



CHAPTER

6

The sun rose early through the scattered fog. During a brief break in the fog, Rachel stared out from her balcony and could see the city as it spread out southwesterly toward the peaks of nearby Cabuyao and Santo Tomas, guarding the western entrance to Baguio. She turned directly south and viewed the willow trees surrounding the manmade lake in Burnham Park beneath her, home to a few early-morning joggers and walkers. Then, the sky darkened and a light rain began.

Brooke was right on time, driving a Toyota 4Runner in place of his rental car. He had some pastries and coffee for the trip over the mountains. The site they were visiting was just off the Benguet-Nueva Vizcaya Road, about fifteen kilometers southwest of Bambang, near the intersection of the mountain road with the Pan-Philippine National Highway just north of the town of Aritao. Although the site was only about one hundred kilometers east of Baguio, winding through the mountainous terrain would lengthen the trip to about three hours.

As the two-lane road curved back and forth, occasionally hugging the sides of steep ravines, Rachel took in the montane rainforest, punctuated by small enclaves of homes, the nicer two-story ones made of wood and the small shacks made of

corrugated metal. Many of them hugged the road with parked cars periodically jutting into the road. Cars, vans, small trucks, bikes, and motorbikes comprised the weekday traffic, which gradually thinned as they drove eastward, with occasional stretches where no other cars were seen. She noted how traffic would slow and move to the right for passing cars, just as it used to do along the country roads of Texas when she was a little girl.

At one point the road almost brushed Pulag National Park and came within fifteen kilometers of Mount Pulag, the second-tallest peak in the Philippines at over three thousand meters, but it was obscured by trees and the mist. Shortly thereafter, they bypassed the large Ambuklao Hydroelectric Dam on the Agno, recently rehabilitated after the massive Luzon quake of 1990. Although only a small percentage of the Filipino population was situated in its adjacent provinces, the Cordillera region contained a substantial portion of the Philippines' wealth, mostly agricultural and mineral but also hydroelectric. Over sixty percent of the Philippines' temperate vegetables came from the region, as well as eighty percent of its gold. And the huge amounts of rainfall and steep elevations created a hydroelectric potential that was so vast that, by some estimates, the region was capable of providing over half of the Philippines' energy needs.⁸⁹ Mining and dams were not popular with the entrenched indigenous peoples, however, who constantly fought the large-scale projects that threatened their way of life.

As they descended toward Bambang, the clouds began to break and Rachel was able to see glimpses of the vast and fertile Cagayan Valley in front of her, as it extended eastward toward the Sierra Madre. As the elevation decreased, the pine forests started to mix with oak and laurel stands and eventually gave way to some tall lowland rainforest varieties. Due to the limestone overlay of the volcanic Cordillera base, the region was full of caves and caverns and tunnels, which afforded the

⁸⁹ See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cordillera_Central_\(Luzon\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cordillera_Central_(Luzon))

Japanese many large sites in which to bury the massive Golden Lily treasure.

About one kilometer after they veered right at the bridge over the Santa Cruz River in their approach to the National Highway, Brooke's GPS-linked beeper on his smartphone went off. He slowed down and started searching to his left. He quickly spotted a small dirt road that, after a few kilometers, led to a highly concealed little opening covered in underbrush. After quickly removing the cover, Brooke got out of the 4Runner and moved a couple of small trees, still in their soil containers, that blocked the entrance to a little dirt road that was hidden from above by the overhanging canopy. Brooke then drove the SUV slowly through the opening before stopping again and motioning to Rachel to get out and help him move everything back into place. Nearby, some screeching macaques showed their displeasure at the new human presence. The entrance to the cave was a hundred meters or so beyond, and the road was barely wide enough for the 4Runner to pass through, brushing the ferns and orchids hanging from the branches above. Three men stood watch at the cave entrance. Brooke got out and started talking in Tagalog to what appeared to be the foreman of the group. He gently nodded and periodically interjected with a question while the other man talked and motioned with his fingers. Then, Brooke motioned to Rachel to join him and began describing the situation to her.

"Pepe says we're in luck . . . only yesterday did the methane levels drop low enough to go into the cave for the first time without a mask."

"Methane from what?"

Brooke paused. "From decomposition of the bodies."

Rachel blanched slightly but remained silent.

"I don't know if you did any research since my New York visit, but after the large Golden Lily sites were finished and the gold put in place, the Japanese would throw a big party for the workers and soldiers and engineers who worked on the site.

After they had drunk a lot of sake, the commanders—whether it be the emperor’s brother Prince Chichibu or his cousin Prince Takeda or perhaps General Yamashita himself—would slip out and then the entranceway would be exploded to trap everyone inside, so the secret of the location would be secured. Then, the entrance would be covered in dirt so the forest could regrow around it.”

Rachel was horrified. “And the bodies—they’re still in place?”

“Yes . . . at least what’s left of them.”

