

CHAPTER 1

RYAN WEBSTER NEVER thought a simple promise would come to this. He scanned the skyline and counted at least seven dishes from network satellite trucks reaching out to the world. His secret was being broadcast from the parking lot of his family's primate park, along with reports of the carnage that had occurred less than an hour ago. His father was wounded and near death. His mother's world was shattered. Two federal agents had been shot. Cyrus Shultz, the man who'd set out long ago to destroy his family, was in custody. Jacob Remington, the head of the radical Christian group, The Society of True Believers, and Charles Grandby, the world's most famous atheist, who'd both been battling for the right to kill him for the past two weeks, were now under full damage control and facing the scrutiny of the FBI. But an acidic guilt gnawed in his gut. The one thing he promised to protect—the most remarkable primate species ever discovered—was now in grave danger.

He'd made the promise to his dying grandfather only three weeks ago. He said he'd find the monkeys that had been kept hidden in the Amazon since 1926. He said he'd hide and protect them until he decided if the world was ready for their revelation.

The cold handcuffs cutting into his wrists clearly said the world wasn't ready. He'd been a seventeen-year-old boy when he'd responded to his grandfather's text to come to the hospice. Now, three weeks later, he was an eighteen-year-old man. While he'd spent most of his life under his father's thumb and in awe of his grandfather's greatness, he'd finally stepped up. He'd been protected by his Uncle Thad, and he loved him for that. But even though it seemed impossible in his current predicament, he knew it was time for him to be a force to be reckoned with.

Ryan watched the Fish and Wildlife agents load the magnificent hybrids into the trailer. But they weren't hybrids to him—they were his friends. These remarkable beings even had names—Barney, Zach and Taylor—names they'd spoken in their own voices—voices that had shocked the world. With a noose around his neck, the smallest, Taylor, glanced back at Ryan. His expression said it all. The monkeys were now in the custody of the species his great-grandfather claimed was capable of destroying the most significant discovery in the last two thousand years. But his expression said something else to Ryan—something that crushed his heart. The boy they'd trusted with their lives had let them down.

Ryan instinctively tried to raise his hand to wave goodbye to his friend, but the cuffs firmly trapped his arms behind him. He craned his neck and gave Taylor a long nod. Taylor nervously smiled and stepped into what looked like a horse trailer with bars. The flashes from the press corps cameras created a continuous strobe light and Ryan spotted at least seven reporters tethered to their satellite trucks broadcasting word of the discovery of the 'missing link.' The entire world now knew about the swimming monkeys.

"We'll get them back, dude," his uncle Thad said.

"Yes, we will," Addy agreed.

Even though they were sitting on the curb of the parking lot of the primate park with their hands cuffed behind their backs and encircled by FBI and ICE agents, Ryan felt a surge of determination. As far as he was concerned, the monkeys were still his responsibility. Inwardly, he railed against the vision of the probing and testing at the hands of government scientists that Thad had warned about. He prayed that the secret of their longevity remained just that—a secret. Ironically, he knew that revelation would be the greatest threat to their lives.

The sun had plummeted into the horizon, but the asphalt was still warm. He scanned the raucous crowd as it pulsed against the yellow plastic line secured by the Miami-Dade Police. The crowd had swelled and overflowed onto the county road in front of the park. People stood on their tip-toes, shoved each other aside, and held their smartphones in the air, in an effort to get a glimpse or a shot of the monkeys. They gawked as the trailer, escorted by three motorcycle cops, four Miami-Dade Police patrol cars and half-a-dozen unmarked sedans, pulled onto to the road and disappeared to the east.

They were gone. Ryan did his best to hide his frustration and fear. He'd risked everything to protect them. Now they were headed to an unknown location as mere caged animals. But from somewhere deep inside him, a spark of rage ignited a renewed commitment—a determination that bolstered his resolve. Some way, somehow, he'd get to them.

This wasn't over by a long shot.

The mob seemed evenly divided between those who supported Jacob Remington and the Society of True Believers' view of a Grand Creator, and those who shared Charles Grandby's atheist point of view, now emboldened by the scientific evidence represented by the three hybrids. Both men had been inciting their constituents and playing to the media. Grandby claimed the monkeys proved the theory of evolution and that God and the bible were fairy tales. Remington claimed the monkeys were created by some sick experiment conducted by the Webster family and their existence proved nothing. Now Ryan couldn't spot either man. He guessed they'd both been detained and would be interrogated for hours, answering questions about their involvement in the trail of murders that had doggedly tracked him for weeks.

Ryan looked up at one of the FBI agents and nodded toward the parking lot. "Where are they taking them?"

The stone-faced agent looked down and locked eyes with Ryan. “I wouldn’t worry about them right now. You have your own worries.” He snapped his attention back to the crowd.

With the monkeys now gone, the crowd’s focus shifted to the three suspects sitting on the curb. Ryan could feel their stares as their excited rumble slipped into an eerie silence. The two-way radios gripped in the agents’ hands crackled with reports as SWAT cleared the inside of the park. Behind him, Ryan heard the *Rain Man*-like dialogs of the parrots caged at the front of the park, acknowledging the end of daylight. The smell of gun oil drew his attention to the shotguns and MP5s dangling in his face. To his right, the front gate of the park creaked open and Cyrus Schultz, the man who shot his father and tried to destroy the monkeys, was dragged by two FBI agents to the waiting sedan. Handcuffed, he backed into the rear doorway of the car and paused. His defeated scowl momentarily changed to a grin when he locked eyes with Ryan.

