

A large, circular Mayan calendar stone is the central focus of the upper half of the image. It features intricate carvings of a central face with large eyes and a wide mouth, surrounded by concentric rings of glyphs and symbols. The entire image has a blue, textured background that resembles a sky or water.

GRAHAM BROWN

THE

**MAYAN
CONSPIRACY**

A DEADLY SECRET THAT COULD CHANGE THE WORLD...

The lower half of the image shows a large, ancient Mayan pyramid, likely Chichen Itza, under a cloudy sky. Three military helicopters are flying in formation around the pyramid, with bright searchlights or spotlights shining down from them onto the base of the structure.

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Title Page

Epigraph

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Chapter 45

Chapter 46

Chapter 47

Chapter 48

Chapter 49

Chapter 50

Chapter 51

Chapter 52

Author's Note

Acknowledgments

Copyright

Former CIA-agent Hawker has been black flagged by his own government, and Interpol and the State department have issued a warrant for his arrest. All Hawker wants to do is find a way back home that doesn't involve a prison sentence or a body bag.

Government operative Danielle Laidlaw is his way out. She needs a pilot and a security consultant for her mission to discover the lost Mayan city of Tulan Zuyu. In return for his services, she promises Hawker his life back.

Graham Brown grew up in the United States, but travelled often to the UK to visit with grandparents in London and Sussex. He went to college in deserts of the western US out in Arizona, learning to fly small planes in the process. Later, he attended Law School and, after several years practicing law, decided he hadn't tried enough different careers yet and sat down determined to become a writer.

A huge fan of Michael Crichton, Stephen King and shows like *The X-Files* and *Lost*, Graham's first novel *The Mayan Conspiracy* is a adventure thriller, infused with suspense and mystery and combining the quest for cold fusion with ancient Mayan legends from the writings of the Popul Vuh.

If 2012 is the end, *The Mayan Conspiracy*, is the beginning.

Graham currently lives in Arizona where he's at work on his third novel and a group of short stories. When he's not writing, he's either skiing (in the winter), riding a motorcycle (in the summer) or pretending he knows how to golf every chance he gets. Which is never often enough. He's also planning a trip to England that will have to include good seats for his father at a Chelsea football match, to keep a promise he made years ago.

GRAHAM BROWN

**THE
MAYAN
CONSPIRACY**



EBURY
PRESS

There came one called Destroyer, who gouged out their eyes, and another called Jaguar, who devoured their flesh. They raced for the trees and they raced for the caves. But the trees could not bear them and the caves were now shut.

And then came the torrent; a rain of black resin that poured from the sky. Rain through the day and all through the night and the earth was blackened beneath it.

—*The demise of the wooden people, from the Mayan text Popul Vuh*

PROLOGUE: THE RAINFOREST

THE DARKNESS OF the jungle loomed above, its dense, tangled layers spreading like a circus tent from the towering pillars of massive trees. Gorged on the rain, it grew impenetrable and unyielding, a home to thousands of species, most of which never left the confines of its elevated embrace. Life was lived up there, high in the canopy; the ground was for shadows and crawling things and for that which had died.

Jack Dixon allowed his gaze to fall from the lush world above him to the soil beneath his feet. He crouched, examining a set of tracks. The tread of the heavy boots was easy to discern, but subtly different from those he'd found earlier. These were deeper at the toe, pressed down into the earth and spaced farther apart.

So the targets were running now. But why?

He looked around, wondering if he'd come up too quickly and given himself away. It seemed unlikely. Knotted undergrowth blocked most of the sight lines, and where one could see, the vaporous fog grayed the distance to infinity. It was as if nothing else existed, no world beyond, only endless trees, clinging moss and vines hanging limp in the mist like ropes from an empty gallows.

Besides, if they had seen him, he'd already be dead.

Dixon motioned to a man trailing him. He pointed to the tracks. "Something spooked them," he said.

The second man, whose name was McCrea, studied the print for a second. "But not us."

Dixon shook his head. "No. Not us."

As cicadas buzzed in the distance, a subtle tic fluttered across McCrea's face. But nothing more was said and the

two men moved on, holding their assault rifles in front of them and creeping even more slowly than before.

