

Chapter One



Peruvian Jungle
July 5, 5:59 p.m.

Dr. Nicholas Randall felt the noose-like effect of the humidity choking the breath from his body. Perspiration slicked down his back like a sudden waterfall forming after a heavy spring rain. The conditions were unbearable, but he pushed onward and ever deeper into the Amazon. Normally, he would have made the trip in the cooler, drier months, but his benefactor had been specific. The trip had to be made immediately, or he'd lose his funding, so Randall and his small group from the University of Lima found themselves slogging through the lush vegetation during the hottest and wettest time of the year. They traveled without speaking, the dwindling sunlight fading through the foliage.

Once considered a gifted archeology student, Randall was now deemed an outcast in the field for his controversial theories. Randall believed that someone or something had intervened in the development of the indigenous population and had propelled their technology forward at a staggering rate. He had first conceived the theory as a graduate student on a field assignment almost thirty years ago. It had almost destroyed his career. In fact, had it not been for his longtime friend and colleague, Dr. Francisco Andrade, Randall would have been forced out of the field years ago. Only Francisco's support had made this trip possible, and Randall realized that this excursion was his last chance to redeem his reputation.

Now he found himself deep in the rainforest with only his guide, a linguistics expert from the University of Lima, and his two graduate assistants, Phillip Drew and Mike Gomes, in tow. They needed to find the ruins quickly, or they would be forced to make camp in the middle of the jungle before they were consumed by the encroaching darkness. Making matters worse, they had lost contact with their home base days ago and were running low on supplies.

"Finally, there's the entrance up ahead," Ernesto, said. A linguistics specialist from the University, Ernesto was clearly uncomfortable being out in the middle of the jungle during the summer. He made no effort to mask his feelings as he swatted a mosquito and threw his pack to the ground.

Randall stopped next to Ernesto, glad to have a chance to rest his aching muscles. He wiped the sweat from his short black hair, straining to see the small opening in an otherwise solid wall of jungle plants but eventually spotted it. The entrance was carved into the solid rock in the side of a mountain. After days of searching, they had finally arrived.

Amaro Angara, the local guide who had led them to the site, paused, staring into the dark opening. His body language spoke of his reluctance to enter.

"Ernesto, ask Amaro if he's going in." Randall said, the salty taste of dirt and sweat entering his mouth as he spoke.

After a brief exchange, Ernesto replied. "He says it's forbidden for his people to enter the sacred ruins."

"Phil and Mike, come with me. Ernesto, wait here with Amaro. We'll scout inside the ruins, then figure out where to set up camp."

The three ventured through the small opening. The passageway wound its way down a twisting ledge, which had been carefully cut into the stony surface. Randall's pulse quickened as he examined the tunnel. He ran his hand along the rock wall, marveling at how the surface felt as smooth as glass. One thought entered his mind: *This wasn't done with primitive tools.*

He stepped back from the wall and shined his light straight down the passageway. He realized that the opening was a perfect square, the corners fitting together with a precision, unlike any he had seen in past ruins. Next, he trained his light on the floor and traced the pathway from the entrance as far as his beam would illuminate. The floor was etched with a repeating diamond pattern and was clear of any dust and debris. Someone was maintaining the tunnel.

Although the Inca had been skilled artisans, Randall knew that this tunnel and what lay inside the mountain weren't Incan remains. A sense of foreboding mingled with his excitement as he realized the enormity of the ruins and their implications. Whoever had built this entrance possessed advanced machining technology.

"Dr. Randall, take a look at this!" Phil called out.

"What is it? Phil, where are you?"

"I'm around the corner. You have to see this!"

Randall turned the corner then immediately stopped. The path led into a single large room with intricately carved symbols on one wall. Darkness enveloped the room, broken only by the beams of their flashlights.

Phil stood next to the wall, his light trained on the strange symbols. He struggled to decipher the writing. "What language do you think this is?"

"I'm not sure." Randall held up his light for a closer look and studied the writing carefully. He traced a finger along the smooth grooves that formed the shapes. Beads of sweat gathered on his temple, and his mouth went dry.

Phil frowned. "It resembles Cuneiform, but that doesn't make sense. How could one group of Incans use a completely different form of writing from the rest of their empire? Besides, Cuneiform was used in southern Mesopotamia, and that's 8,000 miles away. What's going on here, Professor?"

As Phil spoke, Michael entered the room.

"That's a good question, but it's not Cuneiform. The only other place I've seen this language was in the tablet room of Paititi," Randall reflected, remembering the first time he witnessed the great jungle city of Amaro's tribe.

Randall studied the symbols intently. There was something almost familiar about the way they were arranged. They reminded him of something – something so obvious, and yet so elusive, that the professor couldn't put his finger on it. Each symbol was neatly centered in a carved square, almost like ...

A distant cracking noise and a horrific scream echoed from the entrance of the ruins.

"What the hell was that?" Phil asked.

Mike keyed his radio. "Ernesto, are you there? Come in, over."

The only reply was static.

"Ernesto, can you hear me?"

Still no reply.

"I can't reach anyone on the radio."

A sound arose from the entrance – shuffling boots and muffled voices. Someone was coming, and the three of them were trapped inside the chamber. The only path out was the way they had come in.

Randall's mind worked feverishly.

"Do you hear that?" Phil asked, cocking his head. He peered around the corner and shone his light down the tunnel. The rocky wall above his head exploded in a hail of gunfire.

Phil ducked his head back behind the corner. "Holy crap, someone tried to kill me! What do we do?"

"Were those gunshots?" Michael asked. Eyes wide.

"Yes! We need to get out of here!"

Randall's heart raced. Either someone had followed them and wanted the contents of the ruins for themselves, or the keepers of the ruins wanted it to remain a secret.

The footfalls were getting louder – the shooters were almost in the chamber.

Randall heard one gunman giving orders to the others. They would be there at any moment.

"I don't want to die here," Phil whispered.

Randall reached out tentatively and touched several symbols. The wall folded away from him. Startled, he jumped back. An opening had appeared in the solid rock.

Randall pushed Phil and Mike through the entrance, following closely behind.

He turned and shined his light. The section of rock had swung inward like a door. "Help me close this!"

The three men pushed with every ounce of strength they could muster. The rock door swung closed. A moment later they heard heavy boot steps entering the outer chamber.

"Where are they?" a voice said from the other side of the wall.

Randall's pulse pounded in his ears. He bent over, trying to catch his breath.

Phil tapped his shoulder. "What do we do now?"

Randall shone his light around the room. Unlike the outer chamber, there was writing on three of the four walls. Randall gestured to it. Phil nodded. The key to their escape was the writing. They were safe for now, but for how long?