

BOOK III - THE CHRONICLES OF THE STONE

THE TEMPLE OF THE CRYSTAL TIMEKEEPER

FIONA INGRAM





CRASH LANDING IN THE JUNGLE

Adam opened his eyes. The terrible thudding noise, the screaming sounds of metal tearing, and the rush of branches breaking had finally stopped. Still strapped into his seat, he hung at an angle, the seat belt being the only thing preventing him from hurtling through the gaping hole in the roof of the plane to the jungle floor below. The strap cut into his chest as his whole weight pressed against the fabric. He craned his neck upward, twisting awkwardly to see the others. His body ached after the awful jarring and jolting when the plane fell. He shoved his hand into his right side pants pocket to feel for his golden scarab. Phew! It was safe. Relieved, he squeezed the scarab for a few seconds to get his courage up. It felt warm and comforting in his hand.

“Justin? Kim?” he called, hoping like crazy they were all right.

“Uhh.” The groan came from Kim. “Ow! My head.”

“What happened just now?”

Adam grinned. Justin was okay. He could tell by his cousin’s angry tone.

“Are we alive?” Kim’s voice was faint. She sounded dazed. “Why am I the wrong way up?”

“I think we’ve crashed into the jungle.” Adam tried to look around. He couldn’t see much because the interior of the plane was shadowy. Everything looked weird half upside-down.

“That’s just flipping great!” Justin exploded. “Just great. The jungle is only thousands of miles big. We might as well be dead.”

“Don’t say that,” said Kim, almost crying.

“It’s true. What else do you want me to say?”

Adam called out, “Cool it, you two. Let’s think about how to get out of here.”

Even as he said this, he knew Justin was probably right. James had told them they were flying over the Lacandon Jungle, an area of rainforest measuring roughly 1.9 million hectares—a lot of jungle that stretched from Chiapas, Mexico, into Guatemala and into the southern part of the Yucatán Peninsula. Maybe it wasn’t so big in actual miles, but nearly two million of anything sounded enormous. He remembered looking out of the window and admiring the vast expanse of

greenery that stretched like a gigantic carpet as far as the eye could see. He also remembered James saying how difficult it was to see things on the ground because of the density of the tree canopy and vice versa. Things couldn't be worse than they were right now.

By holding his head at an angle, Adam could just make out James, their archaeologist friend, slumped in the cockpit. He looked in a bad way; his head lolled to one side and his eyes remained closed.

"James! James!" Adam called out, even though James must be unconscious. Blood trickled down the side of James' face. He must have cut his head in the force of the plane's impact with the trees.

"What do we do now?" asked Kim.

The plane shuddered. Then, with the same awful tearing sound as before, the plane fell a few feet. The sensation felt like going down in a lift very quickly. James had mentioned some of the trees were between one to two hundred feet high. How far had they had fallen already? Soon there wouldn't be anywhere to go except hit the ground.

"Hang on!" Justin yelled. "It's moving."

Adam clutched the sides of his seat as the plane dropped like a stone. The metal cylinder of the fuselage was all that protected them from being smashed to pieces as the plane shuddered and bumped downward. The most horrible shaking reverberated through every bone in his body. Even his teeth rattled. Then, amazingly, the nose of the plane hit a branch, the fuselage rotated, and everything turned right side up. Adam looked at Justin. They burst out laughing, a nervous "thank-goodness-we're-alive" kind of laughter. Kim didn't laugh.

Justin unsnapped his seat belt and motioned for the others to stay in their seats. He inched carefully into the cockpit to check on James. Adam looked up. The huge hole in the roof of the plane revealed massed tree branches with an occasional tiny flash of blue sky. They had fallen far down, near the ground. He wondered if that was good or bad.

Justin looked back at them. "James is alive but knocked out. He sniffed hard. "I can smell fuel."

Adam sniffed as well. The smell was strong. They would roast alive if the plane caught fire. He glanced at Kim. She sat with a frozen expression, her fingers digging into the sides of her seat.

"Kim!"

She didn't reply, just stared ahead, as if too terrified to move.

Adam carefully unsnapped his seatbelt, eased out of his seat, and edged over to her, praying that his movements wouldn't dislodge the plane. The plane settled into the branches with more screeching sounds as the metal tore into the bark of the tree. During those few long moments, Adam clung to the top of Kim's seat. When the movement stopped, he looked at Kim and grinned ... a big fake grin that he hoped would convince her he wasn't worried.

"Narrow escape, huh?"

She gave him a weak smile in return, but her wide eyes betrayed her total terror. Adam glanced at Justin. They exchanged grins and Justin made a thumbs-up sign.

"We can climb out of the windows where the glass has broken," Adam said. "We're not far off the ground."

"We can't leave James," Kim said.

"No, of course not," said Justin impatiently. "But let's get out first and check our surroundings. Then we can rescue him."

