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# **The Devil Colony**

Written by James Rollins

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# THE DEVIL COLONY

———— A  $\Sigma$  Sigma Force novel ————

**JAMES ROLLINS**



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## **Autumn 1779**

### **Kentucky Territory**

The skull of the monster slowly revealed itself.

A shard of yellowed tusk poked through the dark soil.

Two muddied men knelt in the dirt on either side of the excavated hole. One of them was Billy Preston's father; the other, his uncle. Billy stood over them, nervously chewing a knuckle. At twelve, he had begged to be included on this trip. In the past, he'd always been left behind in Philadelphia with his mother and his baby sister, Nell.

Pride spiked through him even to be standing here.

But at the moment it was accompanied by a twinge of fear.

Maybe that was due to the sun sitting low on the horizon, casting tangled shadows over the encampment like a net. Or maybe it was the bones they'd been digging up all week.

Others gathered around: the black-skinned slaves who hauled stones and dirt; the primly dressed scholars with their ink-stained fingers; and of course, the cryptic French scientist named Archard Fortescue, the leader of this expedition into the Kentucky wilderness.

The latter—with his tall bony frame, coal-black hair, and shadowed eyes—scared Billy, reminding him of an undertaker in his black jacket and waistcoat. He had

heard whispered rumors about the gaunt fellow: how the man dissected corpses, performed experiments with them, traveled to far corners of the world collecting arcane artifacts. It was even said he had once participated in the mummification of a deceased fellow scholar, a man who had donated his body and risked his immortal soul for such a macabre endeavor.

But the French scientist had come with credentials to support him. Benjamin Franklin had handpicked him to join a new scientific group, the American Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge. He had apparently impressed Franklin in the past, though the exact details remained unknown. Additionally, the Frenchman had the ear of the new governor of Virginia, the man who had ordered them all to this strange site.

It was why they were still here—and had been for so long.

Over the passing weeks, Billy had watched the surrounding foliage slowly turn from shades of copper to fiery crimson. The past few mornings had begun to frost. At night, winds stripped the trees, leaving skeletal branches scratching at the sky. At the start of each day, Billy had to sweep and rake away piles of leaves from the dig site. It was a constant battle, as if the forest were trying to rebury what lay exposed to the sun.

Even now, Billy held the hay-bristled broom and watched as his father—dressed in muddy breeches, his shirtsleeves rolled to the elbows—cleared the last of the dirt from the buried treasure.

“With great care now . . .” Fortescue warned in his thick accent. He swept back the tails of his jacket to lean closer, one fist on his hip, the other hand leaning on a carved wooden cane.

Billy bristled at the implied condescension in the Frenchman’s manner. His father knew all the woods, from the tidewaters of Virginia to remote tracts of Kentucky, better than any man. Since before the war, his father had been a trapper and trader with the Indians in

these parts. He'd even once met Daniel Boone.

Still, Billy saw how his father's hands shook as he used brush and trowel to pick and tease the treasure out of the rich forest loam.

"This is it," his uncle said, excited. "We found it."

Fortescue loomed over the kneeling men. "*Naturelle-ment*. Of course it would be buried here. Buried at the head of the serpent."

Billy didn't know what they were seeking—only his father and uncle had read the sealed letters from the governor to the Frenchman—but he knew what Fortescue meant by "the serpent."

Billy glanced away from the hole to survey the breadth of the site. They'd been excavating an earthen mound that wound and twisted away through the forest. It stood two yards high, twice that wide, and ran two thousand feet through the woods and over the gentle hills. It looked like a giant snake had died and been buried where it fell.

Billy had heard about such earthen mounds. Embankments such as these, along with many more man-made hills, dotted the wilderness of the Americas. His father claimed the long-lost ancestors of the region's savages had built them, that they were sacred Indian burial mounds. It was said that the savages themselves had no memory of the ancient mound builders, only myths and legends. Stories continued to abound of lost civilizations, of ancient kingdoms, of ghosts, of vile curses—and, of course, of buried treasures.

Billy shifted closer as his father unearthed the object, wrapped in what appeared to be a thick hide of skin, the black coarse fur still intact. A musky scent—a heavy mix of loam and beast—welled up, overpowering even the smell of venison stew from the neighboring cook fires.

