PROLOGUE

Andringitra National Park, Madagascar

Ian and Abigail Hunt had just finished the trek of that unforgiving rock face, using a difficult, switch-backing backpack trail to do so. The next phase of their hike was of the "off-road" variety. They'd need to proceed with caution. The surface was pocked with Swiss cheese-like crags hiding in the lowlight. Some were shallow, only around two feet in depth. Others were measured at over ten times that. Some were deeper still.

Nasty place to get trapped, Ian thought, stepping lightly.

Nicknamed the "Desert of Rocks," the Andringitra Massif mountain range covered a distance of nearly forty miles. It was also over six miles wide at its center-most point. Formed by a sudden volcanic event sometime in the Precambrian timeline, the eastern slope was a spectacle to see in person. Whereas the western side gradually sloped down to the surrounding grasslands, the eastern face of the range was entirely different, abruptly ending at steep and ominous cliffs.

Sunset was almost upon them, and they needed to move fast and find a suitable campsite before it was too late. Even moving by flashlight wasn't recommended when exploring the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site. Things could happen in seconds, and you'd be on your own to fend for yourself if they did.

"It's not worth the risk," Abigail said. The beautiful blonde Australian was predictably overcautious. "I figured a bloke of your background would appreciate the gravity of the situation."

Nearly halfway across the breadth of the range, Abigail stopped and shrugged out of her pack, dropping it to the ground with a sigh. She stretched, her shirt lifting a few inches. Ian was still awestruck by the shape his wife stayed in. She had been an absolute vision when they had first met fifteen years ago.

Still is.

Maybe he would get to see what was under that shirt later. If that didn't come to pass, he could always close his eyes and envision Abigail in the buff instead.

He grinned. *The benefit of being me…*

"Come on, Abby, this isn't combat or anything," he said, dismissing her caution. "We're hiking, not sneaking up on a terrorist cell in an Afghan cave. I seriously doubt there's a herd of Taliban assholes waiting for us out here somewhere."

But he sat, also shedding his pack. He wasn't going to win this battle. Abigail laughed and scooched closer to her husband. Ian wrapped a strong arm around her shoulder and squeezed. The night air was cooling down quickly and, for some reason, Abigail had neglected to pack anything warm for their romp atop the massif.

"And if we do get into a scrum," she jabbed, elbowing him in the gut, "you won't have any of your mates back home to help you."

Ian flexed his biceps, earning a laugh out of Abigail. "Since when do I need help from anyone?" His eyes widened, and he quickly added, "Except from you, I mean."

She elbowed him again. "Good save… Wanker." She shivered in his arms. "Dammit-to-shit, Ian, why didn't I pack a heavier jacket?"

"Because you have me to keep you warm." He grinned. "Plus, you do get a little flighty when you get excited."

Abigail shook her head. "Har, har…"

Her head leaned into his neck, and together, they sat there and watched the sun dip beneath the horizon. It was the most peaceful scene they could ask for. He couldn't remember the last time they'd just sat and quietly watched a sunset. Life was busy and, like it was for most people, tough to manage.

"Do you really think it's here?" he asked.

Abigail didn't answer.

He was about to ask the question again but stayed silent and listened.

The only thing he heard besides the gentle breeze was his wife's heavy breathing. She was already out cold. Gently, he laid her down and stood, letting her use his own rolled sleeping bag as a pillow. He breathed in deeply and sighed, enjoying the refreshingly cool air.

It smelled like nature.

And he loved it.

After thirteen years in the United States Navy, Ian had retired and moved to Australia with his wife, Dr. Abigail Hunt. Eventually, the two made their way to South Africa, where they lived now. Abigail specialized in a very controversial field, having learned under the renowned Dr. Catherine Forster at George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

The study of dinosaur-bird evolution was, at first, a very debated one. But as the years went by, and as more information became available, it began to make more and more sense. But it was something Ian still had a hard time buying into.

Like so many in their field, Abigail and her mentor, Dr. Forster, believed that the dinosaurs in the *Paraves* clade eventually evolved into birds and flew away. It reminded Ian of Dr. Alan Grant's speech at the beginning of *Jurassic Park*, when he gave the same explanation to a group of onlookers.

Ian especially enjoyed the part when Grant threatened that bratty kid with his fossilized raptor claw. Though, after seeing the series of movies a dozen times or so, Ian had to admit that a good portion of the dinosaurs did sort of look like turkeys.

Just like the kid said to Grant.

When Ian and Abigail had gone on their first date, she'd told him about her studies, exhibiting the passion she still showed for it to this day. His initial reaction was to laugh in her face, exactly like those same bystanders had done at the beginning of the movie.

Fifteen years of marriage had forced him into becoming an unwilling expert on the subject too. She'd bounce her hypotheses off him daily, and he'd always give his real-world responses. Ian was just a normal guy with

a normal way of thinking. He'd been schooled in the art of war, not paleontology. Shoot, Ian didn't even have a college degree of any kind. He'd joined up with the Navy out of high school and had forgone any *formal* education.

