

CHAPTER 1

Ryan Webster kept the phone to his ear and tried to hide the news. He'd been through hell, and hadn't thought anything else could shock him—until now. After hearing the two words *they're alive* over the satellite phone in his hand, he knew his trip through hell had only just begun. He glanced at his uncle Thad, who was keeping watch for any sign of trouble. Thad's Marine Corps training had bailed him out more than once, but Ryan felt the responsibility for survival shifting to him. Ryan looked up into the night sky and scanned for FBI choppers. Several agents at the mine had been injured by the blast. By now every lawman in the southern Sierras would be looking for them. The thin woods provided cover from the traffic racing south on Highway 395.

“Did you hear me, Ryan?” Doctor Brunner said. The Twitter feed showed Brunner was a renowned anthropologist. He'd been sent into the scorched crater in the Amazon that Ryan had fled just a month ago after rescuing a hidden species of monkey—a species so close to human Ryan now called them his friends. The newsfeed said Brunner was part of a team sent to catalogue the burned-out remains of the most remarkable species ever uncovered. Something in Ryan's gut said he could be trusted.

“Ryan?” Brunner repeated.

“Yeah. I heard you.”

“I haven't told anyone else. After seeing the reports of that explosion at the mine, every agency of the US government looks like they want you dead.”

“We didn't do that—we didn't hurt those agents.”

“They don’t know that, son. You and the others are wanted—extremely armed and dangerous—according to the FBI.”

“We’re out of there. Heading somewhere safe.”

“Based on the reaction around the world to the revelation of these monkey-human hybrids, I think that’s the best course of action. Do you still have them?”

“Yes.”

“Are they okay?”

Ryan decided that Brunner was genuine.

“They’re fine.”

“Good. I assume you know what finding a pair of older hybrids, one male one female, means?”

Ryan wasn’t sure where Brunner was going. “No ...”

“Your three are all younger males. They can’t reproduce. These two can, I think. That news will prompt a full-scale assault on this entire area. They’ll never escape.”

“I understand.” Ryan exchanged glances with Thad.

“I thought you needed to know. I also think that based on their color and looks, your three may be their offspring.”

Ryan let the words hang in silence. Finally he said, “Will you save them?”

“Let me make myself clear. I don’t think they deserve to be exploited. My work confirms what’s being blasted all over the news. These creatures are more human than anything—perhaps just another species of human. If these are the last ones on Earth, and they’re a family, they need to be together—and not in a cell or laboratory.”

Ryan sagged under the weight of the words. At the same time, his sense of determination hardened.

“I understand what you’re asking, and I’ll get them there.” Now, Thad was face to face with Ryan, wide-eyed with curiosity.

“I don’t know how you’ll do it. But if you do, I’m here. The hybrids are safe here for now. They’ve found a new place that’s away from the crater. I’m only observing them. Use this number again once you have a plan. And son?”

“Yes?”

“Tell no one.”

The phone clicked. Brunner was gone.

Still stunned, Ryan slowly handed the phone back to his uncle, who waited for an explanation. Ryan’s senses were deadened by Brunner’s news that there were other hybrids, probably their parents. Yet he smelled the diesel fumes from the monster RV idling behind Thad. Ryan nodded toward the RV. “I’ll tell you inside.”

Thad shrugged and headed for the door of the RV. Ryan followed him and froze on the steps. Davy Jones stared at him from the driver’s seat. Davy had been with Ryan’s great-grandfather in the sixties and had been eating the unique fruit the monkeys had eaten for over fifty years. As a result, he was living proof that humans’ lifespans could be extended far beyond what anyone had imagined, and he was just as much of a target as the monkeys. He deserved to know what was going on. Despite being nearly eighty, he still looked thirty, and his mind was sharp. He’d seemed to be reading Ryan’s expression.

“Well?” he asked.

Thad pointed to Ryan over his shoulder as he climbed into the passenger seat. “Talk to him.”

Ryan climbed past Barney, Zach, and Taylor without looking at them. He buckled into the seat just behind Thad.

“Everything okay?” Addy asked from the back. She’d saved his life, more than once, and she deserved an answer too. He loved her and didn’t want to put her in even more danger than they were already in. He needed time to think. He tossed a glance over his shoulder. “I need just a second, Addy.” She leaned back and folded her arms. He turned back to Davy. “Let’s get going before someone gets suspicious.”

