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CHRISTINE FEEHAN

DARK STORM

A Carpathian
Novel

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SAVAGE NATURE
WILD FIRE
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DARK
STORM

A CARPATHIAN NOVEL



CHRISTINE FEEHAN



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

THE BERKLEY PUBLISHING GROUP

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 490, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada

(a division of Penguin Books Ltd.) • Penguin Books Ltd, 88 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England • Penguin Group (Australia), 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland

(a division of Penguin Books Ltd.) • Penguin Group (New Zealand), 241 Deodar Road, Cambridge, Victoria 3124, Australia

(a division of Penguin Australia Company Ltd.) • Penguin Books (India) Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Chandni Chowk, New Delhi—110 001, India • Penguin Group (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd., 23 Alexander Avenue, Rosettenville, Johannesburg, 2008, South Africa

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd.

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 88 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

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The "P" design is a trademark of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

First published October 2012

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Fischer, Christine.

Dark shadows: a Capricorn novel / Christine Fischer. — 1st ed.

N. Y. :

ISBN 978-1-4201-2505-5 (pbk. paper)

e-book ISBN 978-1-4201-2506-2

I. Vanphos—Fiction. I. Scott, Aronster—Fiction. 2. Romance—Suspense—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3605.L25D3358 2012

813.6—dc22

2012028922

ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

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*For three amazing people who came through when I needed them most: Brian Feehan
Domini Stottsberry and Cheryl Wilson—with much love and many thanks.*

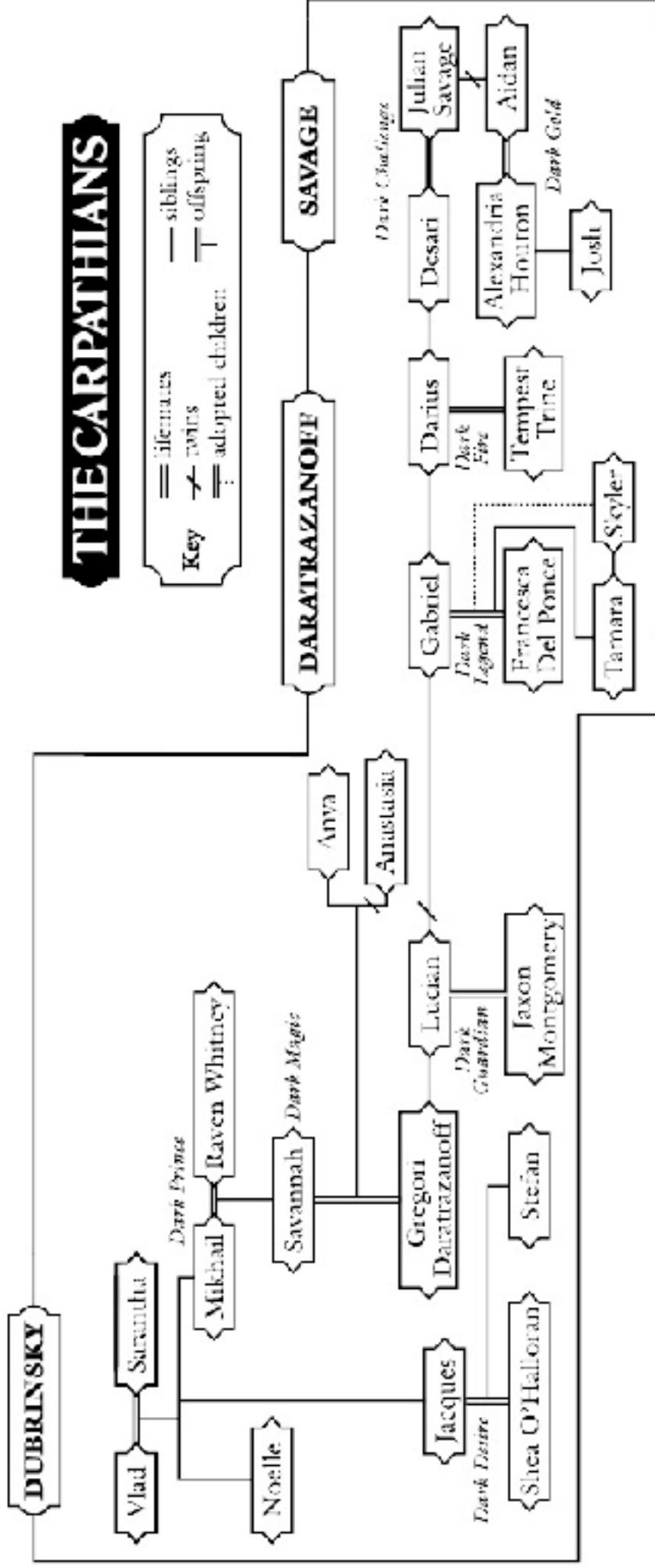
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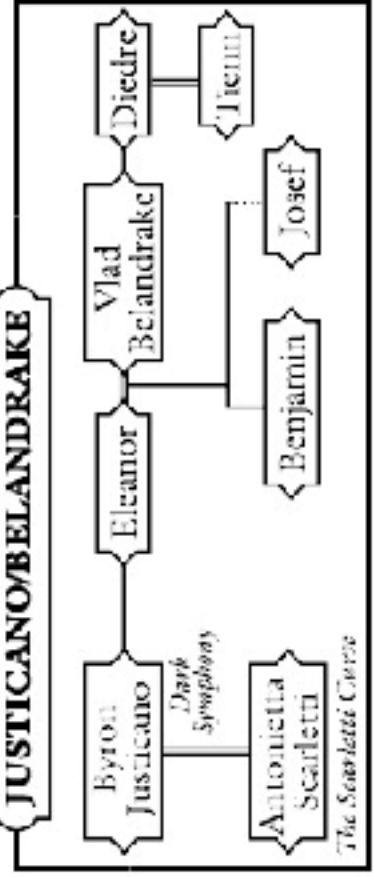
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There would be no *Dark Storm* without Brian Feehan, Cheryl Wilson or Domini Stottsberry. They worked long hours to help me with everything from brainstorming ideas and scenes to doing research and edits. There are no words to describe my gratitude or love for them. My sister, Anita Toste, always answers my call for aid in strange rituals. I just have to include Dr. Christopher Tong, who always finds the time in his crazy busy schedule to come to my aid whenever I ask. And a special thanks to Dr. Newell for all of his support. Thank you all so very much!