A few minutes later they came upon what Dixon had begun to expect. Another kill. A fresh kill with no stench, though the birds had found it already. As Dixon brushed past the last of the blocking undergrowth, the carrion flock scattered in alarm, flapping to safety in the trees.

Exposed by their departure was the mangled body of a man in the same jungle fatigues as Dixon and McCrea. He lay facedown on a swath of crimson mud with a native spear broken off in his back. Chunks of flesh had been gouged from his legs, and his right arm and shoulder were gone, not cut clean but torn away, leaving only tattered strips of flesh and sinew draped over bloody spits of protruding bone.

"What the hell," McCrea said, turning at the sight.

Dixon stared, disturbed but pragmatic. He addressed the dead man. "That's what you get for trying to leave me behind."

Beside him McCrea fought to hold it together. "The bastards did a number on him."

The bastards were a native group known as the Chollokwan, a tribe that had been harassing them ever since they came west of the river. In a pair of skirmishes weeks before, Dixon and his men had gunned down a handful of the charging natives. But it seemed one lesson was not enough.

"Saved us the trouble," Dixon said. "Now search him."

McCrea dropped to the ground and rifled through the man's pockets. Finding nothing, he pulled out a small device and switched it on. It began clicking slowly, accelerating into a rapid buzz as he zeroed in on the right spot.

"I told you he had them," Dixon said.

McCrea put the Geiger counter away and dug into the man's pack. He froze in place as a shrill cry rang out from

the depths of the jungle.

Silence followed in its wake.

"It's just another bird," Dixon said.

"It sounds like ..."

Dixon glared at McCrea. "It's a long way off," he growled. "Now just find the damn stones and we'll get out of here."

Under the weight of Dixon's gaze, McCrea went back to work, soon plucking a greasy rag from the litter. Unfolded, it revealed a group of small stones, slightly larger than sugar cubes but twelve-sided and shimmering with a dull metallic gloss. Beside them lay a scratched, colorless crystal.

Dixon eyed the stones, the crystal and then the tortured face of his former charge. "Thief," he said finally: a last pronouncement on the dead man, an epitaph for a traitor who would never see a proper grave.

McCrea rewrapped the bundle and Dixon took it.

"His papers too," Dixon said.

Reluctantly, McCrea held out the man's passport.

As Dixon took the ID packet, the shrill cry sounded in the distance once again. And this time a second call answered it, louder than the first, closer; a wailing screech that seemed to bypass the ears and pierce the brain directly.

"That's not a goddamned bird," McCrea said.

Dixon did not reply, but silently he agreed. They'd heard that call before, back at the temple, just before everything went to hell. He was not happy to be in its presence once again.

He shoved the stone-filled rag into a pocket and tightened his grip on the rifle, the veins on his massive forearms bulging. His eyes darted around as he strove to see through the mist and the trees and the same blocked sight lines that had hidden his own approach.

His thoughts turned to his dead former comrade. This was not good ground to be stalked upon.

Beside him, McCrea mumbled something unintelligible and then added, "We stayed too long."

Dixon ignored him, drawing a machete from the scabbard at his hip and stepping forward, rifle in one hand, long metal blade held high in the other. He pushed through the fronds and then stopped.

On the jungle floor, beside another trail of dark, coagulating blood, he spotted a new set of tracks, long two-pronged depressions, like someone had shoved a tuning fork into the earth and then bent it forward. Try as he might, Dixon could think of nothing that left such a mark.

As he crouched to study them, he smelled a familiar odor. Pungent, almost ammonialike. And then the piercing call echoed through the forest once again, rolling over them like a wave and on into the distance.

"We need to get out of here," McCrea said.

"Quiet," Dixon replied as he studied the tracks.

"Man, don't you see? It's happening again."

"Shut up!" Dixon ordered. He struggled to concentrate. Running would get them killed, but staying ... There was something wrong with this place, a truth he hadn't recognized until it was too late. Men were not the hunters here but the hunted.

From somewhere far ahead of him, Dixon heard movement, soft, like the flutter of owl's wings, but at ground level. He put the rifle to his shoulder.

"Dixon," McCrea begged.

The sound was coming toward them, faster now, racing through the forest but treading lightly.