Not that you can't get a proper education in the real world too.

All of this was why Ian had thought the ramblings of a senile old fool from one of the villages that bordered the park were just that: ramblings. But after some serious digging and a few *very* long-distance phone calls, Abigail theorized that a hybrid of the two animals, a bird and a dinosaur, did, in fact, exist and lived within the Andringitra Massif.

The coot had said that he'd heard a set of screeching calls six months ago, soon after a series of minor tremors had occurred. The man would regularly poke around the rocks, searching for lost valuables. Hikers routinely lost things, and Yakko—yes, like the *Animaniacs* character—would scour the many crevasses for the re-sellable goods.

He'd said the noise sounded like a giant bird but with hate in its throat.

Whatever the hell that means, Ian thought.

He knelt and unzipped a long, skinny bag. He reached in and removed his Beretta 1301 tactical shotgun and stood. Ian felt confident in his ability to take down such a creature, if it actually existed. He hoped it did too. Abigail had poured her heart and soul into this project, and he wanted nothing but the best for her. She worked for the *Museum Africa* back in the Newtown Precinct of South Africa. She hoped this discovery would land her a job as the building's new curator.

Running a museum had been her dream job since she was a kid.

Ian's dream job had ended when he'd gotten shot in the Middle East while fighting in the war on terror. He'd survived, thank God, but his close call with death had forced him to call it quits and come home to his "hot-ass-babe" of a wife. He had complained for all of ten minutes… Now, he was her unofficial research assistant, and more importantly, her private security chief.

His new job was to support her and to keep her ass safe.

They traveled the world together and had been to some perilous places over the years. Madagascar hadn't been one of them until now. Yes, like all countries—especially some of the ones in Africa—there were pockets of threats.

Ian gripped his shotgun harder, shouldering it. That was when he was at his best. As a former Navy SEAL, Ian was an extremely competent person when under duress. He never flinched or lost his nerve. He'd seen heavy combat in his past life and had been very good at his job.

Then, he took three rounds to the chest and was nearly down for the count. It hadn't even been during an operation across enemy lines, either.

One day, a guy in his squad snapped and tried to kill Ian and anyone else nearby. Ian quickly jumped on top of the crazed man, saving countless others in the process. He was labeled a hero and was honored by his superiors as one. But his wounds, two of them piercing his left lung, were so bad that he actually died on the scene.

Can't hold me down.

It had been his answer to the miraculous recovery. He'd said the Grim Reaper couldn't keep its grip on him. It'd been the truth too. Ian had always thought of himself as being better than death, stronger than it even. He had refused to let his wife go, and after he had returned home, he called it quits so he could be with her. The navy had been willing to bring him back, but Ian retired before they could make an official offer.

He paused mid-step, feeling something unusual. The ground beneath his feet suddenly began to quake. It was slight at first but quickly grew so strong that he was thrown to the ground. Never before had he been tossed around like he was a pair of sneakers in a clothes dryer. Not even when he'd been in the service.

The earth around him cracked and popped, lifting and falling in huge sections. The sound of splintering stone was deafening, and he had to close his eyes to keep himself from vomiting. Just when he thought he was going to pass out, the shaking stopped. Still feeling a slight vibration beneath him, Ian could only lie there and try to catch his breath.

The Andringitra Massif was supposed to be geologically stable from what he understood. There hadn't been an episode of mass upheaval in quite some time, although small tremors were still common, but nothing like what had just happened.

Stable my ass!

Groaning, he picked himself up off the rocky earth, hearing a skittering noise as he did. It seemed to originate near the foot of Pic Boby, the highest peak within the mountain range. That was supposed to be their goal tomorrow. They had planned to scale it and look for evidence of Abigail's creatures, possibly an undiscovered cave entrance.

Not anymore.

The earthquake had surely destroyed countless cave entrances—but perhaps it had also opened all new ones. It was a terrain that neither of them could safely traverse, even in broad daylight.

The skittering noise picked up again.

Leveling his shotgun at it, Ian clicked on its mounted light and stalked forward, taking each step slow and soft. He needed to be careful, now more than ever. Even with the powerful weapon light, he couldn't see much except for what was directly ahead of him. The night swallowed the light with very little effort.

Three steps in, the surrounding breeze kicked up a little, covering his own movements more. But it also drowned out the scratching noise. Ian paused, hearing more to the northwest.

He turned toward it, swinging his shotgun around too, and once more, moved forward. He had thought about not using his weapon light to reduce the chances of his discovery in case the noise had come from a human and not an animal. But darkness was something that happened really fast out here, and with no artificial light on the mountain, Ian had thought better of it. He'd happily give up his own position if it meant being able to see his enemy better.

You can't shoot what you can't see¸ Ian thought.