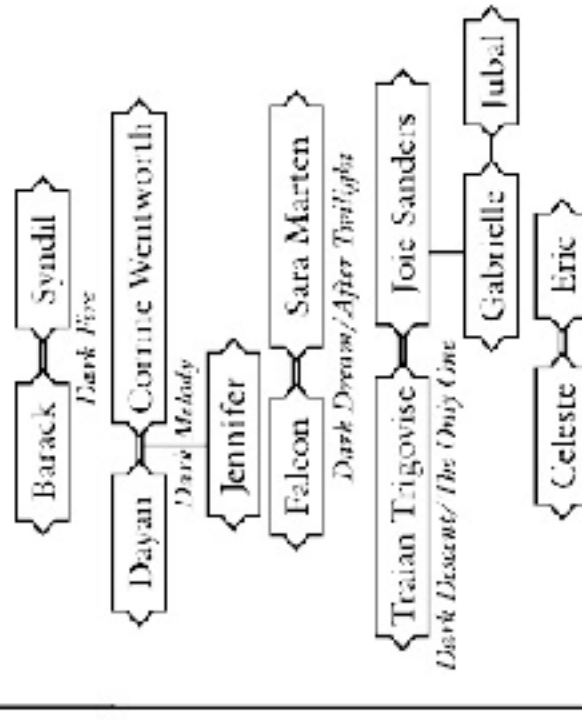
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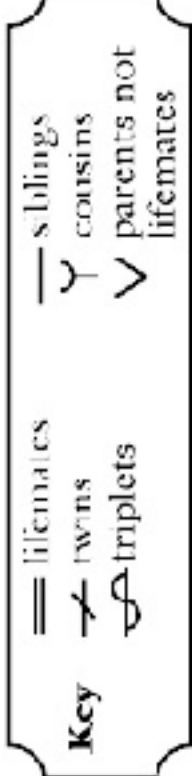
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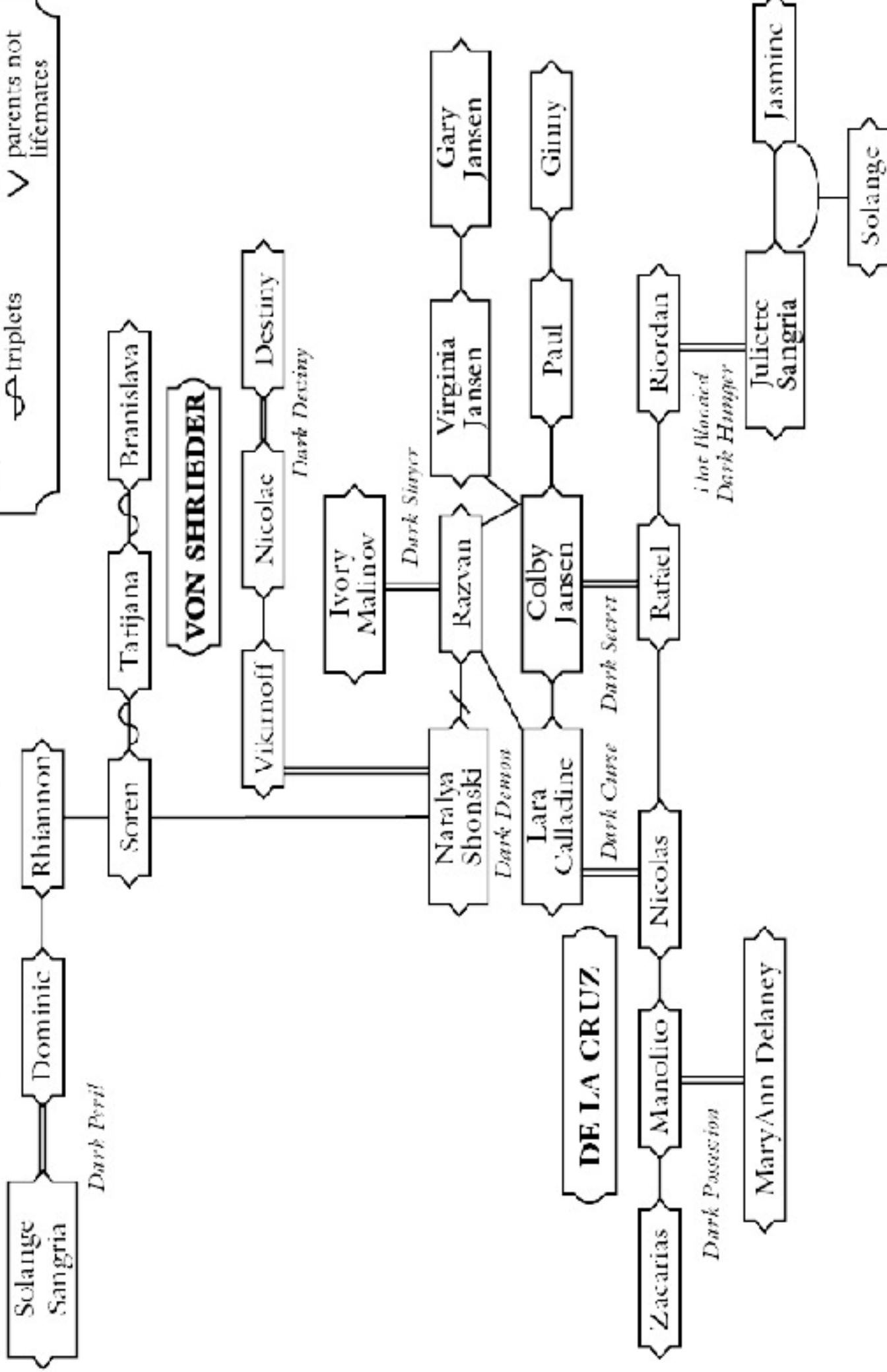
OTHER CARPATHIAN LIFEMATES



THE CARPATHIANS



DRAGONSEEKER



1

“I can live with being on a small boat with no privacy for seven long days, the sun turning me into lobster girl, and mosquitoes feasting on me, I really can,” Riley Parker informed her mother. “But I swear to you, if I hear one more complaint or disgusting sexual innuendo from Mr. I’m-So-Hot-Every-Woman-Should-Bow-Down-To-Me, I’m just going to shove the idiot overboard. His constant licking his lips and saying he likes the idea of mother and daughter gives me the creeps.”