"Dixon, please!"

Dixon rose up, preparing to fire, but the sound dodged to his left, passing him. He spun, pulling the trigger even as a dark blur exploded through the trees.

McCrea screamed. Gunfire boomed through the forest and a spray of red mist fanned out over the leaves, but there was nothing left to hit; no target, no enemy, no McCrea, just the low-lying fronds, swaying from the impact and covered in a sheen of human blood.

Dixon stared at the blood dripping from the leaves. "McCrea!" he shouted.

He listened for sounds of struggle but heard none. McCrea was gone, dead and gone just like all the others. Only this time it had happened right in front of him.

Dixon began to back away. Not a man given to fear, he could feel his heart beginning to pound, the flight reflex growing uncontrollably within him. He looked in one direction and then another. He began with measured steps, but soon found his pace quickening. His heart was pounding, his mind spinning. And when the echoing screams rang through the forest once again, he took off running with all he had.

Unbalanced and panicked, Dixon charged forward, crashing through the undergrowth like a bull, stumbling as the vines clutched at his feet. He twisted at the sound of hidden movement, turning one way then the other, shouting angrily and firing into the trees.

"Get away from me!" he screamed.

As he ran, he heard movement, crunching foliage and native voices, chasing him, closing on him.

He tripped, landed on his hands and knees and came up firing. The flash of a dark shape hit him anyway and sent him flying. Tumbling through the air, he caught a brief glimpse of his attacker before it disappeared into the forest. Eight men dead and this was the first sight he'd had of their killer, its hide like polished, blackened bone.

He hit the ground with a jarring crash, aware enough to hold on to his rifle even as a stabbing pain shot up through his leg.

With his breath coming in spurts, he rolled over and forced himself to look. The lower bones of one leg were broken, the tibia sticking through the skin. Running was no longer an option; he probably couldn't walk.

In agony, he propped himself up. He used his good leg to scoot backward until he reached the base of a wide, gray trunk. With shaking hands, he checked his rifle, then lodged it in the crook of one arm and braced himself for the inevitable and painful end.

In a few moments, he was shivering and growing weak. His head wavered and tilted backward until it rested on the fallen trunk. Far above him the tangled web of branches moved on a breath of wind that did not reach the ground. Pinpoints of light made their way through gaps in the foliage, painful to look at with eyes grown accustomed to the shadows. As he watched, the light seemed to be fading, though perhaps it was his vision.

A minute went by without incident, and then another. The silence surrounded him, broken only by his labored breathing. As the seconds ticked away Jack Dixon prayed that he might be left to die on his own, to fade and fall into an endless, peaceful sleep. After another minute or two he even began to feel hope.

And then that bitter shriek rang out again, freezing his heart, piercing his skull and echoing across the depths of the Amazon.

CHAPTER 1

Manaus, Brazil

DANIELLE LAIDLAW SAT ALONE on the terrace of a small café overlooking the great river. In the heat-induced calm of a sweltering afternoon she watched the sun paint traces of gold on the river's surface. It was a mesmerizing and hypnotic sight, and one she'd gazed at for too long.

She turned her attention to the café, looking past the tables and their bright yellow umbrellas to what she could see of the café's interior. In the heat of the afternoon the place was all but empty. Certainly there was no sign of the man she was waiting on, a man who was running atypically late.

With quick hands, she retrieved her BlackBerry, checked for any messages and then typed a none-too-subtle text. It read: Where the hell are you?

Before she could press *send*, she caught sight of him, speaking to a waiter in the café's foyer.

She spotted his silver hair first, and then his craggy face as he turned in her direction. He walked toward her, as nattily dressed as always, today in dark slacks, a button-down shirt and a navy blue dinner jacket. She wondered how he could wear such clothes in the heat of central Brazil, but then Arnold Moore didn't do compromise very well, not even with the vagaries of nature.

"You're late," she said. "Did you have trouble finding this place?"

He pursed his lips as if the suggestion itself was ludicrous. "Of course not," he said. "I simply asked where one might find a brooding, dark-haired woman angrily

checking her BlackBerry a hundred times a minute. Surprisingly, only seven different people pointed me in your direction.”