"Buffalo hide," his father determined, glancing over to Fortescue.

The Frenchman nodded for him to continue.

Using both hands, his father gently peeled away a flap of

the hide to reveal what had lain hidden for ages.

Billy held his breath.

Since the founding of these lands, many Indian mounds had been dug up and looted. All that had been found were the buried bones of the dead, along with a few arrowheads, hide shields, and shards of Indian pottery.

So why was this particular site so important?

After two months of meticulously surveying, mapping, and digging, Billy was still none the wiser as to *why* they had been directed to come here. Like the looters of other barrows, all his father's team had to show for their meticulous work was a collection of Indian tokens and artifacts: bows, quivers, lances, a massive cooking pot, a pair of beaded moccasins, an elaborate headdress. And, of course, they found bones. Thousands and thousands of them. Skulls, ribs, leg bones, pelvises. He'd overheard Fortescue estimate at least a hundred men, women, and children must have been buried here.

It was a daunting endeavor to collect and catalog everything. It had taken them all the way to the edge of winter to work from one end of the winding mound to the other, painstakingly stripping down the Indian burial mound layer by layer, sifting through dirt and rock—until, as the Frenchman said, they'd reached the head of the serpent.

His father unfolded the buffalo skin. Gasps spread among those gathered here. Even Fortescue took a sharp intake of breath through his pinched nose.

Across the inner surface of the preserved hide, a riotous battle had been drawn. Stylized figures of men on horseback raced across the hide, many bearing shields. Spears stabbed with splashes of crimson dyes. Arrows flew. Billy swore he could hear the whoops and war cries of the savages.

Fortescue spoke as he knelt down. A hand hovered over the display. "I've witnessed such handiwork before. The natives would tan the buffalo skin with a mash of the

beast's own brains, then apply their pigment with a hollowed-out piece of its own bone. But, *mon Dieu*, I've never seen such a masterpiece as this. Look how each horse is different from another, how each warrior's garb is painted in such detail."

The Frenchman's hand shifted next to hover over what the hide had protected all these years. "And I've never seen anything like this."

The skull of the monster was laid bare. Earlier, they had excavated the broken tusks of the beast, poking out of the hide-wrapped package. The cranium, exposed now to the light of day, was as large as a church bell. And like the buffalo hide, the bone of the skull had also been adorned, become a canvas for some prehistoric artist.

Across its surface, figures and shapes had been carved into the bone and painted so brightly they looked wet to the touch.

Billy's uncle spoke, full of awe. "The skull. It's a mammoth, isn't it? Like those found over at Big Salt Lick."

"No. It's not a *mammoth*," Fortescue said, and pointed with the tip of his cane. "See the curve and length of the tusks, the giant size of its masticating teeth. The anatomy and conformation of the skull are different from the mammoth specimens of the Old World. Remains such as these—unique to the Americas—have been reclassified as a *new* species, a beast called a *mastodon*."

"I don't care what it's called," his father commented forcefully. "Is this the *right* skull or not? That's what I want to know."

"There is only one way to find out."

Fortescue reached and ran his index finger along the bony crest of the skull. The tip of his finger sank into a hole near the back. Over the years, Billy had dressed enough deer and rabbit carcasses to know the hole looked too clean to be natural. The Frenchman used that purchase and pulled up.

Another round of gasps spread outward. Several of the



slaves fell back in horror. Billy's eyes widened as the top of the monster's skull split into two halves, opening like the doors of a cabinet. With his father's help, Fortescue gently pushed back the two pieces of the cranium—each two inches thick and as large as dinner platters.

Even in the meager sunlight, what lay inside the skull glinted brightly.

“Gold,” his uncle choked out, shocked.

The entire inside of the skull had been plated in the precious metal. Fortescue ran a finger along the inner surface of one of the bony halves. Only now did Billy notice the bumps and grooves across the gold surface. It looked to be a crude map, with stylized trees, sculpted mountains, and snaking rivers. The surface was also inscribed with hen scratches that might be writing.

Leaning closer, he heard Fortescue mumble one word, full of awe and a flicker of fear. “Hebrew.”

