

## Chapter 1

May 2

Northern Patagonia, Chile

The air smelled of sulfur. At first, Sheila Kennedy didn't notice. Two hours working her way down a steep scree staircase of fractured basalt and rain-slicked gravel, and all she could think of was finding a level place to sit and taking a long slug from her water bottle. But after she had both, the rotten-egg stench wrapped around her like a beggar's blanket. She stashed the bottle in her backpack and pulled her turtleneck up over her nose.

The rocks she sat on were warm despite the persistent drizzle and temperatures that necessitated her heaviest sweater. A flicker of worry. Both anomalies—the strong sulfur smell and the unusually warm ground temperature—could be signs of an active volcano. But Chaitén hadn't erupted in nine thousand years. The slope she was descending was temperate rain forest lush at the lower elevations, the exposed rock on its peak smooth and weathered. On a danger level, climbing Chaitén ranked lower than falling out of bed.

She peeled the foil from an energy bar and stuck the wrapper in her jacket pocket, then checked to make sure her camera was secure before zipping her pack shut and hefting it onto her shoulders. Her knees trembled when she stood. Another hour, and she'd reach camp—assuming her overworked calf muscles didn't give out first. Two months of living and working in the mountains had her in the best physical condition she'd ever been, but the trek to Chaitén's caldera and back in a single day would have defeated a far better athlete than she. Even Ross would have been winded.

She resumed the descent, legs aching like an arthritic grandmother's. First thing she'd do when she got back to camp was build a fire and change into dry clothes; then she'd upload her photos to her laptop and e-mail them to Ross. He was going to go ballistic when he saw them. She could hardly comprehend the enormity of their discovery herself.

Gradually, the sky darkened. The drizzle became a spatter, and then a full-on downpour. She untied her raincoat from around her waist and threw it over her shoulders, pulling the hood over her head and clutching the coat beneath her chin with one rapidly freezing hand. From a distance came a low rumble. She considered. Keep going and hope she'd reach camp before the storm hit, or turn back and find temporary shelter? The last thing she needed was to get caught in the open during an Andean thunderstorm.

Another long, ominous rumble set the ground vibrating like a tuning fork. She headed for the tree line, placing her feet carefully as she worked her way down the slope, the scree as unstable as tectonic plates. A series of pops like small gunfire followed by an odd crackling reignited her earlier worry. Some kind of storm-generated electrical discharge? Rocks expanding or contracting?

Then a massive, end-of-the-world explosion stopped her cold. Heart pounding, she squinted through the rain as the echoes reverberated off the low cloud ceiling, and her worry-flicker burst into flame.

A colossal pillar of ash and gas spewed from Chaitén's caldera. Molten rock colored the column red as it streaked for the stratosphere, turning the sky around it a sickly yellow. Plumes of steam erupted from the surrounding rocks, cheering the inferno heavenward like hissing demons.

For a moment she could only gape as the Earth turned inside out. Then she ran—gasping, stumbling, sliding, rolling down the slope. It was crazy to think she could outrun an erupting volcano, but instinct was stronger than reason. *The trees*. If she could make it to the tree line, she could shelter in the river valley. Stay low, and maybe the pyroclastic flow would pass over her, like in that movie about the tornado—

She dodged around a boulder. Caught her foot in an erosion gully and pitched forward. Slid a dozen feet and smashed headfirst into another boulder. Lay on her back half stunned as the ash column swirled above: monstrous black cumulonimbus billows roiling with ash and debris; lightning slashing the pillar in schizophrenic scribbles. She closed her eyes. Listened to the mountain roar. Pictured a miasma of fire and toxic gases incinerating her into oblivion, and shuddered. Rolled over. Forced herself to her hands and knees. Shook her head to clear it, then staggered to her feet, wobbling like a boxer until she found her equilibrium and took off running again.

She was almost to the tree line when a blast of hot wind knocked her to her knees. Cinders pelted her hair, scorched her jacket and jeans. Hot ash choked the air.

Scrambling for two canted basalt slabs, she threw herself beneath. Then boulders the size of houses began falling from the sky, and she knew she was dead.

THE PREVIOUS DAY

## Chapter 2

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She may as well have been a Sherpa. Sheila Kennedy reached behind to ease the weight of her pack, then leaned forward and rested her hands on her knees, pinpricks of light swarming her vision like *E. coli* in a petri dish. She took a deep, oxygen-deprived breath, and then another. Altitude wasn't the problem; it was Ross. Sheila's stride was half the length of his, Ross knew it, and yet every day as they hiked for the glacier, he set a pace that would have worn out a greyhound. She watched the gap between them widen as he strode along the trail, long legs eating up the terrain like he was born to it, black braid swinging, two small feathers bobbing tauntingly at the end. She waited for him to sense that she was lagging and turn back, but he rounded a bend and disappeared.