As she smiled at his barb, Danielle sensed the eyes of the waitstaff upon them. It happened more often than not. She was thirty-one, tall and fit with high cheekbones and glossy chestnut hair, and he was twice her age, gray and refined, almost continental in his bearing. People who saw them together commonly gawked, assuming her to be his mistress or trophy wife or perhaps, less cynically, a niece or daughter. The truth would have surprised them: she was his partner, his protégé and one of the few people in the world he actually trusted.

As ranking field operatives for an American organization known as the National Research Institute, Danielle Laidlaw and Arnold Moore had traveled much of the globe together. In just the prior year they’d spent time in eleven countries, studying everything from oil field resuscitation in the Baltics to nano-tube production in Tokyo. They’d even been to Venice as the NRI partnered with the Italian government on a plan to protect the island with a band of giant sea gates.

Their stock-in-trade was to examine cutting-edge projects and determine what technologies, if any, could be valuable to the United States. Then, through a combination of relationship building, bribes, or even outright theft, they were to secure for their country what might be of interest.

To that end, she and Moore spent their days in cutting-edge labs or at illustrious seminars. Their nights resembled those of the jet set, attending state functions and elaborate parties thrown by corporations and wealthy entrepreneurs. It was often as glamorous as it was rewarding. So far, however, the mission to Brazil was proving to be an exception.

The NRI’s interest in the country was unrelated to anything being designed, developed or produced there. In

fact, it concerned the past as much as the future, beginning with a group of artifacts recovered from the Amazon by an American explorer named Blackjack Martin.

A fortune hunter more than anything else, Martin launched his expedition in 1926, in search of anything that might bring him fame. He returned a year later having mostly failed. The stories he told were laughed off as fanciful exaggerations or outright lies. And the few artifacts he did bring back raised little more than passing interest and were soon consigned to the dusty backrooms of various museums, forgotten if not lost. At least, that is, until a chance encounter with one of them, and an examination with modern tools, had drawn the NRI's substantial interest.

Since then, Danielle and Arnold Moore had been in Brazil, trying without success to pick up on Blackjack Martin's trail. After months of fruitless effort, Danielle believed she'd finally found something that would help.

"I have good news," she said. "And something to show you."

Moore grabbed a cloth napkin and snapped it open. "And I have bad news," he said, "straight from the mouth of our director."

The words were spoken in a tone that Moore reserved for moments of disgust. She sensed a hint of resignation on Moore's face, the bitterness of another argument lost or some new and bizarre order being implemented over his objection, something that had become a pattern on this particular assignment.

"What's happened now?" she asked.

Moore shook his head. "You first. Perhaps something positive will take the sting out of what I have to tell you."

"Fine," she said, reaching into a small leather bag at the foot of the table. She pulled out a flat gray stone and placed it in front of Moore. "Take a look at that."

About two inches thick, the stone was roughly rectangular in shape, with jagged edges on three sides and a face slightly larger than a postcard. It tapered at one end and was covered with weathered symbols, including one that resembled a skull and others that appeared to represent animals.

Moore took the stone from her, holding it out at arm's length. He squinted hard before giving in to necessity and pulling a pair of bifocals from his pocket. With great precision he placed them in their proper spot at the end of his nose.

"Hieroglyphic," he noted.

"And clearly Mayan," she said.

He nodded, angling the piece for a better view. As he did, the edges of the glyphs caught the sun. "My, my," he whispered to himself. "Now, this is a sight."

"Take a look at the top right corner," she said. "Recognize that one?"

Moore studied the glyph, a grin creeping onto his face. "The same mark we saw on Blackjack Martin's cradle," he said. "Xibalba: the underworld."

Her eyebrows went up in triumph. If they were right, this was the first real proof they'd found supporting what Martin had described in his wild journals. "Hard to believe, isn't it?"

"Yes," he said. "Very hard." He looked at her suspiciously. "Where did you get this?"

"I bought it from a logger who'd taken his crew upriver for contraband hardwoods. Mahogany, for the most part."

Mahogany was an important cash crop in the Amazon, but the trees grew slowly and most of those in accessible areas had been felled long ago. Others were protected. As a result, increasing amounts of illegal logging took place far upriver, where the loggers went in search of untouched lands to harvest. As time went by, this trade took them

deeper and deeper into the watershed, to places where few others journeyed.