After the initial shock wore off, his father spoke at Billy's elbow: “But the skull is empty.”

Fortescue turned his attention to the open cavity of the gold-lined cranium. The space was large enough to cradle a newborn baby inside, but as his father had noted, it was empty.

Fortescue studied the cavity, his face unreadable, but behind his eyes, Billy saw his mind churning on unfathomable calculations and speculations.

*What had they expected to find?*

Fortescue stood up. “Close it back up. Keep it wrapped in the hide. We need it ready for transport to Virginia within the hour.”

No one argued. If word spread of gold here, the place would surely be ransacked. Over the next hour, as the sun sank below the horizon and torches were lit, men worked quickly to free the massive skull. A wagon was prepared, horses readied. Billy's father, his uncle, and the Frenchman spent much of that time with their heads bent together.

Billy crept close enough with his broom to eavesdrop on their conversation, pretending to be busy. Still, their voices were too low to pick out more than a few words.

“It may be enough,” Fortescue said, “. . . a place to start. If the enemy finds it before us, your young union will be doomed before it has even begun.”

His father shook his head. “Then maybe it best be destroyed now. Set a bonfire here. Burn the bone to ash, melt the gold to slag.”

“It may come to that, but we’ll leave such a decision to the governor.”

His father looked ready to argue with the Frenchman, but then caught Billy hovering nearby. He turned and lifted an arm to shoo Billy off and opened his mouth to speak.

Those words never came.

Before his father could speak, his throat exploded in a spray of blood. He fell to his knees, clutching at his neck. An arrowhead poked from under his jaw. Blood poured between his fingers, bubbled from his lips.

Billy ran toward his father, regressing from young man to child in a dark instant. “Papa!”

In shock, his ears went deaf. The world shrank to include only his father, who stared back at him, full of pain and regret. Then his father’s body jerked, again and again, and toppled forward. Feathers peppered his back. Behind the body, Billy saw his uncle kneeling, head hanging. A spear had cleaved clean through his chest from behind, its point buried in the dirt, its shaft propping the dead body up.

Before Billy could comprehend what he was seeing, what was happening, he was struck from the side—not by an arrow or spear, but by an arm. He was knocked to the ground and rolled. The impact also snapped the world back into full focus.

Shouts filled his ears. Horses screamed. Shadows danced amid torches as scores of men fought and grap-

pled. All around, arrows sang through the air, accompanied by savage whoops.

An Indian attack.

Billy struggled, but he was pinned under the Frenchman. Fortescue hissed in his ear. "Stay down, boy."

The Frenchman rolled off him and flew to his feet as a half-naked savage, his face painted in a red mask of terror, came flying toward him, a hatchet raised high. Fortescue defended with his only weapon, as meager as it might be—his cane.

As the length of carved oak swung to point at the attacker, it parted near the handle. A sheath of wood flew from the cane's tip, revealing a sword hidden at its core. The empty sheath struck the savage in the forehead and caused him to stumble in his attack. Fortescue took advantage and lunged out, skewering the attacker through the chest.

A guttural scream followed. Fortescue turned the man's momentum, and dropped the savage beside Billy on the ground.

The Frenchman yanked his sword free. "To me, boy!"

Billy obeyed. It was all his mind would allow. He had no time to think. He struggled up, but a hand grabbed his arm. The bloody savage sought to hold him. Billy tugged his arm loose.

The Indian fell back. Where the hand had clutched his sleeve, a smeared handprint remained. Not blood, Billy realized in a flash.

*Paint.*

He stared down at the dying savage. The palm that had clutched him was as white as a lily, though some of the paint was sticking to creases in the palm.

Fingers clamped onto his collar and pulled him to his feet.

Billy turned to Fortescue, who still kept hold of him. "They . . . they're not Indians," he sobbed out, struggling to understand.

“I know,” Fortescue answered with nary a bit of fright.

All around, chaos continued to reign. The last two torches went dark. Screams, prayers, and pleas for mercy echoed all around.

Fortescue hauled Billy across the encampment, staying low, stopping only long enough to gather up the loose buffalo hide, which he shoved at Billy. They reached a lone horse hidden deeper in the woods, tethered to a tree, already saddled as if someone had anticipated the attack. The horse stamped and threw its head, panicked by the cries, by the smell of blood.