She picked up a handful of gravel and flung it, not caring that the gesture was more appropriate to a petulant two-year-old. It was that or throw Ross off the mountain—not the optimal way to deal with a difficult

research partner, though she doubted any juror who spent an hour in his company would disagree. Ross had changed after his field experience in Antarctica, and not for the better. Some people came out of a disaster more compassionate, more understanding. Instead, it was as if the continent had taken all of Ross's negative qualities and polished them to a glossy shine. The new and unimproved version was arrogant and rigid, with a my-way-or-the-highway single-mindedness of purpose that at times was almost scary. Yes, their work was urgent. When you were documenting the regeneration of microbial life in the wake of retreating glacier cover due to global warming, you couldn't exactly take a break and come back and gather your data later. But if you couldn't stop once in a while and savor some of the most spectacular scenery on the planet, what was the point of working so hard to save it?

She shrugged off her pack and sat down on a boulder. Sifted another handful of stones through her fingers, then picked out a piece of obsidian shaped like an arrowhead to add to her future jewelry collection and dropped it in a Ziploc. So she was stuck with a self-centered research partner with an ego big enough to make Donald Trump blush—so what? She'd chosen Ross for his expertise, not his manners. Dr. Roundtree was a pebble in her boot, a wrinkle in her sock. An irritation with the potential to grow into a serious blister—*but only if she let him*. Sheila's strong suit was the ability to see the positive in any situation, and not let others' vicissitudes spoil her good mood. Her mother used to joke that when the world came to an end and everyone else was running and screaming and cowering, Sheila would be the one standing alone out in the open, admiring the pretty colors in the sky.

This particular sky was so blue she had to squint to look at it; the air balmy enough to convince the most devout skeptic of the reality of global warming. No equatorial sun-kissing at this elevation; the crinkling sensation when the sun hit her skin felt more like being fried. She unscrewed the cap from a tube of SPF 50 and smeared her face and hands. Just because she was African American didn't mean she wasn't at risk for a serious sunburn. She'd found that out during an eighth-grade graduation trip to Six Flags.

Below, barren, boulder-strewn slopes morphed into undulating green ridges reaching toward the Pacific, where nalca grew like rhubarb on steroids and fuchsia bloomed on bushes taller than her head. Six miles south at the region's only natural harbor was civilization, or what passed for it in an area as remote and uninhabited as Northern Patagonia: Chaitén, population four thousand, the capital of Chile's Region X. The *X* was a Roman numeral designation, though in view of the area's countless unnamed mountains and unexplored river valleys, Sheila rather liked the anonymity the *X* implied. With its homemade welcome sign and wood-frame buildings as individual as the people who made them, Chaitén reminded her of the lumber towns in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, except that the signs were in Spanish. Even the people were similar: blond and red-haired Caucasians, brown-skinned Mapuche with dark, lank hair and aquiline noses, and every combination thereof (the conquerors having become the conquered)—all wearing wool watch caps and flannel. The two regions shared roughly the same 40-degree latitude—one in the Northern Hemisphere and the other in the Southern—which went a long way toward explaining why, as soon as she stepped off the air taxi from Puerto Montt, she felt at home.

Speaking of which, if she sat here any longer, she may as well buy a condo. She stood up and stretched. No doubt Ross had arrived at the glacier by now and was working himself into a royal snit at her absence—as if starting fifteen minutes later than usual would make a modicum of difference. She adjusted her pack until it rested comfortably on her shoulders, then started off at a leisurely pace. No reason to let Ross's issues become her own.

There was movement on the road below, a distant glint of sunlight on silver. She lifted the binoculars that forever dangled around her neck against the day she happened to spot some wildlife more interesting than a turkey vulture. A line of trucks. Tankers. New ones, judging by their bright reflections. No logos, or if there were, none that she could read from this distance, even with 20x magnification.

She lowered the glasses. She had a sudden urge to hide, as if by spying on the convoy, she was doing something wrong. Her bad-vibes meter was clicking off the charts. North of Chaitén, Chile's main north-south highway was a rough, two-lane road of crushed black gravel; a single

vehicle sighting was as rare as a condor. In three weeks, she'd seen nothing larger than a cattle truck.

She crouched behind a boulder and rested her camera on top—to use the boulder as a tripod—and waited for the convoy to pass. Instead, long before the lead truck came close enough for her to snap a decent picture, it turned off the highway and vanished into the trees. She counted them off as, one after another, the following vehicles did the same.

When the last truck disappeared, she turned off her camera and sat back on her heels. There was no industry in the region—no mining, no logging. Nothing but seven hundred thousand acres of pristine wilderness bought up by an American clothing tycoon in the 1990s and donated to the Chilean government as a park. No reason for twenty-two tankers to come trundling down the Carretera Austral, turning inland at a place where a road didn't exist.