"How far in was he?" Moore asked with renewed enthusiasm.

"Eight days from here, a trip we could make in four or five."

As Moore examined the stone, Danielle felt a new surge of energy. A reverberation of the jolt she'd felt when first viewing the stone herself—and something sorely needed by both of them.

"Did he know what he was selling you?" Moore asked, flipping the stone over.

"Not the specifics," she said. "But he knows where it came from and he claimed to have seen a much larger stone nearby, one with similar markings. Too heavy to carry, apparently, so he took this one instead."

She watched as Moore ran his fingers across the sharp edges on the back of the stone; the rest was relatively smooth and weathered.

"Recent break," he said. "I wonder if he chipped this piece off of the bigger one."

"My thoughts exactly," she said.

Moore looked up. "What else did he tell you?"

"He said they hired some members of the Nuree tribe to act as guides upriver. One of the tribesmen pointed out the larger stone as they were hiking along the banks of a small tributary. They treat it as a marker of some kind, denoting the border of a land they consider to be cursed. Beyond it lie terrible things, apparently: shadows darker than the night, a tribe that converses with the spirits and controls wild animals ... and a wall," she said, "made with the bones of human beings."

It was local folklore—more often outright false than even partly reliable—but in this case they had reason to trust it, at least enough to hope. One of the few landmarks Blackjack Martin had used in his journal was a place he

called the Wall of Skulls. If they could find it, they might be able to trace the rest of his movements and locate the source of the items he'd brought back. And if they could do that ...

"A wall made of bones," Moore repeated.

She nodded.

"Big step," he said, "if you could find that."

He placed the stone back on the table.

"And when I say *you*," Moore continued, "I mean you alone."

Danielle glared at him, not certain that she'd heard him right. "What are you talking about?"

He elaborated. "There are changes afoot. Gibbs is calling me back to Washington, and, despite my best efforts, I haven't been able to talk him out of it."

Gibbs was the NRI's director of operations. The man who'd sent them here in the first place. Gibbs seemed to have a strong personal interest in what he called the Brazil project—unfortunately, he also had a strong personal dislike for Arnold Moore. And the two men had been clashing since the word go.

"Tell me you're joking," she said.

Moore shook his head. "Afraid not. I'm going back, and you're staying on. It's going to be your show from here on out. Your team to run, when all the players get here."

She stared at him, eyes wide with shock. Moore had been her mentor almost since she'd first joined the NRI. He was also one of the few people she trusted in the strange and perilous world in which the NRI operated. The thought of being suddenly denied his assistance in the middle of a critical operation infuriated her.

"Why?" she asked. "Of all times, why now? I mean, we're finally making progress here."

Moore took a deep breath and pulled the reading glasses from his face. "I'm sixty-three," he reminded her. "Too damn old to go traipsing around the jungle in search

of lost cities. That's a job for the young—and the foolish, I might add—and you seem to fit at least one of those categories," he said. "I'll let you decide which. Besides, Gibbs is well aware of my aversion to snakes, mosquitoes and poisonous frogs. I expect he's just trying to save me from all that."

"That's a crock of shit," she said. "You've been begging Gibbs to send us out there with the snakes and frogs since the day we got here." Her eyes tightened their focus, as if to prevent him from hiding something. "Give me the real reason."

Moore faked a smile. "Two reasons," he said. "First, Gibbs thinks you're ready, and he's right—you are. You have been for some time. I've just been selfishly holding you back. And second, he's worried. He thinks we're getting close, but he fears someone else may be closer. He's afraid they may already have people in the field."

She was sick of hearing about Gibbs and his paranoia. The operation was being run so quietly that they had no staff, a shoestring budget and nonstandard channels for basic communications. "Impossible," she said. "The only people who even know the whole story are you, him and me."

"Yes," Moore replied quietly. "The only three."