The Frenchman pointed. “Up you go. Be ready to fly.”

As Billy hooked a boot into the stirrup, the Frenchman vanished back into the shadows. With no choice, Billy climbed into the saddle. His weight seemed to calm the horse. He hugged his arms around the mount’s sweaty neck, but his heart continued to pound in his throat. Blood rushed through his ears. He wanted to clamp his hands over those ears, to shut out the bloody screams, but he strained to see any sign of approach by the savages.

*No, not savages,* he reminded himself.

A branch cracked behind him. He twisted around as a shape limped into view. From the cape of his jacket and the glint of his sword, he could see it was the Frenchman. Billy wanted to leap off the horse and clasp tightly to the man, to force him to make some sense of the bloodshed and deceit.

Fortescue stumbled up to him. The broken shaft of an arrow stuck out of the man’s thigh, just above the knee. As he reached Billy’s side, he shoved two large objects up at him.

“Take these. Keep them bundled in the hide.”

Billy accepted the burdens. With a shock, he saw it was the crown of the monster’s cranium, split into two halves, bone on one side, gold on the other. Fortescue must have stolen them off the larger skull.

*But why?*

With no time for answers, he folded the two platters of gold-plated bone into the buffalo hide in his lap.

“Go,” Fortescue said.

Billy took the reins but hesitated. “What about you, sir?”

Fortescue placed a hand on his knee, as if sensing his raw terror, trying to reassure him. His words were firm and fast. “You and your horse have enough of a burden to bear without my weight. You must fly as swiftly as you can. Take it where it will be safe.”

“Where?” Billy asked, clenching the reins.

“To the new governor of Virginia.” The Frenchman stepped away. “Take it to Thomas Jefferson.”

**PART I**  
**TRESPASS**



# 1

## **Present Day**

**May 18, 1:32 P.M.**

## **Rocky Mountains, Utah**

It looked like the entrance to hell.

The two young men stood on a ridge overlooking a deep, shadowy chasm. It had taken them eight hours to climb from the tiny burg of Roosevelt to this remote spot high in the Rocky Mountains.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” Trent Wilder asked.

Charlie Reed took out his cell phone, checked the GPS, then examined the Indian map drawn on a piece of deer hide and sealed in a clear plastic Ziploc bag. “I think so. According to the map, there should be a small stream at the bottom of this ravine. The cave entrance should be where the creek bends around to the north.”

Trent shivered and brushed snow from his hair. Though a tapestry of wildflowers heralded the arrival of spring in the lowlands, up here winter still held a firm grip. The air remained frigid, and snow frosted the surrounding mountaintops. To make matters worse, the sky had been lowering all day, and a light flurry had begun to blow.

Trent studied the narrow valley. It seemed to have no bottom. Down below, a black pine forest rose out of a sea of fog. Sheer cliffs surrounded all sides. While he had packed ropes and rappelling harnesses, he hoped he wouldn't need them.

But that wasn't what was truly bothering him.

"Maybe we shouldn't be going down there," he said.

Charlie cocked an eyebrow at him. "After climbing all day?"

"What about that curse? What your grandfather—"

A hand waved dismissively. "The old man's got one foot in the grave and a head full of peyote." Charlie slapped him in the shoulder. "So don't go crapping your pants. The cave probably has a few arrowheads, some broken pots. Maybe even a few bones, if we're lucky. C'mon."

Trent had no choice but to follow Charlie down a thin deer trail they'd discovered earlier. As they picked their way along, he frowned at the back of Charlie's crimson jacket, emblazoned with the two feathers representing the University of Utah. Trent still wore his high school letterman jacket, bearing the Roosevelt Union cougar. The two of them had been best friends since elementary school, but lately they'd been growing apart. Charlie had just finished his first year at college, while Trent had gone into full-time employment at his dad's auto-body shop. Even this summer, Charlie would be participating in an internship with the Uintah Reservation's law group.

His friend was a rising star, one that Trent would soon need a telescope to watch from the tiny burg of Roosevelt. But what else was new? Charlie had always outshone Trent. Of course, it didn't help matters that his friend was half Ute, with his people's perpetual tan and long black hair. Trent's red crew cut and the war of freckles across his nose and cheeks had forever relegated him to the role of Charlie's wingman at school parties.