"Where are you?" he asked himself. His voice was just below a whisper

and something he did without realizing it. He talked to himself constantly. Abigail spoke to herself too. It was always a funny moment when they'd catch each other doing it and then look up at one another and say, "Huh?"

This time, two different sets of the skittering noises reverberated around him. He spun and checked behind him—only to be startled. He fell, tripping on a small outcrop of rock.

Abigail clicked on her flashlight and looked down at him. She shook her head and smiled in amusement. She relaxed and lifted the bill of her George Washington University baseball cap, blowing out a long breath. He'd startled her too.

"Bloody hell, Ian, really?" She put a hand on her hip. "I wake up, and nearly piss myself because I reckon the world is crumbling around me. Oh, and you're nowhere to be found!"

He reached up a hand, knowing she'd offer one any minute. She did, taking his and helping him to his feet. He winced as he picked out a handful of small pebbles from his palms.

"I'm fine, by the way." He looked around, checking their surroundings. Then his eyes found hers again. "I think I heard something. Sounded like claws on rock."

Abigail's face lit up. "Really?"

Ian shrugged. "Not sure what it was. Could've just been a little critter or something. Wanted to make sure it was nothing to worry about while we camped out for the night."

She nodded.

The sound grew louder, surrounding them.

"Um, Ian…"

"Shhh," he hissed, weapon up. "Stay behind me." She did, grabbing the back of his belt and walking stride for stride with him.

"Watch our asses, okay?" He took a step and stopped. "Give me some more light up here."

Abigail lifted her light over his shoulder, igniting the ground in front of him with a quivering hand. Carefully, he stepped toward the noise,

jamming the stock of the shotgun deeper into his shoulder. His aim was steady, and his breathing was slow. This was kid's play to him. Come to think of it, he hadn't had a real reason to play soldier in a while.

His wife's labored breathing was *nothing* like his.

She yelped as Ian let loose a shell, seeing a shape moving in on them then quickly dart away. Whatever it was, it cried out in pain and disappeared deeper into the night, and out of the reach of both their lights.

"Abby… What the actual hell?"

"I… I don't know," she replied, sounding scared. "I'm not—"

Twin shrieks announced the arrival of two more of the things, one from each side. Ian spun to his left and pumped two rounds into the fast-moving wraith. The moment had been so fast that Ian still didn't get a good look at what it was. He spun, attempting to do the same to their other attacker, but stumbled over his wife's inert feet. She was still clutching his belt and was pulled to the ground when he turned.

He also fell on his ass, smacking the back of his head on something hard and jagged. Small rises of granite littered the plateau-like mountain, and the back of Ian's skull had, apparently, found one of them when he fell. Gone was his shotgun and its light. The light had winked out when it had struck the ground. Abigail's flashlight was still functioning, but it was pointing in the wrong direction. The scene had been cast back into darkness.

Mostly. The flashlight moved as Abigail reacquired it.

Woozy, Ian blindly reached for his panicking wife, just barely snagging her hand. Suddenly, one of their unseen attackers moved in from the other, darker side and raked its claws across the side of his head. The only reason he hadn't taken it directly in the face was thanks to Abigail, who had let go of his hand, causing him to rock backward, away from the razorblade-like strike.

Concussed and bleeding heavily, Ian shouted in abject horror as his hysterical wife was dragged away from him and deeper into the darkness. Unarmed, he stumbled to his feet and followed as fast as he could,

zigzagging through the landscape, focusing on the origin of her flashlight. She was still gripping it, consciously or unconsciously giving Ian a road map to follow. The only reason he knew she was still alive, and not holding the flashlight in death, was because of her constant, heartbreaking screams.

Tripping and falling again, he looked up, and just for a moment, saw Abigail staring back at him in the aura of her light. The next thing that happened was worse than anything he'd ever seen—ever experienced.

It was even worse than when his own SEAL teammate had tried to blow his head off.

With one last cry, Abigail was silenced with a wet gurgle that only came when someone—some*thing*—slashed your throat. Ian had heard it several times while he was overseas. Thankfully, the light had been knocked out of her hand as it happened, hiding her gruesome murder from him.

But he'd heard it…

"No!" Ian yelled, trying to get to his feet, but it was too late. His beloved wife was gone. Still, he leapt to his feet. Whatever had taken Abigail from this world, he'd happily use his bare fists to beat it to its own death. Ian didn't need a weapon to take care of business.

On his feet now, he wiped the smear of blood, snot, tears, and sweat from his face and marched forward. The ground shook again, opening the earth beneath his feet. He landed hard, rolling down the steep grade and into a tunnel, feeling two of his ribs crack in the process. Finally, he stopped face down, breathing hard.

A chirping noise drew his attention forward, and he instinctively lifted his chin to see what it was. He was surprised that he could see at all but realized that light was being provided by Abigail's discarded flashlight. It was lying next to him, pointing straight ahead. Through an unrelenting headache and blurred vision, he caught a glimpse of what had killed his wife.

And it was something he couldn't believe was real.