Kim unsnapped her seat belt and climbed out of the window nearest the trunk of the tree. The glass had shattered in the crash so it was easy to squeeze through and scramble down the side of the plane to the ground, using branches to hang onto as they dropped the last few feet. They looked up at the plane resting in the crook of two massive tree branches. It was actually higher than Adam had thought. He could just see the top of James' head. How they would get James down to safety? By some miracle, the plane's windscreen remained intact. He and Justin took a few steps back.

"Oh, no!" Justin muttered angrily. "It's higher up than I reckoned."

"You guys said planes never fall out of the sky," Kim said in an accusing tone. She slumped to the ground in a forlorn heap and pushed aside some fern fronds, trying to make herself more comfortable. "Ow! This stuff is prickly."

"They don't usually," said Adam. "Not the big planes anyway."

"I just knew James was making a mistake hiring this beat-up old plane," Justin said sourly. He folded his arms in a huff. "No wonder it fell to pieces."

"No, it's not the plane," said Adam. "This is a Cessna 185."

Justin shrugged. "So? What's so special about it?"

Adam looked up at the battered carcass of the plane, its once-bright yellow and silver paintwork now scarred and scratched from the tree branches.

“They’re solid planes. Most of the air forces in the world use them. James told me this model has a strengthened fuselage. They’re used in bush flying, reconnaissance, and even in the ice fields in Alaska and Canada.”

Their skeptical expressions said otherwise. Justin raised his eyebrows and gave a disbelieving snort.

“I’m telling you this is a good plane.” Adam was convinced the problem lay elsewhere. Planes like the sturdy Cessna 185 didn’t just fall apart for no reason.

Kim sniffed and tossed her head in scorn. “It can’t be all that good.” She pointed at the plane. “Look, the wings have fallen right off.”

The wings and tail had sheared off completely. Some parts lay on the ground; some bits of wreckage hung in the surrounding trees. It looked like a scene from a disaster movie.

“That’s not surprising,” said Justin. “The wings got torn off when the plane hit the trees.”

“It’s a good plane,” Adam repeated doggedly. “Someone must have sabotaged it.”

As he finally voiced his fears, a cold sensation clutched at his chest. Horrible thoughts chased around in his mind. They had only been in Mexico a few days. Had Dr. Khalid caught up with them already? Did he even know they were here? James was an experienced pilot. What could have gone wrong?

Justin laughed. “That’s impossible. It must have been some kind of malfunction. Maybe something broke. I heard a bang and then things went crazy.”

Adam didn’t say anything more about sabotage. He replayed in his mind James’ last words, “Hang on, kids!” as a loud noise sounded in the rear. Then the plane had begun to bank left while James fought to keep control. Adam pushed those awful memories aside, trying to focus on the present and getting back to safety. Well, getting out of the jungle for a start.

Kim rolled her eyes in an “I’m bored with this conversation” look. “Can we please stop talking about stupid planes and think about getting James to safety?”

“You started it!” Justin snapped. His expression was tight and tense with worry. Justin always got bad-tempered when he felt stressed out.

“Let’s think about the best route back to civilization,” Adam said. “There’s no point in us arguing.”

A quick glance around showed they were surrounded by trees, trees, and even more trees. Adam looked up. The gigantic trees formed a thick green canopy overhead, with an occasional brief glimpse of blue sky. Long creepers and lianas hung down from the branches. Monkeys

screamed and chattered above their heads, while brightly colored birds whooped with strange cries. Something crashed through the undergrowth nearby. It sounded like a large animal. James had mentioned the wild animals that inhabited the Lacandon Jungle. Jaguars, wild pigs, crocodiles, and deadly snakes instantly sprang to mind, not to mention the large variety of poisonous insects and spiders, including scorpions, tarantulas, and *bird-eating* spiders. How big could that spider be? As big as a side plate or a dinner plate? He tried to remember which size scorpion James had said was the poisonous one: was it the small one or the big one?

Just thinking about these wild creatures gave Adam the shivers, especially the jaguar, which was an apex predator. When he had asked James what that meant, James looked serious and said, "It's at the top of the jungle food chain with no predators of its own. Man is its only enemy."

Man, not three helpless kids with no weapons who had just crash-landed in the jungle, many miles away from civilization. Adam remembered the stalk and ambush part of James' lecture, and the fact that jaguars had an exceptionally powerful bite. They also had a way of crushing their prey's skull bones with one bite. Maybe it was better not to worry about jaguars, even though one might be stalking them at that very moment.