Though the thought went unvoiced, it was as if they both knew their friendship was about to end as adulthood fell upon their shoulders. So as a rite of passage, the two had agreed to this last adventure, to search for a cave sacred to the Ute tribes.

According to Charlie, only a handful of his tribal elders even knew about this burial site in the High Uintas Wil-



derness. Those who did were forbidden to speak of it. The only reason Charlie knew about it was that his grandfather liked his bourbon too much. Charlie doubted his grandfather even remembered showing him that old deerhide map hidden in a hollowed-out buffalo horn.

Trent had first heard the tale when he was in junior high, huddled in a pup tent with Charlie. With a flashlight held to his chin for effect, his friend had shared the story. "My grandfather says the Great Spirit still haunts this cave. Guarding a huge treasure of our people."

"What sort of treasure?" Trent had asked doubtfully. At the time he had been more interested in the *Playboy* he'd sneaked out of his father's closet. That was treasure enough for him.

Charlie had shrugged. "Don't know. But it must be cursed."

"What do you mean?"

His friend had shifted the flashlight closer to his chin, devilishly arching an eyebrow. "Grandfather says whoever trespasses into the Great Spirit's cave is never allowed to leave."

"Why's that?"

"Because if they do, the world will end."

Right then, Trent's old hound dog had let out an ear-splitting wail, making them both jump. Afterward, they had laughed and talked deep into the night. Charlie ended up dismissing his grandfather's story as superstitious nonsense. As a modern Indian, Charlie went out of his way to reject such foolishness.

Even so, Charlie had sworn Trent to secrecy and refused to take him to the place marked on the map—until now.

"It's getting warmer down here," Charlie said.

Trent held out a palm. His friend was right. The snowfall had been growing heavier, the flakes thickening, but as they descended, the air had grown warmer, smelling vaguely of spoiled eggs. At some point, the snowfall had

turned to a drizzling rain. He wiped his hand on his pants and realized that the fog he'd spotted earlier along the bottom of the ravine was actually *steam*.

The source appeared through the trees below: a small creek bubbling along a rocky channel at the bottom of the ravine.

"Smell that sulfur," Charlie said with a sniff. Reaching the creek, he tested the water with a finger. "Hot. Must be fed by a geothermal spring somewhere around here."

Trent was unimpressed. The mountains around here were riddled with such baths.

Charlie stood up. "This must be the right place."

"Why's that?"

"Hot spots like this are sacred to my people. So it only makes sense that they would pick this place for an important burial site." Charlie headed out, hopping from rock to rock. "C'mon. We're close."

Together, they followed the creek upstream. With each step, the air grew hotter. The sulfurous smell burned Trent's eyes and nostrils. No wonder no one had ever found this place.

With his eyes watering, Trent wanted to turn back, but Charlie suddenly stopped at a sharp bend in the creek. His friend swung in a full circle, holding out his cell phone like a divining rod, then checked the map he'd stolen from his grandfather's bedroom this morning.

"We're here."

Trent searched around. He didn't see any cave. Just trees and more trees. Overhead, snow had begun to frost on the higher elevations, but it continued to fall as a sickly rain down here.

"The entrance has got to be somewhere nearby," Charlie mumbled.

"Or it could just be an old story."

Charlie hopped to the other side of the creek and began kicking at some leafy ferns on that side. "We should at least look around."

Trent made a half-assed attempt on his side, heading away from the water. “I don’t see anything!” he called back as he reached a wall of granite. “Why don’t we just—”

Then he saw it out of the corner of his eye as he turned. It looked like another shadow on the cliff face, except a breeze was combing through the valley, setting branches to moving, shadows to shifting.

Only this shadow didn’t move.

He stepped closer. The cave entrance was low and wide, like a mouth frozen in a perpetual scowl. It opened four feet up the cliff face, sheltered under a protruding lip of stone.

A splash and a curse announced the arrival of his friend.

Trent pointed.

“It’s really here,” Charlie said, sounding hesitant for the first time.

