

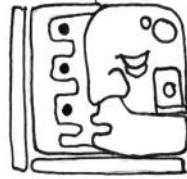


Ann Charles

MAKE NO BONES ABOUT IT

AN EXCERPT ...

From Chapter One...



***Machete:* A broad-bladed, long, heavy knife used for cutting through underbrush by the Maya.**

The Mexican jungle had devoured the remains of the dead, bones and all.

Through the thick shroud of vines, bushes, and trees, Angélica García could see only traces of evidence left over from those who'd lived here long, long ago. But in her mind's eye, fueled by her imagination and decades of study, the dig site before her teemed with mounds hiding Maya secrets waiting to be uncovered, explored, and shared.

A twig snapped behind her, followed by the rustling of branches and leaves. She was no longer alone.

"*Gatita*," her father wheezed her childhood nickname in between heavy breaths. Juan García hobbled up beside her, leaning on his crutches when he paused at her side. The citrusy scent of bug spray hovered in the soupy humidity, mixing with the damp musty smell wafting up from the forest floor. "This is a bad idea."

"I agree. If you'll remember, I strongly suggested that you wait for me back at the helicopter."

A howler monkey let out a loud, guttural growl from high above them in the trees, probably annoyed with them for talking during its naptime.

"That's not what I meant and you know it." Her father frowned at the untamed tangle of trees, branches, and bushes surrounding them. "*Ay chihuabua*. This dig site hasn't been worked in a long time."

"Five years and two months, to be exact." The length of human absence explained why the jungle had regained the upper hand on hiding some of the ruins in the satellite images Angélica had spent the last week studying back in her home office in Cancun.

"Look," he said, pointing at a stand of trees. "Those sapodilla trees have no scars from chicle harvesting."

She'd noticed the lack of diagonal cuts marking the tree trunks as well. For centuries, the Maya had been slicing into the bark of the sapodilla trees, tapping them like maple trees for sap. The chicle resin that drained from the trunks was strained and boiled into chicle bricks that were shipped all over the world to make chewing gum. Apparently, not even the local Maya population had bothered this site for decades, if not centuries.

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"I was checking out that temple up ahead through my binoculars." She aimed her machete at the structure she'd come here to see specifically. "Strangler fig roots cover the northeast corner. There will likely be some structural damage we'll need to address."

Juan shook his head. "It's going to take too much."

"Too much what?"

"Time and work." He squeezed her shoulder. "Not to mention the heartache. You are biting off more than you can chew—than we can chew."

She frowned up at him. "Heartache?"

"Being here won't bring her back, *gatita*."

"I know that." She swung her machete at some of the spindly branches blocking what she guessed to be a deer trail, plowing forward again. "This isn't about resurrecting the dead."

"Are you sure about that?" His crutches creaked behind her as he limped along the uneven ground.

"Positive." She swung again and again, making slow but steady progress.

"Because," he continued, speaking to her back, "I'm having trouble understanding why you feel so strongly about spending time at the site that killed your mother."

She lowered the machete and turned around, her breath coming in huffs. Taking off her straw sun hat, she wiped the sweat running down her cheek with her damp camp shirt. "I could swear we've gone over this before, Dad." In fact, they'd discussed it many, many groan-filled times since she'd made the decision to come here. "This place didn't kill her. The crash did."

Juan swatted at a fly buzzing around his head. "A crash that was caused by a curse she found here on this site."

Concrete dams gave way more easily than her father when it came to superstitious shit. "It's not a curse this time. It's a warning."

"I know what Marianne's notes say." He smacked her in the middle of her forehead.

"Ouch!" She drew back. "What was that for?"

"The fly." Pulling a handkerchief from his back pocket, he grimaced and held it out. "You might want to wipe that off. It was a juicy one."

She snatched the handkerchief from him, cleaning off the bug remains before jamming her hat back on. "If you know what Mom wrote, why do you insist on arguing with me about those damned glyphs she found?"

"Your mother was one of the brightest, smartest, most amazing women I've ever met in my almost forty years in the archaeology field. But I'm telling you here and now." He pounded the leaf-littered ground with one crutch for emphasis. "She was wrong on this particular theory." He pointed toward the three-story-high structure visible between the breaks in the trees. "What she found at that temple was more than a warning. This place has a history of death."