Ryan had enough. “You son-of-a-bitch!” Ryan yelled and rocketed off the curb. Three hands grabbed his shoulders and slammed him back to the asphalt. Cyrus folded into the seat. The agent slammed the door, and the car sped away.

“He’ll get his, dude,” Thad said.

Ryan realized he was holding his breath and hissed it out. Still, the rage boiled inside him. He imagined crushing Cyrus’s windpipe with his bare hands.

An hour earlier, Ryan had watched his father, the wounded young Fish and Wildlife agent, and the albino mercenary known as Karl, being rushed into three ambulances. His mother had tried to comfort Ryan, but to his disappointment she’d chosen to leave with his father and left him in his uncle’s company. With the help of Agent Phillips, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent who’d discovered them, he’d convinced the FBI, FWS and ICE to allow Ryan, Barney, Zach and Taylor to help safely corral the five hundred monkeys back into the

park. Now, with Agent Phillips on his way to the hospital, Ryan, Thad and Addy were the only ‘suspects’ remaining at the scene. He heard the bickering between the FBI and ICE agents over exactly whose custody they were in, until a grey-haired FBI agent announced that Washington had made the call and the FBI would take the lead, since federal agents had been wounded. Agent Phillips protested from his gurney, until the FBI agent added that they would coordinate with ICE.

The grey-haired FBI agent appeared from inside the park and marched up to face Ryan, Thad and Addy.

“Okay you three, on your feet.”

Ryan rose to his feet and felt an agent grab his bicep. Addy got up, too. Thad remained seated and stared at the agent. One of the bulkier agents stepped behind Thad, bent down and grabbed his arm. Without taking his eyes off the agent-in-charge, Thad twisted out of his grip and floated to his feet.

“You the man?” Thad asked disdainfully.

The agent paused, and then said, “I’m Agent Williams, special-agent-in-charge of the Miami office. You’re all coming with me, Mr. Webster.”

“What’s the charge?”

The agent stepped closer. “I believe we have evidence of a list of felonies as long as your monkey friends’ arms. Now, we can do this the hard way or the easy way—up to you.”

Thad held his ground, then just shook his head.

The agent spun and said, “Let’s go.”

Ryan felt his escort squeeze his arm and drag him after Thad and his perturbed escort.

“Just showing them who’s boss,” Thad said glancing over his shoulder with a grin.

As they approached two Ford Crown Victorias, Agent Williams said, “Those two with me,” as he pointed to Thad and Ryan.

“Addy?” Ryan said. She was dragged toward the second sedan.

“I’ll be all right,” she said throwing a less-than-confident glance over her shoulder.

But it wasn’t all right for Ryan. Addy had helped keep him alive. Deep in the Amazon, he’d returned the favor. They’d grown close—much closer than he’d ever felt to anyone. And while the physical attraction was strong, he felt something even deeper between them.

He couldn’t stand seeing her taken away from him.

“Watch your head,” the agent said to Ryan.

Still straining to see Addy behind him, Ryan ducked into the back seat of Williams’s car, while Thad was stuffed into the other door and dropped into the seat next to Ryan. Ryan’s escort jumped into the front passenger’s seat and Williams started the car. They drove past the crowd and the cameras and were on the road toward Miami in no time.

By now, the late August sun had disappeared and darkness filled the void between the streetlights. Ryan looked at Thad, who lay back against his handcuffed arms with his eyes closed. It was clear there would be no conversation. Both agents remained silent and occasionally glanced back. They reached the Turnpike and headed toward Miami, partly retracing the route Ryan had made with Barney, Zach and Taylor just hours before. Now, their revelation was underway, and Ryan knew they weren’t safe.

They exited onto the Palmetto Expressway and skirted the edge of Coral Gables. As he gazed over the rooftops, Ryan bristled at the thought of Sarah. He wondered what he’d ever seen in her, and why he allowed her to use him to help expose the monkeys. She claimed his family had created the ‘hellish creatures,’ and with the help of her mother and The Society of True

Believers, she was clearly focused on their destruction. He recognized now that the passion he thought he felt for her was only lust. And that had quickly turned to contempt.

It was different with Addy. He glanced back at the other car behind them and thought about how she'd come back. She risked everything for him. There was an undeniable connection they shared that was already much stronger than anything he felt with Sarah.

They continued north past the Miami exits.

"Where are we going?" Ryan asked, breaking the silence.

"FBI Headquarters in North Miami Beach. You have an appointment." Williams shared a chuckle with the other agent.

"With who?" Ryan asked.

"You'll see soon enough."

"But you dudes are so much fun," Thad scoffed.

The grins left the agents' faces and they drove on. In what seemed like minutes they arrived at the low-slung building near the interchange of the Florida Turnpike and I-95.

Thad and Ryan were dragged from the cars, separated, and before Ryan knew it, he was anchored to a chair bolted to the floor of a holding cell on the second floor. The cell wasn't much bigger than a walk-in closet and reeked of bleach. The walls were white with a white perforated drop ceiling. Just like in the movies, a single rectangular window faced Ryan, reflecting his haggard image back at him. He looked like crap. He sat alone for the first time in weeks. He could hear his own heartbeat but nothing else. The longer he waited, the angrier he grew. Who was this appointment with? He knew he'd be interrogated, but how? Was he a suspect?

He waited. It had been at least an hour, he guessed, before the door flew open and a giant of a man, with thick brown eyebrows and deep-set eyes, dressed in a black suit, starched white

shirt and red tie, slammed it behind him. He stormed to the table, threw a file and notepad down and resting on his knuckles, leaned over Ryan.

“Young man, I am Special Agent Milo Sands, and you’re in a shitload of trouble.”