They stood for a long moment, staring at the cave entrance, remembering the stories about it. They were both too nervous to move forward, but too full of manly pride to back away.

“We doing this?” Trent finally asked.

His words broke the stalemate.

Charlie’s back stiffened. “Hell yeah, we’re doing this.”

Before either of them could lose their nerve, they crossed to the cliff and climbed up into the lip of the cave. Charlie freed his flashlight and pointed it down a tunnel. A steep passageway extended deep into the mountainside.

Charlie ducked his head inside. “Let’s go find that treasure!”

Bolstered by the bravado in his friend’s voice, Trent followed.

The passageway narrowed quickly, requiring them to shuffle along single file. The air was even hotter inside, but at least it was dry and didn’t stink as much.

Squeezing through a particularly tight chute, Trent felt the heat of the granite through his jacket.

“Man,” he said as he popped free, “it’s like a goddamn sauna down here.”

Charlie’s face shone brightly. “Or a sweat lodge. Maybe the cave was even used by my people as one. I bet the source of the hot spring is right under our feet.”

Trent didn’t like the sound of that, but there was no turning back now.

A few more steep steps and the tunnel dumped into a low-roofed chamber about the size of a basketball court. Directly ahead, a crude pit had been excavated out of the rock, the granite still blackened by ancient flames.

Charlie reached blindly to grab for Trent’s arm. His friend’s grip was iron, yet it still trembled. And Trent knew why.

The cavern wasn’t empty.

Positioned along the walls and spread across the floor was a field of bodies, men and women, some upright and cross-legged, others slumped on their sides. Leathery skin had dried to bone, eyes shriveled to sockets, lips peeled back to bare yellowed teeth. Each was naked to the waist, even the women, their breasts desiccated and lying flat on their chests. A few bodies had been decorated with headdresses of feathers or necklaces of stone and sinew.

“My people,” Charlie said, his voice croaking with respect as he edged closer to one of the mummies.

Trent followed. “Are you sure about that?”

In the bright beam of the flashlight, their skin looked too pale, their hair too light. But Trent was no expert. Maybe the mineral-rich heat that had baked the bodies had also somehow bleached them.

Charlie examined a man wearing a ringlet of black feathers around his neck. He stretched his flashlight closer. “This one looks red.”

Charlie wasn’t talking about the man’s skin. In the direct glare of the beam, the tangle of hair around the dried skull was a ruddy auburn.

Trent noted something else. "Look at his neck."

The man's head had fallen back against the granite wall. The skin under his jaw gaped open, showing bone and dried tissue. The slice was too straight, the cause plain. The man's shriveled fingers held a shiny metal blade. It still looked polished, reflecting the light.

Charlie swung his flashlight in a slow circle around the room. Matching blades lay on the stone floor or in other bony grips.

"Looks like they killed themselves," Trent said, stunned.

"But why?"

Trent pointed to the only other feature in the room. Across the chamber, a dark tunnel continued deeper into the mountain. "Maybe they were hiding something down there, something they didn't want anyone to know about?"

They both stared. A shiver traveled up from Trent's toes and raised goose bumps along his arms. Neither of them moved. Neither of them wanted to cross this room of death. Even the promise of treasure no longer held any appeal.

Charlie spoke first. "Let's get out of here."

Trent didn't argue. He'd seen enough horror for one day.

Charlie swung around and headed toward the exit, taking the only source of light.

Trent followed him into the tunnel, but he kept glancing back, fearing that the Great Spirit would possess one of the dead bodies and send it shuffling after them, dagger in hand. Focused as he was behind him, his boot slipped on some loose shale. He fell hard on his belly and slid a few feet down the steep slope back toward the cavern.

Charlie didn't wait. In fact, he seemed anxious to escape. By the time Trent was back on his feet and dusting off his knees, Charlie had reached the tunnel's end and hopped out.

Trent started to yell a protest at being abandoned—but another shout, harsh and angry, erupted from outside. Someone else was out there. Trent froze in place. More heated words were exchanged, but Trent couldn't make them out.

Then a pistol shot cracked.

Trent jumped and stumbled two steps back into the darkness.

As the blast echoed away, a heavy silence was left in its wake.