Angélica's guffaw incited another deep howl from overhead, followed by a bark from a nearby spider monkey.

"Dad, every single Maya dig site on the list sent to me by INAH has a history of death." Mexico's federally funded National Institute of Anthropology and History, known as INAH for short, had hired Angélica to clean up and prepare derelict dig sites, hoping to reel in more archaeotourism income to help support their programs. "You and I are in the business of archaeology, remember? We study the relics of the dead, not those who are still living

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happily ever after.”

“Of course I remember that, *gatita*. I’m not senile.”

“Not yet, anyway,” she teased.

He poked her calf with a crutch, making her yip. His brown eyes sparkled as she dodged additional jabs.

“Okay,” she said, laughing. “I take it back. Stop. Stop!”

He lowered his weapon. His focus shifted to the temple in the distance. “Of all the sites on your list, this one stole my beautiful wife from me.” He looked down at her, his face lined with pain. “If we stay, I fear it will rob me of my hard-headed daughter, too.”

Her eyes watered. She turned away before he could see any tears. She sniffed, checking her emotions before she told him, “You’re too superstitious, Dad.”

“And you’re too logical, Marianne Jr.”

“I take that as a compliment.” Returning to the narrow trail and the task at hand, Angélica chopped at a tangle of vines and palm fronds blocking their way. One of the vines thudded harder than the others when it hit the ground, coming to life with a rattle and hiss.

“*¡Dios mio!*” Juan’s voice was a notch higher than normal. “What’s the Mayan word for ‘rattlesnake?’”

She inched backward, not taking her eyes off the snake. “I fail to see why that matters at this moment.”

“Oh, I remember. A *tzabcan*.”

The rattling grew louder.

“Would you please shush,” she whispered. Raising her machete slowly in case it lunged, she held steady as the snake stuck its forked tongue out several more times. Finally, it stopped rattling and slithered into the undergrowth.

Juan blew out a breath. “That was close. The curse almost bit you.”

“A warning, Dad.” She wiped a drip of sweat from her chin. “The snake wasn’t interested in biting me; only *warning* me that he was there and wanted to be left alone.”

“A warning of the curse then.”

Angélica wasn’t going to have this argument with him today. It was too damned hot and humid. “I should have chopped off its head and taken the body back to Teodoro.”

Her favorite Maya shaman was always on the lookout for dead rattlesnakes.

“Please don’t tell me María uses them in her *panuchos*.”

Teodoro’s wife, María, was the site’s cook. Her tortillas, stuffed with black beans, chicken, and a spicy, delicious orange-colored sauce, always inspired much drooling from Juan and the rest of Angélica’s field crew. “No, Teodoro likes to dry rattlesnakes and then roast them.”

“Why?”

“He grinds them into some kind of medicinal powder.”

“Medicine for what?”

“Probably toothaches,” she said, holding back a grin. Her father had suffered from a toothache at the last dig site. Not even Teodoro’s homemade numbing ointment could stop the pain that ended up requiring an emergency trip to a dentist in Cancun.

Her father wrinkled his nose. “That cruel sense of humor comes from your mother’s side of the family.”

A loud *plee* from a crested guan hanging out high up in a nearby ceiba tree urged Angélica back to swinging her machete.

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Thirty minutes later, they stood at the base of the gray-stoned, crumbling Maya version of a pyramid. According to the paperwork she'd read on the location, one of the first archaeologists who'd worked the site had named it the *Baatꞥ'* Temple, incorporating the Yucatec Mayan word for "spider monkey." On paper it was just another Mayan name for a large structure, but this particular temple had haunted her dreams and nightmares since she'd read her mother's notebook after the crash.

image

Angélica uncapped her water bottle and took a swig, staring up at the stone exterior.

The forest hadn't completed its camouflage work on this temple yet, unlike several of the other structures that were painted various shades of green with lichens and wrapped in vines, or those hidden under mounds of dead leaves, verdant shrubs, and palm fronds. The *Baatꞥ'* Temple poked up through the surrounding canopy, reaching for the sky gods. In contrast to the more elegant temples of Chichen Itza and Tikal, the handful of exposed structures at this site were unpolished, ravaged by time's destructive weathering picks and hammers.

A purple butterfly as big as her hand fluttered past, landing high out of reach on the side of the temple wall.

"Your boyfriend is going to hate this place," her dad told her, taking the bottle of water she held out to him.