The big leafy plants all around looked menacing. Moss and lichen grew on the tree trunks and branches, giving them a creepy look. Something moved ... a brightly patterned snake lazily uncoiled from a nearby low branch and slithered away. Insects buzzed incessantly. Everything was so loud. This was no Disney movie jungle with friendly talking, singing, and dancing animals like Baloo and Bagheera from *The Jungle Book*. The undergrowth consisted of lots of bushes and ferns, with no sign of a path, a beaten track, or any shred of evidence that people might be nearby. It was hot and muggy. Although they'd felt the heat the minute they arrived in Mexico, it seemed to be even hotter in the jungle with all the trees and vegetation creating a dense green mass. Sweat rolled down Adam's forehead in warm drops and his damp shirt clung to his back like a clammy second skin. He felt suffocated.

Justin wiped his forehead with one arm, leaving wet patches on the sleeve of his khaki shirt. "I'm dying of heat here. I'm sweating like a pig, too."

Adam wondered if pigs actually sweated. He'd used the same expression often before, but hearing it now, in the middle of a vast jungle, Justin's words sounded weird. In fact, the whole situation was so weird that he wondered if he was dreaming. Maybe he was still back in the hotel room, in the middle of an awful nightmare, and all this was unreal. He pinched his arm hard, digging his nails into his skin so that he felt pain. His nails made white half moon dents that slowly faded. Nothing changed. He didn't wake up because he was already awake and this hot, scary jungle was real.

“Don’t just stand around, Adam. We should get the stuff out of the plane first,” said Kim, scrambling to her feet. “There’s a first aid kit in the back, and some food and water. Justin, don’t forget the signal flares. Maybe the radio still works.” She spoke in an organizing, bossy voice.

“I doubt it,” said Adam. “The nose hit the trees first.”

He headed for the plane, but Justin grabbed his arm and pulled him close.

“Don’t look at those bushes. I think there’s someone there,” Justin hissed.

As Adam turned his head toward the bushes, Justin yanked his arm. “I said don’t look!”

Adam stood still. Slowly Justin’s hand fell away from his arm. The cousins stared at each other, rigid with tension.

“What did you see?” Adam whispered, not wanting to hear.

“Lots of eyes looking at us. *Human* eyes!”

“What shall we do?” Kim whispered.

Adam’s heart sank. He wanted to crawl away into the undergrowth and hide. This trip was a complete disaster. Even before arriving in Mexico, they’d had no idea where they were going until they got to the airport in Johannesburg and met their aunt. Aunt Isabel had arranged their passports and visas because James wanted to give them an incredible surprise. Their parents, who were used to their expeditions with Aunt Isabel by now, were also in on the secret. Since the boys’ first trip to Egypt, their parents thought travel improved young minds and were keen for the cousins to experience the world. Of course, they didn’t know anything about the quest for the Seven Stones of Power; or that each trip involved a possibly deadly encounter with their mortal enemy Dr. Faisal Khalid, who was also in pursuit of the stones. Adam could just imagine his parents totally freaking out if they knew what was really happening.

James had flown to Mexico a few days earlier to start his investigations and to hire an expedition guide. How James had laughed when he met them at the airport in Mexico City! His infectious smile made everyone giggle as he said he was going to make this the ultimate treasure hunt, only revealing clues as they went along. Of course, they were looking for the third Stone of Power, but this time they had no details, just his mention of a “lost city.” James said the reconnaissance trip over the jungle was to get an idea of distance, but he hadn’t said distance to what or where.

Adam recalled thinking Mexico would be the most fantastic adventure with real jungles and ruined ancient cities. Well, now they were in a real jungle and it was more frightening than fantastic, especially when the only adult around was hurt and unconscious, and they had no way of getting back to civilization.

Everything had seemed all right to begin with. Aunt Isabel remained in Mexico City to do extra research at the National Museum of Anthropology. She was always preparing articles on some interesting subject or other. James knew the director of the museum very well. The director, a friendly man called Carlos Almeida, was delighted to assist the well-known investigative journalist Isabel Sinclair. The kids and James flew first to a place called Comitán, where they stayed overnight. It was about 500 miles away from Mexico City. The next morning, James had hired the Cessna from a small air charter company at the Copalar Airport in Comitán.

The owner of the plane, Juan, had smiled at them through his glossy black mustache as he wiped his oily hands on a rag. When he gave James the keys, he'd told James to look after his "beautiful *senorita*." Juan didn't seem the treacherous type. Juan had shown them a photo of his family: his two small children holding Pepe, their tiny Chihuahua dog, and Juan's plump, pretty wife called Carmen. But their enemy Dr. Khalid had intimidated people in the past, people who had betrayed them in the end.

Adam squared his shoulders and tried to act brave. Unfortunately, at that moment he felt about as brave as the biggest coward this side of the Rio Grande.

"Maybe we can make friends with whoever is in the bushes."