Rachel grew noticeably paler and nauseated, and Brooke came over to hold her hand and calm her. After a minute or so, he struck up again. “Rachel, there are other bad things in that cave . . . giant spiders and even snakes. Most of the snakes are nonpoisonous, but if we come across a cobra infestation, we’re out of there right away. Are you still in?”

No, I wish I were a thousand miles from here. But I’m not going to give you the satisfaction of knowing that.

“I’m still in . . . as long as you go first and play the snake music.”

Brooke smiled. “Good . . . I always figured you were pretty tough deep down. But don’t worry, there will be a team of us going in, with adequate lighting.”

And then all five of them—Brooke, Rachel, Pepe, and the two other men—gathered at the entrance, wearing light-cotton long-sleeve shirts and caving helmets with LEDs. After traversing a tight passageway and a narrow and precipitous drop, they were suddenly in a large room that began to glisten. She was entranced by the sight of large piles of gold further on, until Brooke grabbed her arm gently and pointed to a space on the ground in front of her, where several skeletons were present. “Be careful,” he whispered.

Aside from the gold and skeletons, the small stalagmites and stalactites reminded Rachel of the limestone caves she used to visit in the Hill Country of Texas with her parents and relatives.

The ground had small pools of standing water in places but was less flooded than might have been expected given the daily rains in the area, presumably due to the slope of the ground above, which diverted most of the water. Only when she got near to the first pile of gold did the truth of the Golden Lily legend begin to sink in. She estimated there were fifteen bars in each of twenty stacks, with each stack spreading ten rows deep. She did the quick calculations in her head—three thousand bars in total, in such a small area.

“How many ounces in each bar?” she asked.

Brooke replied, “If I remember correctly, there are over thirty troy ounces to each kilo, so each bar would contain about three hundred and seventy-five ounces total.”

“Three hundred and seventy-five times three thousand . . . that’s over a million ounces total. At fifteen hundred or so an ounce, that’s—”

“Just under two billion dollars . . . *in this pile alone.*” Then, while she was unsuspecting, he snapped a photo with her and the gold pile on his smartphone and added kiddingly, “This will be for your grandkids someday.”

Rachel was too entranced by all of the gold to appreciate Brooke’s attempt at levity as she moved about the large room. She quickly counted the piles—eight in all. Not to mention at least a dozen large drums full of diamonds and other gems.

“So, we’re talking about fifteen billion total!”

“But there’s more, miss,” Pepe chimed in. “See that wall? Our imaging shows a hidden door that may open to a larger room. Based on what we know of the Golden Lily numbering system, this was a ‘777’ site—one of the largest. Others like it have been shown to contain more than twenty billion in gold and other minerals. And there’s still more.”

Pepe led Rachel and Brooke to a smaller side chamber. When he shined his flashlight in the center of the room, Rachel gasped. A den of snakes was crawling on what must have been at least a dozen skeletons, some of which had samurai swords

next to them. And in the middle of it all was a glistening golden Buddha, at least a meter high, probably similar to the one that Roxas had found in Baguio and perhaps full of diamonds like his. Pepe motioned not to get too close. "This must have been where they spent their last few hours, next to the statue. Of course, the pit vipers weren't there at that moment."

"Pit vipers? How would they have gotten in?" Brooke asked.

"Probably through little cracks in rock that opened up after the explosives. I've never seen them before . . . there's not much here for them here except for a few small lizards. And now us, of course."

Pepe sensed that Rachel wasn't amused. Turning to her, he said, "Don't worry, miss, I hear they use the viper venom in wrinkle creams these days . . . not that you need it."

Brooke chuckled and then interjected, "How do you know so much about snakes, Pepe?"

"You probably didn't know I was majoring in biology and helping with some reptile research at the university here until I got my Christina pregnant . . . which meant I needed a real job all of a sudden."

Rachel asked Pepe if they were planning to remove the Buddha from the cave.

"It'll be the last thing, for sure. It will be hard to get it out of the entranceway, but we should be able to manage with ropes."

No one talked for about another minute. Rachel was taking in the entire experience. *Yes, it will be a good story for my grandchildren . . . if I ever have any.*

They slowly walked from pile to pile. Brooke picked up a bar from one of the piles that had about half of its bars missing. "Look at this one, Rachel . . . do you see the stamp?"

Rachel looked at what Brooke held close to her and could see what looked to be some lettering finely imprinted on one side of the bar, one of which resembled an italicized **S**.

Brooke came by and picked up another one with the same mark. "See, this came from the treasury of Sarawak in the

1800s . . . so do you mind if I take one as we leave? No one will miss a mere three hundred thousand American dollars.”

Rachel was perplexed. “But I thought you—”

“Were going to give it all to the people?” Brooke laughed and gave Rachel a look of *You sure are gullible for an Asian scholar*. “Actually, Rachel, we’re all going to take some bars out of here today. If each of the men take four bars and you can carry two, that’s over two hundred kilos in all. I don’t think I want to task the 4Runner with any more going up the mountain.”