"Quint Parker's opinion of where I choose to work doesn't matter." She plucked a tick from her father's shirt and flicked it into the weeds, checking the rest of his shirt and hat brim for more. "He'll probably be here only a short time before he has to fly out again anyway." She tried to keep frustration with their whole long-distance relationship folly out of her voice, aiming for a light and carefree tone.

"Uh-oh." Juan handed back her water bottle, his face lined with dirt, sweat, and a frown. "That sounds like a rumble of thunder in paradise."

She should have known better than to say anything at all about Quint. There was no fooling her father, especially as they spent pretty much every day working together since his leave of absence from his tenured professor position at the University of Arizona.

"How can the honeymoon be over already? You two have barely started. What happened?"

"Nothing happened." Nothing besides one static-filled message from him on her voicemail the day after he left. Otherwise, since Quint had kissed her good-bye and climbed onto that plane, she hadn't heard a peep from him. No additional phone calls, no texts, no emails, *nada*. Hell, even a postcard would have been something. "I just don't like the idea that a temporary visitor has a say in where I work day after day."

"A temporary visitor?" Juan sucked air through his teeth. "Is it that bad already?" Leaning against the side of the temple, he fanned himself with his hat.

"I don't want to talk about it, Dad." She turned away from him, hacking at some of the morning-glory vines climbing the side of the temple.

"Come on. Tell dear ol' dad what's got you huffing and puffing."

"I'm not huffing." She swung the machete too wide. It hit the old stone structure with a clang that scared several chattering green parrots out of the tree canopy. The blade left a fresh silver scar on the structure.

"Your nostrils are flaring, *gatita*."

"You can't see my nose from there."

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“Your neck is bristling.”

“I’m too sweaty to bristle.” Angélica swung her machete at a small *Jabin* tree half-strangled with more vines, releasing her frustrations about Quint’s lack of contact since he’d left.

After receiving his short, static-filled message, she’d attempted to get through to Quint many times a day for a week. Unfortunately, she received a message that his voicemail box was full every damned time.

It appeared they were on a star-crossed lovers’ kick at the moment, which she’d decided late last night was for the best. Quint messed with her head too much, not to mention the ache of doubts and insecurities he and his traveling inspired in her gut.

After recently learning that her ex-husband was not the man she’d thought he was, Angélica suffered from trust issues—as in having no faith in her own ability to judge character. When she piled the stupid choices from her past into one heap, it was clear that she was a bad candidate for a long-distance relationship and its inherent confidence requirements.

She kicked a hacked branch out of the pathway, scowling after it. Besides, much more of this loneliness business and she’d probably take up drinking.

Make that take up drinking *more*.

Her attempts to numb her relationship angst since Quint’s departure had those Coronas and *Dos Equis* disappearing from her refrigerator way too quickly. Work had become an escape that settled her qualms, which was one of the reasons this was the perfect site for her to sink her teeth into as well as her trowel.

The other reason had to do with the secrets hidden at this site her mother had learned about on that last visit. Secrets Marianne had not shared with the lead archaeologist at the time. Instead, she’d noted them along with her hesitations and thoughts in her notebook.

Apparently, her mom had planned to return home and study her notes more before conferring with him, and for good reason. Experience had taught Marianne how vindictive other scientists in her field could be when it came to controversial topics and acceptable proof. This professional slander her mother had endured still made Angélica grind her molars. With time and research, she would avenge her mother’s jealous foes.

Marianne’s helicopter had crashed upon takeoff from this place, and her knowledge about the site’s secrets had almost died with her ... until Angélica had found her notebook. Unfortunately, there was only one page of notes, albeit a very full page.

“*Gatita*.” Her father’s voice interrupted her train of worries and memories. “Tell me.”

It took her a moment to snap back to the topic at hand. *Oh, right, Quint*. She shook her head. “I cannot emphasize how much I really don’t want to talk about him.”

“You shouldn’t bottle up your emotions. It’s not good for you.”

“Neither is Quint Parker,” she muttered.

“I disagree. When he’s around, you return to your old self.”

That was why Quint was bad news. Her old self made some serious screwups. It had taken her “new” self a lot of work to rebuild after the last disaster. She didn’t need to return to her old ways.