*Charlie . . . ?*

Shaking with fear, Trent retreated down the tunnel, away from the entrance. His eyes had adjusted enough to allow him to reach the chamber of mummies without making a sound. He stopped at the edge of the cavern, trapped between the darkness at his back and whoever was out there.

Silence stretched and time slowed.

Then a scraping and huffing echoed down to him.

*Oh no.*

Trent clutched his throat. Someone was climbing into the cave. With his heart hammering, he had no choice but to retreat deeper into the darkness—but he needed a weapon. He stopped long enough to pry the knife from a dead man's grip, snapping fingers like dried twigs.

Once armed, he slipped the blade into his belt and picked his way across the field of bodies. He held his arms ahead of him, blindly brushing across brittle feathers, leathery skin, and coarse hair. He pictured bony hands reaching for him, but he refused to stop moving.

He needed a place to hide.

There was only one refuge.

*The far tunnel . . .*

But that frightened him.

At one point, his foot stepped into open air. He came close to screaming—then realized it was only the old fire pit dug into the floor. A quick hop and he was over it. He

tried to use the pit's location to orient himself in the darkness, but it proved unnecessary.

Light grew brighter behind him, bathing the chamber.

Now able to see, he rushed headlong across the cavern. As he reached the mouth of the tunnel, a thudding, tumbling sounded behind him. He glanced over his shoulder.

A body came rolling out of the passageway and sprawled facedown on the floor. The growing light revealed the embroidered feathers on the back of the body's crimson jacket.

Charlie.

With a fist clamped to his lips, Trent fled into the sheltering darkness of the tunnel. Fear grew sharper with every step.

*Do they know I'm down here, too?*

The tunnel ran flat and smooth, but it was far too short. After only five scared steps, it widened into another chamber.

Trent ducked to the side and flattened against the wall. He fought to control his ragged breathing, sure it would be heard all the way outside. He risked a peek back.

Someone had entered the mummy chamber with a flashlight. In the jumbling light, the shape bent down and dragged his friend's body to the edge of the fire pit. It was only one person. The murderer dropped to his knees, set down his flashlight, and pulled Charlie's body to his chest. The man raised his face to the roof and rocked, chanting something in the Ute language.

Trent bit off a gasp, recognizing that lined and leathery face.

As he watched, Charlie's grandfather raised a polished steel pistol to his own head. Trent turned away but was too slow. The blast deafened in the confined space. Half of the old man's skull exploded in a spray of blood, bone, and gore.

The pistol clattered to the stone. The old man fell heavily over his grandson's body, as if protecting him in death.

A slack arm struck the abandoned flashlight, nudging it enough to shine directly at Trent's hiding place.

He slumped to his knees in horror, remembering the superstitious warning from Charlie's grandfather: *Whoever trespasses into the Great Spirit's cave is never allowed to leave.*

The tribal elder had certainly made that come true for Charlie. He must have somehow learned about the theft of the map and tracked them here.

Trent covered his face with his palms, breathing hard between his fingers, refusing to believe what he had witnessed. He listened for anyone else out there. But only silence answered him. He waited a full ten minutes.

Finally satisfied that he was alone, he pushed back to his feet. He looked over his shoulder. The flashlight's beam pierced to the back of the small cave, revealing what had been hidden here long ago.

Stone crates, each the size of a lunch box, were stacked at the back of the chamber. They appeared to be oiled and wrapped in bark. But what drew Trent's full attention rose in the center of the room.

A massive skull rested atop a granite plinth.

*A totem*, he thought.

Trent stared into those empty sockets, noting the high domed cranium and the unnaturally long fangs. Each had to be a foot long. He had learned enough from his old earth sciences classes to recognize the skull of a saber-toothed tiger.

Still, he couldn't help but be stunned by the strange state of the skull. He had to tell someone about the murder, the suicide—but also about this treasure.

*A treasure that made no sense.*

He hurried headlong down the tunnel, passed through the mummy chamber, and ran toward daylight. At the entrance to the cave, he paused, remembering the final warning from Charlie's grandfather, about what would happen if someone trespassed here and left.



*The world will come to an end.*

Teary-eyed, Trent shook his head. Superstitions had killed his best friend. He wasn't about to let the same happen to him.

With a leap, he fled back into the world.