Riley cast a glance of pure loathing at Don Weston, the annoying idiot in question. She’d met a lot of narcissistic pigs while earning her doctorate in linguistics, and a few more among the faculty at University of California, Berkeley, where she now taught, but he took the cake. He was a great brute a man, with wide shoulders, a barrel chest and an attitude of superiority that irked Riley. Even if she wasn’t already so much on edge, the presence of that awful man would have made her so. Worse, her mother was very fragile right now, making Riley extremely protective of her, and his constant sexual innuendos and filthy jokes around her mother made her want to just shove him overboard.

Annabel Parker, a renowned horticulturalist famous for her efforts to reestablish thousands of acres of Brazilian rain forest lost to deforestation, looked at her daughter, dark brown eyes twinkling and mouth twitching, obviously itching to smile. “Unfortunately, honey, we’re in piranha territory.”

“That’s the point, Mom.” Riley cast another pointed glare in Weston’s direction.

The only benefit of the horrible man’s presence was that plotting his demise gave her something to focus on other than chills slowly spreading through her body and making the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

She and her mother made this same trip up the Amazon once every five years, but this year from the moment they had arrived in the village to find their usual guide ill, Riley felt as if a dark cloud hung over the trip. Even now, a strange heaviness, an aura of danger, seemed to be following them up the river. She’d tried hard to shrug it off, but the ominous feeling remained, a weight pressing down on her, chills creeping down her spine and ugly suspicions keeping her awake at night.

“Perhaps if I could accidentally cut his hand as he goes overboard . . .” she continued with a dark smile. Her students could have warned the man to beware when she smiled like that. It never boded well. The smile faded a little, though, as she glanced down at the murky water and saw the silver fish churning around the boat. Were her eyes playing tricks on her? It almost looked as if piranha were following the boat. But, piranha didn’t follow boats. They went about their business.

She stole a glance at the guide who muttered to the two porters, Raul and Capa, ignoring their charges—a far cry from the familiar villager who usually took them upriver. The three looked very uneasy as they continually studied the water. They, too, seemed a little more alarmed than usual about being surrounded by a swarm of flesh-eating fish. She was being silly. She’d been on this same trip many times before without freaking out over the local wildlife. Her imagination was working overtime. Still . . . piranha seemed to be all around their boat, but she couldn’t see a single flash of silver in the waters surrounding the boat chugging ahead of them.

“Ruthless child,” Annabel scolded with a small laugh, drawing Riley’s attention back to the aggravating presence of Don Weston.

“It’s the way he looks at us,” Riley griped. The humidity was so high that every shirt Riley wore clung to her like a second skin. She had full curves, and there was no hiding them. She didn’t dare raise her hands to lift her thick, braided hair off the back of her neck or he would think she was deliberately enticing him. “I really, *really*, want to smack that oaf. He stares at my breasts like he’s never seen a pair, which is bad enough, but when he stares at yours . . .”

“Maybe he hasn’t ever seen breasts, dear,” Annabel said softly.

Riley tried to smother a laugh. Her mother could ruin a perfectly good mad with her sense of humor. “Well if he hasn’t, it’s for good reason. He’s disgusting.”

Behind them, Don Weston slapped his neck and hissed out a slow, angry breath. “Damn insects. Mack, where the hell is the bug spray?”

Riley suppressed an eye roll. As far as she was concerned, Don Weston and the other two engineers with him were liars—well at least two of the three were. They claimed to know what they were doing in the forest, but it was clear neither Weston nor Mack Shelton, his constant companion, had a clue. She and her mother had both tried to tell Weston and his friends that their precious bug spray would do no good. The men were sweating profusely, which washed off the insect repellent as fast as they could apply it and left them feeling sticky and itchy. Scratching only aggravated the itching and invited infection. The smallest wound could quickly become infected in the rain forest.

Shelton, a compact man with burnt mahogany skin and rippling muscles, swatted at his own neck and then his chest, murmuring obscenities. “You threw it overboard, you big bastard, after you used the last of it.”

Shelton was a little friendlier than the other two engineers and not quite as obnoxious as Weston, but instead of making Riley feel safer, his proximity actually made her skin prickle. Maybe that was because his smile never reached his eyes. And because he watched everything and everyone on board Riley had the feeling Weston vastly underestimated the other man. Clearly Weston thought himself in charge of their mining expedition, but no one was bossing Shelton.

“We should never have thrown in with them,” Riley murmured to her mother, keeping her voice low. Normally, Riley and her mother made the trip to the volcano alone, but when they’d arrived at the village, they found their regular guide too sick to travel. Alone in the middle of the Amazon, without a guide to accompany them to their destination, she and her mother decided to team up with three other groups traveling upriver.

Weston and his two fellow mining engineers had been in the village prepping a trip to the edge of the Andes in Peru, in search of potential new mines for the corporation they worked for. Two men researching a supposedly extinct plant had arrived from Europe seeking a guide to go up a mountain in the Andes as well. An archaeologist and his two grad students were heading to the Andes looking for the rumored lost city of the Cloud People—the Chachapoyas. All of them had decided to pool their resources and travel upriver together. The idea seemed logical at the time, but now, a week into the journey, Riley heartily regretted the decision.

Two of the guides, the archaeologist and his students and three porters were in the lead boat just ahead of them with a good deal of the supplies. Annabel, Riley, the researchers and the three mining engineers were in the second boat with one of their guides, Pedro, and two porters, Capa and Raul.

Trapped on the boat with eight strangers, Riley didn’t feel safe. She wished they were already halfway up the mountain, where the plan was to go their separate ways, each with their own guide.

Annabel shrugged. “It’s a little too late for second thoughts. We made the decision to travel

together and we're stuck with these people. We'll make the best of it."

That was her mother, always calm in the face of a brewing storm. Riley was no psychic, but it didn't take one to predict trouble was coming. That feeling was growing with every passing hour. She glanced at her mother. As usual, she appeared serene. Riley felt a little silly saying she was worried when Annabel had so many other things on her mind.