As she worked out what he was suggesting, what Gibbs had suggested without speaking the words, her face betrayed her once again. "I'm not going to listen to this. If he thinks—"

Moore interrupted her. "He didn't say it, of course, but he wonders. He's not sure about me anymore. We argue too much. Besides, he thinks you're the stronger horse now. You're young and full of ambition. He figures you'll do almost anything to make this work. I, on the other hand, am not so young and might not be as willing to risk my neck—or other, more vital body parts—on what could very well be a fool's errand. He's afraid I might even look at this as a

chance to retire with something more than a measly pension. And he surely can't afford that."

"This is ridiculous," she said.

"It's not all bad," Moore insisted. "He's got one big carrot to dangle in front of you—one I wouldn't care about either—promotion. You pull this off and he'll give you a full director's position, with a group of regionals working under you."

As he paused, she looked away—unwilling to answer.

"I know this isn't how you want it to happen but you should look at this for what it is—a chance to prove yourself."

"What this is," she said emphatically, "is more bullshit. No one else would have to do something like this for a promotion."

Moore's face turned serious but still kindly. "You're younger than the other field reps, and you're the only one at your level who didn't come directly from the Agency. Those are two disadvantages. The fact that you're close to me is another. With that kind of background, you'll always have to do more. You have to beat the others just to draw even with them."

She didn't want to listen. Despite her rapid ascent in the NRI, she continued to feel like an outsider. And why not—Gibbs ran the organization like a private club: there were those who could do no wrong, "Gibbs' Boys," and those who were looked on as perhaps problems in waiting, staff with loyalties that ran to the organization itself rather than directly to Gibbs. Chief among them was Moore—and by extension, Danielle. Outsiders.

"You have a choice here," Moore added, not allowing any time for self-pity. "You can take this task and see it through, or you can quit, fly back to the States and confirm everything Gibbs thinks about you in the first place: that you're a good second but not a first."

She ground her teeth, the suggestion infuriating her. The project was a long shot at best, setting her up for failure. They had no real budget, no backup and no middle ground. Either they would find what they were looking for or they wouldn't. And no amount of effort or explanation could make the second outcome acceptable.

She exhaled, visibly frustrated. And yet, as angry as she was at the circumstances surrounding the change, she couldn't deny feeling a thrill at the prospect of finally being put in charge. For the past few years, she and Moore had worked as almost equal partners. Through no fault of his own, Moore received the lion's share of the credit, with others seeing her as mostly a beneficiary of his expertise. One thing about a long shot—if she could somehow pull it off, she would prove everyone wrong, prove to Director Gibbs and the rest of them that she was more than a good second, that she was a force to be reckoned with.

"You know damn well I won't quit," she said. "But I'll promise you this, when I get back to Washington with this thing in my hand, I'm going to march into Gibbs' office and shove it down his damn throat."

He smiled. "Just make sure I'm sitting ringside."

Moore played the good soldier to the best of his abilities, but Danielle could sense his anger and frustration. He clearly hated being moved aside. Not too far down the road, a bigger move was coming: forced retirement. At that point she'd be his legacy. It made her even more determined not to let him down.

As she steeled herself for the work ahead, Moore's face grew serious. "You must know," he said, "things have gotten more dangerous. And not just because you'll be leading on your own. There's another party involved now, an outside player."

She listened intently.

"We lost our transportation this morning," he said. "The guy took another charter. I offered to beat whatever they

were paying, but he didn't want anything to do with us. That makes our porters and our transportation all in one week."

Danielle thought about the men who'd backed out. At least one of the porters they'd hired had been assaulted and badly beaten, while the rest of the group had just disappeared.

"Not a coincidence," she said.

"No, it's not," Moore said, sliding his glasses into a jacket pocket. "It doesn't really matter anyway. Gibbs was going to replace them. He's got a hand-picked crew coming in, and they're not locals either."

"Who?" she asked.

"Private security first, led by a man named Verhoven, a South African mercenary. Well thought of, from what I hear. He'll be arriving the day after tomorrow, along with his crew. Then there's a pilot Gibbs wants you to meet: an American who goes by the name of Hawker. He's known in Manaus but he spends much of the year crop-dusting for the owners of a coffee plantation a few hours drive from here."

"What's he doing down here?"

"Ex-CIA," he said. "Black-flagged, apparently."

"Then why are we using him?" she asked.

Moore smiled like a jackal but he didn't reply. He didn't need to.

"Has it really come to that?"