“Let’s get back to the business at hand, Dad. We need to find that block of glyphs with the warning on them so we can fly back to Cancun before dark.” She didn’t wait for him to agree, swinging the machete at a swarm of gnats as she headed around the side of the *Baatx’* Temple.

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“You mean the curse.”

“Keep it up and I’ll let the mosquitoes have you for lunch.”

He followed her along the path that was clearer here with fewer loose stones, exposed roots, and deep ruts. “When is Quint going to return, anyway?”

She shrugged. “Well, *if* he actually follows through on what he said before he flew out, he’ll be back in a little over a week.”

Ten days to be exact, which she planned to fill with hard labor from sunup until well after sundown. Thankfully, there was a lot of work to do before and after her crew arrived.

“He’ll follow through,” Juan said, keeping up with her. “He’s not the type to make false promises.”

Usually, when the sun was shining and logic ruled her world, she knew her dad was right. It was the middle-of-the-night doubts that made her toss and turn, imagining the worst about who Quint really was and if he were truly working up there in Greenland like he’d told her, or if that was just an excuse to escape from her and this corner of the world that he hated so much. Of course, the worry that he wasn’t alone every night chewed on her as well, eating at her self-confidence until she was curled into a tight ball while cursing at the jealous ninny she’d become.

She slashed at a bobbing branch that stuck out into the path. “Let’s talk about something not so ...”

“Emotional?”

“Annoying.” She peered up at the dilapidated temple. The roots of a strangler fig and lichen were hard at work hiding this side of the structure. “This is it, you know,” she said, stopping in front of a traditional Maya corbel-vaulted entryway that had partially collapsed under the weight of another fig tree’s roots.

“We’re not going inside that thing, *gatita*.” Juan’s fatherly tone left no room for argument. “It’s not structurally sound by far.”

His specialty was architecture of ancient Mesoamerican structures. During his long and lauded career, he’d worked at various sites analyzing and fortifying Maya temples. In addition to figuring out how to reassemble a temple from a pile of stones, he often drafted structure-filled drawings of what once was to help others gain a clearer picture of the amazing architectural achievements of those who’d lived long ago.

“You may not believe this, Dad, but I have no desire to risk being crushed to death today.”

She moved along the deer trail, searching the surrounding jungle as she walked toward the location diagrammed in her mom’s notebook of the stone stela covered with chiseled glyphs. The Maya people often posted one or more stelae outside a temple, using them as ancient billboards for messages from the king or his religious leaders to all—locals and strangers.

Angélica kept her eyes open for other chunks of stone with descriptive glyphs carved into them as well. The ancient Maya empires had been full of prolific writers, etching their stories and achievements onto surfaces that long outlasted their great cities.

Looters periodically went through dig sites looking for something that would bring big bucks on the black market. Unfortunately, in their quest for riches, they tended to throw out important pieces of history, such as chunks of rock with important drawings and glyphs carved into them.

“According to Mom’s notes,” Angélica said over her shoulder, “she found the warning

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glyphs on a stela positioned several feet from the west side of the building.”

She led the way with much less chopping to the western face of the *Baatꞥ* Temple. “Be careful where you step—there are a lot of roots poking up here.” She made herself slow down, even though her legs were itching to race to the prize.

“Quit treating me like an old man.” Her father’s crutches creaked as he followed her.

“Your cast may be one of those fiberglass walking ones, but you need to rebuild your strength in that leg again before doing too much hiking around here.”

“My leg is healing fine.”

The compound fracture from the “accident” that happened well over a month ago appeared to be mending nicely thanks to an excellent surgeon and lots of rest, but Angélica doubted his doctor would condone this trek around a dig site as acceptable physical therapy. That was another reason why she’d wanted her dad to wait for her at the helicopter.

“One misstep could leave you in bad shape for the rest of your golden years, you know.”

“You must have taken mother-hen lessons from Pedro. That boy has been driving me nuts with his Florence Nightingale routine. Trust me, I’m being careful and watching every step.”

“Where is our third musketeer, anyway?”

Pedro Montañero had been part of her and her parents’ life since she was a child. Her parents pretty much adopted the young boy, who volunteered at a very young age to work at their dig site in order to help his mother with the financial responsibility of raising his four sisters. Angélica wasn’t sure what had happened to Pedro’s father, and neither was he. Fast forward almost thirty years and Pedro was still by their side.