Still bickering about the discarded bug spray, Weston flipped Shelton the finger. "The can was empty. There must be more."

"It wasn't empty," Shelton corrected, disgust in his voice. "You just wanted to chuck something at that caiman."

"And your aim was as bad as your mouth," the third engineer, Ben Charger, chimed in.

Ben was the quietest of the bunch. He never stopped looking around with restless eyes. Riley hadn't quite made up her mind about him. He was the most ordinary looking of the three engineers. He was average height, average weight, a face no one would notice. He blended, and maybe that made her uncomfortable. Nothing about him stood out. He moved quietly and seemed to simply appear out of nowhere, and he watched everything and everyone as if he were expecting trouble. She didn't believe he was a partner with Weston and Shelton. The other two stuck together and obviously had known one another for some time. Charger appeared to be a loner. Riley wasn't even certain he liked either of the other two men.

Off to the left shore, her eye picked up a white cloud, moving fast, sometimes iridescent, sometimes a pearly color as the cloud twisted together, forming a blanket of living insects.

"Fuck you, Charger," Weston snapped.

"Watch your mouth," Charger advised, his voice very low.

Weston actually stepped back, his face paling a little. He glanced around the boat, his gaze settling on Riley, whom he caught looking at him. "Why don't you come over here, or better yet, Mommy come here and lick the sweat off me? Maybe that will help." He extended his tongue toward her, probably hoping to look sexy, but he got a mouthful of bugs and ended up coughing and swearing.

For one terrible moment, when he called her mother "Mommy" and made his gross suggestion, Riley thought she might hurl herself at him and really push him overboard. But then, with her mother's little snicker, her anger was gone, her unfortunate sense of humor kicking in. She burst out laughing. "Seriously? Are you really so arrogant you don't know I'd rather lick the sweat off a monkey? You are just so gross."

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of the pearly cloud of insects growing closer, widening as they moved in formation over the water. Her stomach gave a little flip of fear. She forced air through her lungs. She wasn't one to scare easily, not even when she'd been a child.

Weston leered at her. "I can see when a woman wants me, and baby, you can't take your eyes off of me. Look at your clothes! You're showing off for me." He flicked his tongue at her again, looking for all the world like a snake.

"Leave her the hell alone, Weston," Jubal Sanders snapped, impatience edging his voice. "Don't you ever get tired of the sound of your voice?"

One of the two men researching plants, Jubal didn't appear to be a man who spent a lot of time in the lab. He looked extremely fit and there was no doubt that he was a man used to a rugged, outdoor life. He carried himself with absolute confidence and moved like a man who could handle himself.

His traveling companion, Gary Jansen, looked more the part of the lab rat, shorter and slender, although very well muscled from what Riley had observed. He was very strong. He wore black-rimmed reading glasses, but he seemed every bit as adept outdoors as Jubal. The two kept strictly to

themselves at the beginning of the journey, but somewhere around the fourth day, Jubal became a little protective of the women, staying close whenever the engineers were around. He said little, but he didn't miss anything.

Although some other woman might be flattered by his protectiveness, Riley wasn't about to trust a man who supposedly lived his life in a lab, but moved with the fluid grace of a fighter. Both he and Gary clearly carried weapons. They were up to something, and whatever it was, Riley and her mother had enough trouble of their own without needing to get involved in anyone else's.

"Don't be a hero," Weston snapped at Jubal, "it won't get you the girl." He winked at Riley. "She's lookin' for a real man."

Riley felt another small surge of anger wash over her and she whipped around to glare at Weston, but her mother laid a gentle, restraining hand on her wrist and put her head close to whisper. "Don't bother, honey. He's feeling like a fish out of water out here."

Riley took a breath. At this late date, she wasn't going to resort to violence over sexual harassment, no matter how much of an ass the man was. She could ignore Don Weston until they went their separate ways.

"I thought he was supposed to be so experienced," Riley answered her mother, her voice equally as soft. "They claim to be mining engineers who've traveled to the Andes countless times, but I'm betting they flew over the peaks and called that going into the rain forest. They probably don't have anything at all to do with mining."

Her mother gave a quick nod of agreement, warmth lighting her eyes all the same. "If they think this is bad, wait until we get into the jungle. They'll be falling out of their hammocks and forgetting to check each morning for venomous bugs crawling into their boots."

Riley couldn't help but smile at the thought. The three engineers were supposedly from a private company seeking prospective mines in the mineral-rich Andes. She couldn't see that any of them were very well versed in the ways of the rain forest, and they sure didn't give much respect to their guides. All three complained, but Weston was the worst and most offensive with his constant sexual innuendoes. He spent a great deal of time snapping at the guides and porters as if they were servants when he wasn't complaining or leering at her and her mother.

"I raised you away from here, Riley. The men in some countries have a different philosophy toward women. We aren't considered their equal. Clearly he's been raised to believe women are objects, and because we've come out here alone, unescorted by a dozen family members, we're easy." Annabel shrugged, but the faint humor faded and her dark eyes went very somber. "Keep that dagger close, honey, just to be on the safe side. You know how to handle yourself."

Riley shivered. It was the first time Annabel had indicated she thought something was amiss as well. That moved Riley's fanciful notions from ridiculous right back into the realm of reality. Her mother was always calm, always practical. If she thought something was wrong, then it was.

A bird sounded in the forest on the riverbank, the noise traveling clearly across the open water. To lighten her mother's suddenly troubled mood, Riley cupped her hands around her mouth and repeated the call. She didn't get the delighted laughter she'd hoped for but her mother did smile and pat her hand.

"That's totally freaky how you can do that." Don Weston had left off slapping at bugs and was now staring at her like she was some carnival sideshow. "Can you imitate anything?"

Despite her dislike of the man, Riley shrugged. "Most things. Some people have photographic memories that let them remember anything they see or read. I call what I have 'phonographic' memory. I can remember and repeat virtually any sound I hear. That's one of the reasons I went into

linguistics.”

“That’s quite a talent,” Gary Jansen remarked.

“Isn’t it?” Annabel slid an arm around Riley’s waist. “When she was little, she used to imitate crickets chirping inside the house just to watch me go crazy trying to find them. And heaven help her father if he slipped up and used language he shouldn’t in front of her. She could repeat it perfectly, right down to the pitch of his voice.”