Davy hesitated, eyeing Ryan a little longer, then turned and jammed the RV into gear. Ryan stayed stoic, working through the message he’d have to deliver. His ribs dug into the armrest as Davy turned hard right and skidded onto the four-lane highway. The roar of the engine and last pieces of the gravel road slinging against the underside of the monster RV snapped Ryan back to the moment. Through the windshield he could see a few headlights in the distance headed their way. He immediately thought of the carnage at the mine and Agent Sands lying on the ground.

“Are we okay on this?” he asked Davy.

“I think so. It’s been two hours and no one saw this thing, so they won’t have a description.”

Ryan could feel his uncle staring at him from the passenger’s seat.

“So?” Thad said, loud enough for the others to hear.

Ryan wasn’t sure how to deliver the news. He had no idea how the monkeys would react, but he knew how he would if he were in their shoes. Pulling on the seat back, he faced Thad.

“We have to go back.”

“What?” Thad said as Davy slowed, took his eyes off the road and glanced at Ryan.

“Back where? Kernville?”

Ryan shook his head. “No. Brazil.”

Thad’s eyes widened. “What the hell did Brunner say, dude?”

Ryan glanced over his shoulder again. Barney, Zach, and Taylor were all eagerly awaiting his reply.

“I promised to keep you safe and I intend to do that,” he told them, then turned back to Thad. “He said he found two others.”

“Two other what?”

Ryan nodded toward the monkeys.

“You’re kidding me,” Thad said.

“Afraid not.”

“So they found others of our clan alive?” Barney asked.

“Did they find Mom and Dad?” Taylor asked.

Ryan hesitated. He suspected they’d be related, since the colony wasn’t that large. He wasn’t sure if they were their parents, but he’d decided it didn’t matter. “Doctor Brunner just said he observed two others, older than you guys, hiding outside the crater.”

“Let’s go. Let’s go!” Taylor said.

“Hold on,” Thad said. “They think we tried to blow up those agents back there. They’ll be out for blood—our blood. We have to get to a safe place first. Then we have to figure out if we can get back to Brazil.”

“That’s a tall order,” Davy added as he pressed the accelerator again.

All eyes were now on Ryan, and he felt the pressure. He'd made peace with a life on the run back in Seattle. But he'd give up everything if he headed back to Brazil, if he even lived. He was convinced he'd never see his mother again, let alone accept that full-ride swimming scholarship to the University of Miami. Yet something deep down called to him. Barney, Zach and Taylor hadn't asked for any of this. He had to protect them, and if the monkeys Brunner had found were their parents, he had to help his friends get back to them.

"Ryan," Addy called from the back. He pivoted and faced her. "We can figure this out. I know Brazil from the times I went there with my dad. But we have to find refuge first, then develop our plan. I'm in."

He saw the love in her eyes. She'd made his decision easy. He gently nodded and turned back to Thad.

"I wouldn't miss this for the world," Thad said.

"I've never been to Brazil," Davy added, grinning.

Ryan dropped his head. They were all willing to give up everything to help him. Their commitment humbled him.

His uncle patted him on the shoulder. "Okay. Let's see what's going on out there." He pulled one of the smartphones from the bag Milhouse had given them back in Seattle.

"Is it okay to turn that on?" Davy asked.

"Won't leave a trace. Milhouse's specialty."

Ryan thought about the time they'd spent hiding out in Seattle at Milhouse's high-tech compound. It seemed a long time ago. He hoped Milhouse was all right. Ryan guessed that with his technical training and government connections, Milhouse probably had nothing to worry about.

Thad opened news apps one at a time. “Looks like there are a bunch of riots.”

“Riots?” Addy asked.

“Yeah. Protests turned ugly. This feed says word leaked about the genetic makeup and longevity of these guys and the ability to address the diseases of aging. National Guard was called out to protect the NIH and other facilities around the country.”

Ryan’s guilt swelled again.

Thad tapped the smartphone a few times. “Hey, you guys are going viral on the Web,” he said, looking back at the monkeys.

“Web?” Barney asked.

Ryan chuckled. “It’s a way for everyone in the world to be connected to one another through information, like messages and reports.”

Barney still looked bewildered.

Thad continued reading. “Wow, there are Twitter campaigns and a bunch of websites raising money and offering to help us.”

“Help us?” Ryan asked.

“Yup. Here’s one that asks people to join their network and help defeat the government’s exploitation of the swimming monkeys. Hey, you guys have a nickname ... and you’re the number one hashtag on Twitter.”

“What’s a Twitter?” Taylor asked. “Can you talk to birds on that web thing?”