“Pedro stayed back at the helicopter with the other machete. He wanted to cut back the forest for a safer liftoff and landing.”

She skirted a pile of loose rubble spilling across the path, pausing to help her dad make it past in spite of his determination to do it on his own. When she rounded the western side of the temple, she shifted her pack off her shoulders and pulled out her mother’s dog-eared notebook.

Several thin-trunked guarombo trees crowded the base of the structure. She studied the area, scanning over the *chaya* shrubs with their large leaves while her heart thudded in her ears.

Shit. The stela wasn’t where it was supposed to be.

She flipped the pages to her mother’s drawing, taking in the small, rough sketch of the temple and the stela’s supposed location her mom had noted on the paper.

“Damn it.” She lowered the notebook, still searching. “Where is it?”

Juan wiped the back of his neck with his handkerchief, the bug guts she’d left behind on it not a bother apparently. “You mean the stela with the curse?”

“The warning glyphs, wiseacre.” Maybe the previous archaeologist and his crew relocated the piece of stone to another area on the site to keep it safe from the elements and looters. Or they figured out the danger of which it told and hid it. “Do you think someone moved it after the helicopter accident?”

“For your sake, I hope so.”

She frowned at her father. “You know I won’t give up that easily on this site.”

“Why not? What is so important about proving a curse exists?”

“It’s a *warning*.”

He waved off her correction. “It will not bring back your mother.”

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Of course not, but it was more than just a warning to Angélica. She needed that stela. She needed to see the glyphs for herself. It was the starting line for the hunt. Then she could begin searching for the other glyphs that told the rest of the story. Her mother had laid out the task, planning a return that would never happen thanks to the crash. Without the first puzzle piece, Angélica couldn't fulfill her mother's unfinished objective.

She stabbed the forest floor with the machete. "You don't get it, Dad."

"You're right, I don't." He leaned on his crutches, sweat rolling down from his salt-and-pepper sideburns. "Explain it to me so I can understand, because for the life of me, Angélica, I can't see why you'd want to court death at this site to prove someone else's theory—even if that someone else is your mother. Marianne would certainly never have wanted you to do this."

She paced in front of him. "I will never be as good as Mom."

"You don't know that. You're still young."

"At my age, she was already well known for her epigraphy skills."

Reading Maya glyphs was no easy feat. Each block of carvings could change meaning with the slightest variation. Angélica had worked on deciphering glyphs since she was a child, and she still was not as adept at it as her mother had been. For Marianne, it had seemed to come naturally. It was almost as if she had lived among the Maya during the golden age of their civilization. That she'd been reincarnated to help her people, solving their mysteries in a future they'd tried so hard to predict.

"You're well known as a talented, multi-skilled archaeologist," her father said, "who now has a dream job with the Mexican government. Do you know how smart you have to be to have landed this position? How many archaeologists would love to wear your boots? You weren't even born on Mexican soil and yet here you stand, trowel and plenty of funds from INAH in hand, with your pick of many incredible Maya sites."

Angélica nodded at his words, but ... "If only Mom were still here. I had so much to learn from her about decoding Maya glyphs." She held up the notepad. "But through this, I can work with her again."

"You do realize that what you're holding there is merely bound paper, right? It's not an original Maya codex or a diary belonging to Indiana Jones' dad."

Shaking the notebook at him, she asked, "Do you realize what is written in here?"

"Which part? The pages where she wrote, *Marianne loves Juan*, with little hearts drawn all around my name over and over?" His grin teased, easing the growing tension between them.

"Besides those pages," she said, smiling back.

"I know there are a bunch of chicken scratches about Maya glyphs that you seem to be all worked up about." He shook his head. "I always had trouble reading Marianne's writing when she scribbled."

"This is full of Mom's theories and ideas about all of the different dig sites she visited and worked." Angélica hugged the notebook to her chest. "Through this, she can teach me how to be a better archaeologist. She can show me a different way of seeing the Maya sites she visited over time, to view them through her eyes."

"To what end, though? So you go to each site and prove your mother right. Then what?"

"I'll publish her theories, listing the proof I collect, and add to or change the current thoughts and beliefs in the archaeology world about ancient Maya civilizations."

"And finish Marianne's work in the process?"

"Exactly."

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“But what about your work?”

“This notebook becomes partly my work. I’m not going to stop digging until I’ve proven every theory she wrote down, unearthed every secret.”