Riley’s heart dropped at the sorrow and love in her mother’s tone. She forced a little laugh. “I was also good at mimicking my teachers, the ones I wasn’t particularly fond of,” she volunteered with a small, mischievous grin. “I could call from school and tell Mom just what a wonderful student I was. Now her mother did laugh, and the sound filled Riley with relief.

To Riley, Annabel was beautiful. She was of medium height, slender, with dark wavy hair and darker eyes, flawless Spanish skin and a smile that made everyone around her want to smile. Riley was much taller, with bone-straight blue-black hair that grew almost overnight no matter how many times she cut it. She was very curvy, with high cheekbones and pale, nearly translucent skin. Her eyes were large and the color was nearly impossible to define—green, brown, Florentine gold. Her mother always said she was a throwback to a long-dead ancestor.

To her knowledge, her mother had never been sick a day in her life. She had no wrinkles, and Riley had never seen a single gray hair on her head. But now, for the first time, Riley saw vulnerability in her mother’s eyes, and that was as unsettling as the crackling in the air signaling a coming storm. Riley’s father had died only two weeks ago, and in their family, husband and wife rarely lived for very long without one another. Riley was determined to stick close to her mother. She could already sense Annabel pulling away, becoming more despondent by the day, but Riley was determined not to lose her. Not to grief, and not to whatever was hunting them on this trip.

Early morning had seen the last of the main river; the two boats were now traveling up a tributary toward their destination. In the reed-choked waters, the ever-present insects were getting worse by the moment. Clouds of bugs continually assaulted them. More rushed toward the boat as if scenting fresh blood. Weston and Shelton both went into a frenzy of cursing and slapping at exposed skin, although they both remembered to keep their mouths firmly closed after eating a mouthful of bugs. Ben Charger and the two researchers endured the insects stoically, following the example set by their guides and the porters.

The locals in their party didn’t bother to even slap at the bugs as the pearly cloud descended en masse. Riley could see the boat ahead and they were even closer to the shore, yet as far as she could tell, the bugs hadn’t attacked anyone aboard. Behind her, Annabel let out a soft startled cry. Riley spun around to find her mother completely enveloped in the cloud of insects. They’d abandoned everyone else and every inch of Annabel’s body was covered with what appeared to be tiny flakes of moving snow.

La Manta Blanca. Tiny midges. Some said tiny mosquitoes. Riley had never researched them, but she’d certainly felt their bites. They blazed like fire and afterward, the itch drove one crazy. Once scratched and open, the little bites became an invitation for infection. She dragged a blanket off the flat board seat and threw it over her mother, trying to smash the little bugs as she took her mother to the floor of the boat, rolling her as if she was putting out a fire.

“Get it off of her,” Gary Jansen called. “You won’t get them all that way.”

He crouched down beside Annabel and yanked at the blanket. Annabel rolled back and forth, her hands covering her face, the insects attached to every bit of exposed skin, clinging to her hair and clothes. Many were smashed from Riley’s efforts. She continued to slap at them, trying to save her

mother from further bites.

Jubal snatched up a bucket of water and threw it over Annabel, brushing at the insects to get them off of her. The porters immediately added buckets of water, dousing her again and again, while Gary, Jubal and Riley scraped the soaked insects from her with the blanket. Ben eventually crouched down beside her and helped to pick the bugs from her skin.

Annabel shuddered violently, but she didn't make a sound. Her skin turned bright red, as a thousand tiny bites swelled into fiery blisters. Gary rummaged through a satchel he carried and drew out a small vial. He began smearing the clear liquid over the bites. It wasn't a small job as there were so many. Jubal held Annabel's arms pinned so that she couldn't scratch at the maddening itch spreading like waves across her body.

Riley clutched her mother's hand tightly, murmuring nonsense. Her previous suspicions came roaring back to life. The tiny little midges had gone straight for her mother. There was no one more attuned to the rain forest than Annabel. Plants grew abundant and lush around her. She whispered to them and they seemed to whisper back, embracing her as if she were Mother Earth. When her mother walked through the backyard at their home in California, Riley was fairly certain she could see the plants growing right in front of her. For the forest to begin attacking her, something was terribly wrong.

Annabel gripped Riley's hand tightly as the two researchers lifted her to her feet and helped her stumble back to their sleeping area made private by the sheets and netting hung across thin ropes.

"Thank you," Riley said to the two men. She was all too aware of the stunned silence out on deck. She wasn't the only one to notice that the white bugs had attacked her mother and no one else after their initial swarm. Even those knocked from her body had struggled to their feet and crawled toward her as if programmed to do so.

"Use this on the bites," Gary Jansen said. "I can make up some more once we're in the forest if supplies run out. It will take the edge off."

Riley took the vial from him. The two men exchanged a look above her head and her heart jumped. They knew something. That look had been meaningful. Profound. She tasted fear in her mouth and quickly looked away, nodding her head.

Annabel attempted a halfhearted smile and murmured her thanks as the two men turned to go, giving the women privacy to find bites beneath clothing.

"Mom, are you all right?" Riley asked, the moment they were alone.

Annabel gripped her hand tightly. "Listen to me, Riley. Don't ask questions. No matter what happens, even if something happens to me, you must get to the mountain and complete the ritual. You know every word, every move. Perform the ritual *exactly* as you've been taught. You'll feel the earth moving through you and . . ."

"Nothing's going to happen to you, Mom," Riley protested. Fear was giving way to sheer terror. Her mother's eyes reflected some inner turmoil, some innate knowledge of a danger she knew of that Riley was missing—more a terrible vulnerability that had never been there before. None of the married couples in their family ever long-survived the loss of a spouse, but Riley was determined her mother would be the exception. She'd been watching her mother like a hawk since her father, Daniel Parker, died in the hospital following a major heart attack. Annabel had been grieving, but she hadn't seemed despondent or fatalistic until now. "Stop talking like this, you're scaring me."