Adam wasn't very confident as he spoke. People who lived in the jungle were not like people who lived in cities. Jungle dwellers customarily had weapons for protection ... or attack. They also usually wanted to be left alone. He'd heard about uncontacted tribes that definitely didn't want anyone from the outside world to intrude in their lives. He'd also read a terrible story about a tribe in Papua, New Guinea, that ate some missionaries a few years ago. Perhaps he shouldn't mention it right now. Kim would most likely freak out if anyone mentioned the word "cannibal."

"You can do that. You're good at making friends with the locals," said Justin, sounding hopeful.

Justin's words reminded Adam of how, in the search for the first Stone of Power, Ismal, their kidnapper in Egypt, became their friend after Adam saved the man's life.

Kim let out a piercing scream as a group of Indians materialized out of the bushes. They must have been there all the time. Adam was amazed at how they blended in with their environment. The men were not much taller than Justin, but they were muscular and looked strong. They wore loincloths and carried spears. Some carried bows. Black paint daubed across their eye sockets formed a mask on each of their faces. The warriors' skins were a light brown, with tattoos and strange ritual scars ornamenting their bodies. Some wore armbands, and decorations around their ankles; a few wore elaborate necklaces made of wooden beads. Most of them had thick ear plugs through the lobes of their ears. They all had longish black hair cut so

that their fringes came down to where the paint mask began. Their dark eyes glittered strangely as they stared back at the trio.

Adam swallowed. Justin made a loud gulping sound that he tried to turn into a cough. Kim stood with her hands pressed against her mouth, her eyes wide with shock. A boy about Adam's age stalked closer. He stared at them with a scornful expression. His eye mask had red dots around the edges. He was different from the rest because the older men deferred to him. The boy looked up at the Cessna and gestured with his spear. Instantly, several men laid down their weapons, ran to the wreckage, and swarmed up the tree in a flash.

"Hey!" said Justin. "You can't go there."

He took a step forward and two warriors crossed their spears in front of him. Their message was clear.

"Okay," he said, stepping back and raising his hands. "You can go there."

Kim sidled closer to Adam. No one tried to stop her. The rest of the group watched the men intently as one by one they slipped into the fuselage through the hole in the top. The boy shouted orders in a strange language.

"Are we prisoners?" she whispered, clutching Adam's arm.

Adam glanced about. The Indians were focused on the plane and paid no attention to them.

"I don't think so," he replied. "They're just ignoring us."

"For now," Justin muttered.

Somehow, the men managed to maneuver James out of the hole in the top of the plane. They positioned him onto the back of one of the men, who climbed nimbly down the tree. James' left leg hung at an angle. It must have been broken in the crash. His head and arms flopped over the much smaller man's shoulders. The men laid James gently on the ground, at a safe distance from the Cessna. His face was white and, although he breathed deeply, he showed no signs of coming round. A few seconds later, the nose of the plane tilted downward and the creaking wreck slid to the ground with a crash that certainly would have killed James if he'd remained inside the cockpit. Kim caught her breath. Adam tried to go to James, but the two men with spears crossed them in front of him.

Adam had the creepiest feeling he was still in a very bad dream, one that seemed endless. This shouldn't be happening. They should have been flying back to the airfield by now, then having lunch with Juan, who had promised them genuine Mexican tortillas, and talking about their trip. Instead, they were trapped in the jungle, surrounded by tribesmen with spears and bows, who acted as if they weren't afraid to use their weapons, and James was badly hurt. One of

the rescuers made a rough leg splint with two spears and pieces of liana. Then several men picked James up, holding his body above their heads, and trotted off.

Justin grabbed Adam, his face pale. “They’re kidnapping him. They’re going to kill him. They’re going to kill us as well!”

Adam said with a forced composure, although his heart pounded, “I don’t think so. They weren’t aggressive and they did rescue him from the plane.”

“How do you know?” asked Kim. Her eyes were wide as saucers again. “They might be cannibals.”

“I don’t know, but I think if they were going to kill us, they would’ve done so already.”

“Ha!” Justin scoffed. “No, they wouldn’t.”

“Okay, why not?” asked Adam.

Justin bugged his eyes. “Because then they would have to carry our three dead bodies back to camp, that’s why.”

Adam felt a stab of fear, although the men hadn’t acted hostile and only put up their spears to stop him and Justin interfering with what they were doing. The men had melted into the jungle. One minute they were there; the next they were gone. Then the boy reappeared and beckoned impatiently to them. Adam looked at Kim and then at Justin.

“What shall we do?” he asked.

“I’ll take my chances with them,” said Kim firmly. “I’m not staying here by myself in a jungle full of hungry wild animals.”

“Me neither,” said Justin. He sounded relieved that, in a way, Kim had made the decision for them.

He pulled Adam’s arm. “Come on, let’s go. What’s the worst that can happen?”

Adam didn’t know, but staying alone in a jungle wasn’t top of his list of possible solutions to their predicament. “Coming!” he said.

They ran after the tribesmen into the gloomy depths of the impenetrable jungle.