“What about your life?”

“What do you mean?” She shook the notebook again. “This is my life.”

“No, your life should involve far more than what’s written on pieces of paper in an old notebook, *gatita*. It should include love, friendship, even children before you’re old and gray. And I’m not talking about that pig of yours.”

“Rover is a javelina, Dad, and you know it. Respect the javelina. He saved my life.”

“I thought Quint saved your life.”

Well, him too.

Something panged in her chest. Damn it, she missed Quint. That frustrating man had better return to her as promised, or she’d ... she’d what? Chase after him and beg him to come back?

She growled. “Never mind him.” Or the way his smile made her feel like the sun had come out after a long dark night. “We have work to do.” She pulled the machete out of the ground. “Daylight is burning.”

“You need to fix things with Quint.” Juan pocketed his handkerchief.

“Why?”

“I want to have grandbabies before I’m too old to bounce them on my knee.”

She scoffed, resting the machete on her shoulder. “You want me to have Quint’s children?”

“What’s wrong with that? You certainly don’t seem to have a problem with kissing him. Making grandbabies shouldn’t be too arduous a task.”

Her cheeks warmed, inspiring another layer of sweat. This was not a discussion she wanted to have with her father in the middle of the Maya jungle. Hell, it was not a conversation she’d like to have with him anywhere. “No more talk about Quint today, Dad.” Or tomorrow. Or for the next ten days.

Besides, had he forgotten that Quint traveled all the time?

Instead of furthering the discussion on the pros and cons of acting as a babymaking oven for Quint’s little buns of love, she took a few slashes at nearby branches. That stela had to be here somewhere. If she didn’t find it today, she’d be back in two more days with part of her crew to begin setting up the site for the field workers the Mexican government had secured in addition to her own men.

The lack of control over choosing the crew made her jaw tighten. One of the drawbacks about her new position was that there were some parts of the golden deal where she had little say. For example, money could be made from students or anyone else who wanted to throw a few thousand dollars INAH’s way to gain the experience of working at a real-life dig site—Angélica’s dig site. Her insistence at having input on who was allowed to work under her fell on mostly deaf ears.

Another howler monkey let out a series of loud growls, probably trying to shoo her and her father back to the big bird they’d flown in on.

“*Gatita*,” her father called from behind her. “Come here and look at this.” He stood at the edge of a thick tangle of slender *Piñuela Yucateca* shrubs several feet from the pathway.

“What? Did you find the stela?”

“No.” He pointed his crutch at something on the ground. “Do you see that?”

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She stared at the dark dirt mostly covered with leaf clutter. “What is it? A scorpion?” Her father had an overblown fear of the pointy-tailed suckers.

“Those little nasties usually don’t come out until dusk.” He poked the dirt with the crutch. “It’s a paw print. Apparently, this is someone’s hunting ground.”

She squatted, inspecting. Sure enough, it was a feline track, and a large cat from the looks of it. She pulled a leaf aside to get a better look. “What do you think it is? Jaguar?”

“Or puma. Either way, it’s an adult. That’s too big to be a juvenile.”

Criminy. This day just kept sliding downhill. “Well, isn’t this just fan-fucking-tastic. A fresh paw print from one of southern Mexico’s largest predators but not a single damned warning glyph to be found.”

He grimaced down at her. “You swear like your mother.”

She glared at the tangled jungle surrounding them. “Ticks, flies, mosquitoes, monkeys, snakes, birds, and big cats, but no stela. Son of a biscuit.”

“Don’t forget the big spiders.”

“What big spiders?”

“Never mind.” He messed up the paw print with his crutch. “It’s a sign, *gatita*.”

She snorted. “Of course you’d say that.”

“I’m merely speaking the truth. Don’t kill the messenger.”

“And what’s this so-called sign say, Mr. Resident Wildlife Expert?” She stood, hands on her hips. “*Beware of the jungle?*” she asked in a rotten imitation of Vincent Price’s deep, spine-chilling voice.

Scanning the forest, her father wrinkled his forehead. “I was thinking more along the lines of a phrase I once saw on an old geographical map that referred to the dangerous territories yet to be fully explored at the time.”

“What phrase is that?”

His brown eyes lowered to hers, not a single twinkle to be found in them. “‘Here be dragons.’”