Annabel struggled into a sitting position. "I'm giving you necessary information, Riley. Just as my mother gave it to me. And her mother before her. If I can't get to the mountain, the burden falls on you. You are part of an ancient lineage, and we've been given a duty that has passed from mother to

daughter for centuries. My mother took me to this mountain, just as her mother took her. I've taken you. ~~You are a child of the cloud forest, Riley, born there as I was. You drew your first breath on that mountain. You took it into your lungs and with it, the forest and all that comes with living, growing things.~~

Annabel shuddered again and reached for the vial Riley held. With shaking hands she drew up her shirt to reveal the tiny midges clinging to her stomach, brushing with trembling fingers to get them off. Riley took the vial and began smearing the soothing gel onto the bites.

"When my mother told me these things, I thought she was being dramatic and I scoffed at her," Annabel continued. "Oh, not to her face of course, but I thought her so old and superstitious. I'd heard the stories of the mountains. We lived in Peru and some of the older people in our village still whispered about the great evil that came before the Incas and could not be driven away, not even by their most fierce warriors. Stories. Dreadful, frightening stories handed down for generations. I thought the stories had been passed down mostly to scare the children and keep them from roaming too far from the protection of the village, but I learned better after my mother died. Something is there, Riley, in the mountain. Something evil, and it's our job to contain it."

Riley wanted to believe her mother was delirious with pain, but her eyes were steady—even more afraid. Annabel believed every word she was saying and her mother wasn't given to flights of fancy. More to reassure her mother than because she actually believed the nonsense about some evil being trapped inside a mountain, Riley nodded.

"You're going to be fine," she assured. "We've been bitten by Manta Blanca on previous trips. They aren't poisonous. Nothing's going to happen to you, Mom." She had to say the words aloud, needing them to be true. "This was only a bizarre event. We know anything can happen in the rain forest . . ."

"No, Riley." Annabel caught her daughter's hand and held it tight. "All the delays . . . all the problems since we arrived . . . something is happening. The evil in the mountain is deliberately trying to slow me down. It is close to the surface and is orchestrating accidents and illness. We have to be realistic, Riley." Her body shuddered again.

Riley hunted through her pack and came up with a packet of pills. "Antihistamines, Mom, take a couple of these. You'll probably go to sleep but at least the itching will stop for a while."

Annabel nodded and swallowed the pills, chasing them with water. "Don't trust anyone, Riley. Any one of these people can be our enemy. We must go our own way as soon as possible."

Riley bit her lip, refraining from saying anything at all. She needed time to think. She was twenty-five years old and had been to the Andes four times, not including when she was born in the cloud forest. This was the fifth trip that she remembered. The hike through the rain forest had been grueling, but she'd never felt terrified as she was now. It was too late to turn back and from what her mother said, it wasn't an option. She needed to let her mother rest, and then they had to talk. She had to learn much more about the *why* of the trip to the Andes.

She dropped the sheet in place as soon as her mother appeared to be drifting off and went out onto the deck. Raul, the porter, glanced at her and looked quickly away, clearly uncomfortable with the presence of both women. Goose bumps rose on her arms. She rubbed them away, turning to walk along the railing to try to put some distance between her and the rest of the passengers. She just needed a little space.

There wasn't enough room aboard the boat to find a quiet corner. Jubal and Gary, the two researchers, sat together in one of the few secluded spots, and judging from the expressions on their faces, they weren't very happy. She gave them a wide berth, but in doing so ended up beside Ben

Charger, the third engineer, the one she couldn't quite make up her mind about. He was always courteous to both women and, like Jubal and Gary, seemed to be developing a protective streak toward them.

Ben nodded at her. "Is your mother all right?"

Riley flashed him a tentative smile. "I think so. I gave her an antihistamine. Hopefully, between that and the gel Gary gave us, the itch won't make her crazy. Those are nasty little bugs."

"She must have been wearing something that attracted them," Ben ventured, half stating, half asking. "Maybe a perfume?"

Riley knew her mother never wore perfume, but it was a good explanation. She nodded slowly. "I didn't think of that. The attack was so bizarre."

Ben studied her face intently, his eyes so watchful, she found his gaze disturbing. "I've heard you and your mother have come here before. Has anything like that ever happened?"

Riley shook her head, grateful she could tell the truth. "Never."

"Why do you and your mother come to such a dangerous place?" Ben asked curiously. Again he didn't blink, or take his eyes from her face. He stared at her with the eyes of an interrogator. "It's my understanding that even the guides haven't traveled to this mountain. They had to get the information from a couple of others in the village. It seems such a strange destination for two women. There aren't any villages on the mountain, so you're not here for the linguistics."

Riley gave him a vague smile. "Mother's work as a horticulturist and advocate for the protection of rain forests takes us many places. But we come here also because we're descendents of the Cloud People and my mother wants us to learn as much as possible so the people aren't forgotten." She pressed her lips together and put a defensive hand on her throat. "That sounded mean. I love the rain forest, and I enjoy the trips with my mother. I was actually born in the cloud forest, so I think my mother thought it would be a good tradition to carry on, coming every few years." She glanced toward the guide and lowered her voice. "We weren't certain these men actually knew the way, that's why we thought it would be safer traveling with all of you."

"I've never been," Ben admitted. "I've traveled around many rain forests, but not to this particular mountain. I don't know why Don said we all had been here before. He likes to think he knows everything about everything. Is the forest as dangerous as everyone says?"

Riley nodded. "Very few people have ever traveled to this peak. It's a volcano and, although it hasn't erupted in well over five hundred years, I'm suspicious sometimes that it's waking up, although mostly because of the way the locals talk about it. There's some story handed down through the various local tribes about that mountain, so most avoid it. It's difficult to actually find a guide willing to travel to it." She frowned. "Truly, it has an off-putting feeling. You find yourself growing uneasy the higher you climb."

Ben ran both hands through his hair, almost as if he was agitated. "This entire side of the rain forest seems infested with legends and myths. No one wants to talk about them to outsiders, and all of them seem to involve some creature that preys on the lives and blood of the living."

Riley shrugged. "That's understandable. Practically everything in the rain forest is out for your blood. I've heard the rumors, of course, and our guide told us that it wasn't the Incas who destroyed the Cloud People, or the Spanish. The locals and descendents whisper of a great evil who murdered in the night, sucking the life from them and turning families against one another. The Cloud People were fierce in battle and gentle in their home life, but they supposedly succumbed one by one or fled the village to the Incas. When the Incas came to conquer the forest people, apparently most of the warriors were already dead. It's rumored that the Incas living here suffered the same fate as the ones

killed by the marauding evil. Their bravest warriors died first.”