"Gibbs doesn't trust anyone now. He's convinced we have a leak and he wants people with no connection to the Institute. He thinks that should make them clean—and he's right, at least to begin with. It doesn't mean someone can't get to them later, but it gives you some insulation."

As Moore took a sip of water, Danielle realized he'd slipped back into the role of mentor. This was it, she guessed, the last words of advice she'd receive for a while.

"What's their cover?"

"No cover," he said. "Hawker's already here and Verhoven and his group are coming over the fence, not through it."

"And their clearance?"

Moore shook his head. "No one's cleared to know what you know," he said. "Not them or the civilians. They can know about the stones, the ruins, the city you're looking for. Everything that's obvious. But beyond that they stay in the dark."

And that was the rub—the burden of leadership on this particular expedition. They were ostensibly planning to follow Blackjack Martin's tracks into the rainforest in search of what would be an astounding discovery, a branch of the Mayan race living in the Amazon, thousands of miles from the rest of Mayan civilization; but there was more to it than that, a goal that coincided with the search, one that the others would never be informed of.

"And if I run into trouble?" she asked.

"You're not to contact the Brazilian authorities under any circumstances," he said bluntly. "In the case of abduction, coercion or other scenarios which might force your hand, the loss of the entire team is considered preferable to any disclosure." That was the order in writing. Moore added his own clarification: "If something happens, do what you can. But if there's no other choice, then you get the hell out of there and leave them behind."

She listened to the directive, one she'd known was coming ever since Gibbs started jamming the civilians down their throats. She had little doubt that Moore shared her revulsion at the order, but they had a job to do.

As if sensing her hesitation, he said, "I don't have to remind you how important this thing is."

"How important Gibbs *thinks* it is," she corrected. "If he's right."

"He is," Moore said, bluntly. "One way or another, he's right about this. You've been asked to take it on faith so far,

but since you're now in charge ... The test results on the Martin crystals were unequivocal. They confirmed the presence of tritium gas sequestered in the quartz lattice."

Tritium was a radioactive by-product, one that could only form during a nuclear reaction of some kind. Its presence could mean only one thing.

Moore explained. "Somewhere along the line, those crystals were involved in a low-level nuclear reaction. Cold fusion, almost certainly."

"And the source of that reaction?" she asked. "Do we have any new thoughts on that?"

Moore squinted into the distance, his blue eyes lit up by the setting sun. "I've come to believe that what we're looking for is out there," he said finally. "I couldn't explain how or why, but I believe it exists. And if we can find it—if *you* can find it—then we have a chance to literally change the world."

CHAPTER 2

THE RUSTING AIRCRAFT hangar stood at the end of a seldom-used airfield just outside the small mountain town of Marejo. Weeds grew unchecked around its edges and pigeons nested in the roof, giving it the appearance of an abandoned hulk, but the structure, and the concrete airstrip it served, still had a few sporadic users.

One of those was a dark-haired, forty-year-old American, owner and operator of a weather-beaten, olive-drab helicopter—a Bell UH-1, commonly called a Huey, a craft that currently absorbed both his admiration and scorn.

Three hours of work in the sweltering hangar had left him concerned about the Huey's state of airworthiness. In truth, he marveled that it was still operating at all. And as his eyes flashed from one section of the craft to the next, he wondered just how many things he could patch together and still continue to fly. Grimly amused at the thought, he guessed he'd find out soon enough.

As he moved to put away a case of tools, the open mouth of the hangar doors caught the sound of an approaching vehicle, a well-tuned, expensive engine, completely out of place in a town like Marejo.

Glad for any excuse to move toward the fresh air, he walked to the entrance, wiping the grease from his hands with a tattered rag. Across the tarmac, a dust-covered Land Rover approached, moving slowly down the access road. He guessed this would be a follow-up to the call he'd taken the night before, an offer he had turned down without hesitation.

So they'd come to talk in person now. They must really want something this time.

The black SUV swung toward him and parked at the edge of the tarmac. The door opened. To his surprise, a woman stepped out. Attractive and fashionably dressed, she slammed the door with more than a little edge and strode toward the hangar, her eyes hidden beneath tortoiseshell sunglasses. There was something confrontational in her gait, like a tiger spoiling for a fight.