Ryan shook his head. All this was now in the public domain. The secret he was supposed to keep was now causing people to fight over the opportunity to extract the secrets locked inside his friends’ DNA. He’d seen how that worked in the government-supported labs in Seattle and wanted no part of it.

“Oh shit,” Thad said as he tapped the phone again.

“What is it?” Ryan asked.

“The FBI issued a bulletin. Armed and dangerous ... do not approach ... may carry deadly diseases ... headed east from Kernville.”

“That’s not good.”

“If you like that, you’ll love this,” Thad said, swiping the screen. “It says other countries are after them too. Spy stuff.” He turned the phone off.

Everyone was silent. The news couldn’t have been worse. Odds were, they wouldn’t make it past dawn, let alone to Brazil.

Thad broke the silence. “Enough of this. What about those clues from Great-Grandpa?” He reached into the console and picked up the piece of yellowed paper Zachariah had left with Davy just before he died in 1976. He’d said to use it only if things went wrong.

So far, despite being gone for nearly forty years, Ryan’s great-grandpa had anticipated the troubles they’d faced rescuing the monkeys he’d kept secret since 1926. His clues and connections had gotten them this far. Ryan leaned forward and watched his uncle read the note.

““Off the beaten path,”” Thad said, looking at Ryan, then at Davy, who kept his eyes on the road.

Ryan was well aware that the only thread of hope might be buried in those clues. He racked his brain, but came up with nothing. “That could be half the West.”

“Keep going,” Davy said.

““Their people were forced to go,”” Thad continued.

“People were forced to go,” Addy said as she unbuckled and slid between the seats, kneeling next to Ryan. “Where were people forced to go ... maybe the detainment camps for the Japanese Americans? That was out here.”

“No connection I can think of to Zachariah,” Davy said.

“I read about the Trail of Tears in class last year,” Ryan said.

“Interesting,” Thad said. “The Cherokees were forced to march from Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee to Indian Territory.”

“Yup,” Ryan said. “But that’s a lot of states to cross.”

Davy pointed to the note. “Read the rest.”

“It’s the grandest of them all, and the wind always blows.”

“The wind always blows ...” Davy echoed.

“Wyoming?” Ryan said. “A friend told me it was really windy up there when his family went to Yellowstone. But Indian Territory was Oklahoma.”

“Bingo,” Thad said, snapping his fingers. “Oklahoma is windy ...” He began to sing. “*Oklahoma, where the wind comes sweeping down the plains ...*” He stopped and grinned.

“So, Oklahoma? But where in Oklahoma?” Ryan asked.

Addy pointed to the smartphone on the console. “Maybe the map will give us a clue?”

Thad tossed it to her, and she turned it on. “What’s that last clue?” she asked.

“It’s the grandest of them all,” Thad said.

Ryan was glued to the small screen as Addy opened Google Maps and zoomed in. Quadrant by quadrant she scanned the map. Then she stopped and Ryan saw her eyes light up.

“Look at this,” she said as she showed the phone to Ryan.

The large lake in the northeast corner of the state looked huge. He hadn't known Oklahoma had any lakes at all. Then he spotted the name. "Grand Lake of the Cherokees?" he said out loud.

Thad simply looked at Davy, who was clearly churning through his memory. After taking Heaven's fruit for all those years, his brain probably worked better than most.

Davy slammed the steering wheel. "Got it! There was an Oklahoma oilman from Tulsa who helped Zachariah when he was in Africa. He retired and moved to that lake."

"You got a name?" Thad asked.

Davy rubbed his forehead, his other hand on the wheel. "It was a name like a bird ..."

"Crow?" Addy asked.

"No ..."

"Hawk?" Ryan asked.

"That's it. Hawkins. His name was Hawkins. He retired and bought some kind of boat to take people out on the lake."

"How long ago?" Thad asked.

Ryan's heart sank when he remembered Davy had eaten the fruit the monkeys ate. He was close to eighty. That meant Hawkins was probably dead.

"Had to be in the sixties."

"So let's say sixty-five in the sixties?"

No one had to do the math. The guy was deader than a doornail by now. But Ryan didn't care at this point. He looked at Thad. "It's all we have now. Maybe he had kids who're there."

Thad glanced at Addy. She nodded. He rubbed his hands together and yelled, “Yee haw. Get on your boots, boys and girls.” Then he started singing again. “*Oklahoma, where the wind comes sweeping down the plains ...*”

Ryan shook his head and smiled at Addy. He looked at Taylor, who had a puzzled expression.

Taylor scrunched his nose. “I don’t have any boots.”