“That’s not in the history books,” Ben said.

Still, she had the feeling he wasn’t surprised, that he’d heard that whispered version. There were many more stories, of course, each more frightening than the other. Tales of bloodless victims and their tortures and horrors they’d endured before being murdered.

“Are you talking vampires?”

She blinked. He’d slipped that question in so casually. Too casually. Ben Charger had a deeper agenda than mining for traveling to the barely explored region. Old legends? Could he want to write? Whatever his reasons, Riley was certain they had nothing to do with mining. She frowned, thinking it over. Could the evil entity whispered about be a vampire? The myth of the vampire seemed to have existed in every ancient culture.

“I honestly have no idea. I’ve never heard whatever the entity is called a vampire, but the languages have changed so much over the years, quite a bit is lost in translation. I suppose it’s possible. Vampire bats play an important part in Inca culture and among the Chachapoyas as well. At least based on what little my mom’s told me and what I’ve managed to learn on my own. There isn’t a lot to go on.”

“Fascinating,” Ben said. “If we get a chance, I’d like to hear more. I find cultures interesting, and here, in this part of the rain forest, the tribes and stories seemed to be shrouded in mystery, which intrigues me all the more. I’m a bit of an amateur writer and I take every opportunity when exploring a new region to learn as much as I can about old myths. I find that no matter where I go, certain legendary creatures have infiltrated the cultures all over the world. It’s intriguing.”

At a soft sound, Riley turned to find her mother standing close. Annabel was unguarded for a moment, her face swollen with bites, her eyes watchful and very suspicious of Ben. Riley stared at her in surprise. Her mother was the most open, gentle woman Riley had ever been around. She didn’t have a mean, suspicious bone in her body. As a rule she shared information, was at ease with everyone, and most people gravitated toward her. Riley always felt protective toward her mother because she was so trusting where Riley wasn’t.

Annabel blinked and the look of suspicion was gone, leaving her mother simply looking at Ben. Riley felt a little as if her world was spinning. Nothing, no one—not even her mother—seemed familiar. “You should be resting, Mom. So many bites can make you sick.”

Annabel shook her head. “I’m okay. The gel Gary gave me is very soothing. It took the itch away and you know the bites aren’t poisonous. Gary and his friend must be very good at studying the properties of plants, because the gel really works.”

Ben glanced over at the two men. Although both were clearly American, Gary and Jubal had journeyed from somewhere in Europe to search for a mythical plant with extraordinary healing properties that supposedly grew high in the Andes. By the expression on his face, he thought both men were slightly insane.

Annabel took Riley’s hand and they nodded at Ben and moved toward the railing of the boat, in the center where they were alone.

The river narrowed more so that in places the huge root systems of the trees along the bank nearly scraped the boat. Lines of bats swayed high in the trees, an eerie sight. They were large, hanging upside down up in the thick canopy. Riley had seen the sight before, even as a child, but for some strange reason, this time it was disturbing, as if the bats were lying in wait, motionless, waiting for dark to begin the hunt—this time for human prey. She gave a little shudder at her own dramatic fantasy.

She was allowing the edginess of close confinement to get to her. She knew better. The bats were large and definitely vampire bats—feeding on warm blood—but she doubted if their hunger was personal and certainly they weren't just waiting for an unsuspecting boatload of humans to come along.

She felt eyes on her and turned to see Don Weston staring at her. He grinned and pretended to shoot an imaginary rifle at the motionless creatures. Riley turned away. Weston's need to be the center of attention every moment disgusted her. But his reaction to the bats was just a little too close to the way she was feeling—and she didn't want to feel anything at all in common with the man.

She turned her attention back to her mother, taking her hand and gripping it tightly. This morning they'd left the main river and begun the journey up the tributary toward one of the most remote parts of Peru. The jungle had closed around them, at times nearly scraping the sides of the two boats chugging upriver. The forest was in constant motion, almost as if the very animals were following them. Monkeys stared with great round eyes. Colorful macaws fluttered above their heads, darting in and out of the tree canopy.

They were definitely entering the world of the rain forest, the lush jungle of mystery that only deepened and became more dangerous with each passing second. The river narrowed, and the air grew still with the dark pungent scents of the deep rain forest. She recognized the signs. Soon, the river would be impossible to navigate. They would be forced to abandon the boats and tramp through the forest on foot. Unlike many places in the rain forest where it was easy to walk because very little could live on the forest floor without too much light, this area was dense. She'd traveled extensively, but the smells and the stillness of this place was a thing she'd found nowhere else on earth. Unlike any of her previous visits, this time Riley felt a little claustrophobic.

"Hey, Mack," Don called to the other engineer. "What the hell is going on now? I swear the jungle is alive." He gave a nervous laugh as he pointed out the strange way the branches dipped down and reached toward them as the boat passed.

Everyone turned to watch the bank closest to them as a great green wave built, following them. Every branch shivered, leaves unfolding and stretching out across the water as if seeking to stop their progress upriver. The first boat had passed unscathed, but the moment the second boat came close to the bank, the leaves reached for them. The stirring was eerie, as if the jungle had really come alive like Don said.

Riley's heart dropped. She'd seen the phenomenon many times before. Her mother attracted plants everywhere she went. There was no getting around it. The force of the magnet in her had never been quite this strong, but the thick foliage along both banks welcomed her with opened arms, even grew inches in an attempt to try to touch her. It never was good to draw too much attention to oneself in the rain forest around the superstitious guides and porters. Riley felt a deep need to protect her mother. She stepped between her mother and the bank, gripping the railing with both hands and staring out at the unfolding plants with wide, shocked eyes.

"Wow," she added to the sudden murmur of conversation. "This is amazing."

"It's creepy," Mack said, stepping back away from the rail.

The porters and the guide stared at the reaching plants and trees and then turned to look directly at Annabel. They whispered to each other. Riley felt other eyes on them. Both Gary and Jubal were looking at her mother as well. Only the three engineers stared into the rain forest as it closed in around them.