As she approached, Hawker considered his own grubby appearance, covered in grease and sweat and three days of unshaven stubble. "Great," he mumbled to himself, then stepped back inside, where he could at least splash some water on his face.

Leaning over the sink, he heard the soles of her boots clicking on the concrete floor.

"*Com licença,*" she said in Portuguese. "Excuse me; I'm looking for a pilot named Hawker. I was told I could find him here."

He shut off the water, dried his face with a towel and looked in the tarnished mirror; a marginal improvement. He turned. "You speak Portuguese," he said.

"And you speak English," she replied. "American English. You must be Hawker." She put out her hand. "My name's Danielle Laidlaw, I'm with the NRI—the National Research Institute—from the States."

He shook her hand cautiously. "The NRI?"

"We're a federally funded research house," she said. "We do a lot of high-tech work in partnership with universities and corporations. Though that's not exactly why I'm here."

He'd heard rumors about the NRI in the past. And however unreliable those sources might have been, there was more to the Institute than her little sound bite let on. "You people are persistent. I'll give you that."

"You should be flattered," she said, smiling.

“‘Flattered’ is not quite the word,” he said, though he couldn’t help but smile back. “I turned your friend down on the phone. Apparently you didn’t get *that* word.”

She removed her sunglasses. “I did, actually. But from what I heard, our men didn’t get a chance to make an offer.”

He threw the towel in the sink. “There was a reason for that.”

“Look,” she said, “I’m not exactly thrilled to be out here myself. Four hours on a dirt road is not my way of enjoying an afternoon. But I’ve come a long way to see you. The least you could do is hear me out. How much could that hurt?”

He stared at her. She was a bold, attractive woman, working for a questionable branch of the U.S. government and about to offer him a contract that would undoubtedly involve some type of covert, illegal or otherwise dangerous activity. And she wanted to know how much it could hurt?

Still, he didn’t want to send her away. “You thirsty?” he asked. “Because I am.”

She nodded and Hawker led her to the side of the hangar, where a dingy refrigerator stood beside a table with a coffeepot. He scooped some ice from the freezer and poured a cup of black coffee over it. “This or water?”

She looked suspiciously at the scratched glass and the dark liquid within it. “I’ll take the coffee.”

“You’re brave,” he said, placing the glass in front of her and pouring himself a drink of water. “And you have come a long way,” he added, taking a seat across from her. “Up from Manaus, I’m guessing, since that’s where your friend wanted me to go. Apparently you have gainful employment to offer. So let’s hear it, tell me about this job.”

She took a sip and her expression did not change. He was impressed; the coffee was absurdly bitter.

“The NRI is funding an expedition into a remote area of the western Amazon,” she said. “The final site hasn’t been

determined yet, but we're pretty certain it'll be accessible only by river or air. We're looking for a pilot and helicopter for up to twenty weeks, with an option for next season as well. You'll be paid for flying, local knowledge and any other duties that would be mutually agreed upon."

His eyebrows went up. "Mutually agreed upon," he said. "I like the sound of that."

"I thought you would."

"What's the cargo?"

"Standard field supplies," she said. "Staff from our Research Division and some university-level experts."

He had to stop himself from laughing. "Doesn't sound so bad. What are you leaving out?"

"Nothing of importance."

"Then what are you doing here?"

A perfect pause, practiced. "I don't follow you."

He felt certain that she did, in fact, follow him. "What are you doing all the way up here when you could have hired someone in Manaus? Why the long journey to see me? Why the midnight phone call from the man with no name?"

The response was deliberate, with gravity in her voice that he recognized from his past. "We're interested in maintaining a low profile, a vision local hires don't always seem to embrace. We're looking for someone who won't ask questions and won't answer them if they come his way." She shrugged. "As for the phone call. Well, we needed to make sure that you were in fact *you*."

The call had included a lot of questions, questions he'd chosen not to answer. That had probably been enough.

Calls like that, or inquiries by other means, had been common over the past ten years, especially during his exile in Africa, after his separation from the CIA. They came from rebel elements, foreign governments and from corporations and proxies of the same Western interests he'd supposedly been excommunicated from. When a man