The two boats continued upstream, drawing closer to the mountain. Black caimans, giant dinosaurs of the past, sunned themselves on the banks, keeping a hungry eye on the small boats invading their

space. Great clouds of black insects bit every inch of exposed skin and got caught in hair and even teeth, this time mosquitoes and other bloodsucking bugs. There was nothing to do but endure it. Below them, the dark waters grew shallow, slowing progress, and twice, the boat ground to a halt and had to be cut free of the tangled reeds reaching out greedily to wrap about the underside of the motor and propeller. Each time the unexpected lurch sent everyone aboard sprawling across the deck.

Weston picked himself up with an oath and staggered to the side of the boat to spit into the water. "This is ridiculous. Couldn't you have found another way?" he demanded of their guide, Pedro.

The guide shot him a tense look. "There is no easy way to this place you want to go."

Weston rested his butt on the railing as he gave the guide the finger. "I think you're just trying for more money and it's not going to happen, pal."

Pedro muttered something in his language to the two porters.

This one the jungle can eat, Riley interpreted. She didn't blame them.

The guide and porters snickered.

Weston lit a cigarette and glared out over the dark water. The boat staggered again and then, as they were all desperately trying to gain their footing, it gave a huge lurch. Weston fell forward, hanging up for one heart-stopping moment on the railing. Everyone leapt to help him as he hung precariously, arms down, closer to the water.

Riley caught his belt buckle while Annabel reached over the side to grasp at his arms. The moment Annabel leaned down, arms covering Weston's, the water came to life, boiling like a cauldron, flashing silver with muddy patches of red.

"Mom!" Riley cried, reaching for her mother, still holding Weston. His weight was pulling them all forward.

The others rushed to help as Annabel slipped farther toward the dark, reed-choked water, now boiling with frenzied piranha. There was no blood in the water so the turmoil made no sense. To Riley's horror the fish began to leap out of the water, hundreds of them, narrow bodies and blunt heads shooting from the river like rockets, the triangular-shaped jaws with razor-sharp teeth snapping open and shut with terrible clacking sounds.

Although the stories of piranha frenzies abounded, Riley knew attacks on people were quite rare. She'd swum in the water with them on several occasions. This bizarre behavior was extraordinary, as unnatural and unsettling as the La Manta Blanca attack. And just like with the Manta Blancas, it seemed clear the piranha were bent on reaching her mother, not Don Weston.

It was Jubal who caught Annabel and yanked her back away from the rail, practically throwing her into Gary. Then he caught Weston and hauled him back on deck, too. Instead of being grateful, the engineer slapped at Jubal's hands, cursing and sliding down to sit on the deck, his breath coming in great gasps. He glared at Pedro and the two porters as if the three men had deliberately tried to murder him.

The guide and porters both stared at Annabel with a look that made Riley wish she had a concealed gun close at hand. Before anyone could speak, the boat nearly ran aground, and the two natives turned back to their work. A low branch overhead dipped down, and a snake dropped onto the deck with a thud right at Don Weston's boots.

"No one move," Jubal hissed as the snake stared at the engineer. "That viper's extremely poisonous."

Pedro, the guide, turned back, catching up the machete that was always close. Before he could take a step, the viper did an abrupt spin and launched itself at Riley. She stumbled back into her mother. The snake flashed between her legs heading straight toward her mother. Gary Jansen yanked Annabel

off her feet and twisted around, holding her in the air while Jubal shoved Riley aside, yelling at the guide, hand up in the air.

Pedro tossed the machete and in one smooth movement, Jubal slammed the sharpened blade across the neck of the viper, severing the head. There was a moment of silence as Gary lowered Annabel to the deck, holding her steady so that she didn't fall.

"Thank you," Riley breathed softly to both researchers. She didn't try to hide the fact that she was very shaken.

Her mother stared at her with stricken eyes. Riley's world crumbled. Capa, Raul and Pedro looked at her mother with the same look they had on their faces when they'd first seen the viper. They were in real trouble if the guides and porters became hostile toward them. She reached for her mother's hand and held on tightly.

Nights were hell in the jungle. Right at sunset, the buzzing started. It wasn't as if the insects were silent—they were producing a constant steady drone—but Riley could push the sound away. This was something altogether different—a soft, persistent noise, a low frequency that jangled every nerve in the body. She'd awakened to the strange noise the very first night they entered the rain forest.

Strangely, Riley couldn't identify the low, irritating buzz, nor could she tell if it was outside or inside her head. She'd observed several others—including her mother—rubbing their temples as if their heads ached, and she feared that same low frequency of whispers one couldn't quite catch was invading insidiously, adding to the danger of their travel. During the day the whispers were gone, but the effects lingered.

Her senses, since entering the rain forest, seemed to have blazed to life and were working overtime. She noticed every little suspicious glance toward her mother. Jubal Sanders and Gary Jansen were armed to the teeth and she was very envious of their weapons. The two moved in silence, kept to themselves and watched everyone. She came to the conclusion that they knew a lot more about what was going on than they let on.

Don Weston and his friend Mack Shelton were a pair of idiots as far as she could see. Neither had ever made the trek into a rain forest, and clearly they were afraid of everything. They blustered, complained and bullied the porters and guides when they weren't leering at Riley or feeding the rampant distrust among the travelers.

Ben Charger seemed much more knowledgeable about the rain forest and the tribes occupying it. He'd done extensive research and had come prepared. He didn't like either Weston or Shelton, but had to work with them and clearly wasn't happy about it. He spent a lot of time talking to the guides and porters, asking questions and trying to learn from them. Riley couldn't really fault him for anything. Perhaps she was just nervous about everyone at this point.

The archaeologist and his students were very excited and seemed completely oblivious to the tension running through the camp, although she noticed they were uneasy at night, sitting close to the fire. They seemed driven, amicable and very focused on their mission. Dr. Henry Patton and his two students, Todd Dillon and Marty Shepherd, were more excited about the ruins they'd heard about than interested in whether or not a woman in their company was bringing bad luck to the travelers. They seemed young and naïve, even the professor, who was in his late fifties. His entire world revolved around academia.

Riley felt a little sorry for all three archaeologists, that they were so clueless, and more grateful than ever that she'd chosen to concentrate her studies on modern languages rather than dead ones. She enjoyed traveling, talking with people and living life too much to be locked in an ivory tower, poring over dusty tomes. Of course, she'd studied ancient languages as well, but primarily as a window to the evolution of languages and their impact on various cultures.

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