Rachel asked, “So you’re just like that going to take them to Baguio?”

“Why not? That’s where they’re being stored . . . for the time being.”

Rachel barely managed to make it through the large chamber to the entranceway under the weight of her two bars. *I can’t believe I’m carrying over a million dollars worth of gold!* As they reached the vertical passage, Rachel glanced at the two skeletons to her left before handing the bars to Brooke and then climbing up the passageway. When they all were out, the bars were loaded into the 4Runner and the entranceway was again covered with brush. Then Pepe and the other two men began walking down the dirt road toward the main road and disappeared, while Rachel and Brooke waited next to the 4Runner.

“I can’t believe you’re leaving billions of dollars in gold back there. Aren’t you worried about someone stealing it . . . or even robbing you of the millions in the SUV?”

Brooke smiled. “There’s a lot more security than you think around the site, Rachel—infrared cameras, motion sensors, trip circuits, and the like. And those men—they didn’t leave the premises altogether.”

“And Pepe can be trusted?”

“Get in and see for yourself. We’re going to go pick up Pepe down the road and have a little lunch with him. As for outsiders knowing about all of this, our biggest advantage is that we

operate under the radar—in small movements and transports. We could bring in some large vehicles to remove everything quickly, but that would attract too much attention.”

Sure enough, Pepe emerged from the underbrush as they approached the main road. He moved the small trees away to let the SUV through and then returned them to their previous state, concealing the main entranceway once more.

Pepe hopped in and directed Brooke about five kilometers down the road to a little clearing, where they saw his white pickup parked. Rachel and Brooke got out and sat on a rock underneath a large dipterocarp, while Pepe took out some sandwiches and fruit and water bottles.

Brooke opened the conversation. “So, Pepe, Rachel was wondering how we could leave billions of gold back there in the mine, entrusted to you and your men.”

Pepe smiled. “I was wondering the same thing!”

“Seriously, try calming Rachel’s worries.”

Pepe turned toward Rachel. “I guess you know about the Dragon Family . . . or you wouldn’t be here.”

“I know a little, mostly based on what Craig has told me and what I found out last night.”

“Then you should know two things—first, that we are secret, although some general information about us has started leaking out in the past year or so, and two, that we are committed. For half a millennium, the Europeans came in wave after wave to Asia, to strip it of its wealth. We weren’t able to mount a collective resistance—if it wasn’t their gunboats that destroyed us, then it was the sellouts of own rulers. Now we are about to achieve one of the great vindications in history . . . and I would trade that moment for a few gold bars?”

Pepe continued. “My father was a revolutionary, a leader of the indigenous tribes in the region during the struggle during the 1970s against Marcos and the landowners. When he was killed, I was barely two. *Tiyo* Benito—”

“The man you’ll meet tonight,” Brooke interjected.

Pepe continued. “Tiyo later adopted me and raised me after my mother died several years later, so to me he is even more than an uncle. He is a man of great honor and strength . . . and vision. He would tell me often of the rebellion and of my father’s role in it. He always vowed that his death would be avenged and that justice would prevail, and that someday the Philippines would be free of Western economic domination. But when I was heading off to study, the struggle had subsided. As I mentioned, I was initially interested in biology, but my plans had to change and I ended up working in the mines, eventually becoming a foreman. Two years ago, Tiyo came to me and told me with my experience, I could be a big help to the Family, not disclosing the details. I didn’t hesitate when he asked me to help open the cave, despite the dangers. Nor did those men, who are very loyal, mainly to me personally.”

“Because you had once saved their lives, right?” Brooke interjected again.

Pepe nodded. “And because I am also their local tribal leader.”

Rachel asked Pepe, “So how did you manage to open the cave without destroying it?”

“As Craig no doubt told you, we knew there was a site somewhere in the general vicinity. During the war, the Japanese would cross the mountains, but the road wasn’t anything like this. Some of their geologists and engineers would scour the forest cave openings for underground storage sites, and this one proved very convenient because of its large chamber inside. Using some advanced imaging techniques, we were able to determine the outline of the cave and what must have been the entranceway. My men and I carefully dug out the opening, and after passing the entry, we used some robotic devices to check for booby traps and tripwires. Because we are working very slowly, mostly at night, it’s taken awhile to open up the main passageways and chambers, but as I mentioned, there’s still

more to the site than we've uncovered. Of course, we could have moved much faster had we had the engineering maps."

"And how long do you think it will take to remove all of the gold?"

"The gold you saw should take about another month. But we know there's at least one more chamber . . . possibly two. All told, we may be looking at anywhere from two to four months."

"That seems like a long time for you to escape detection."

"Perhaps. But from what I've been told, the problem with some of the past recoveries is that they had too much visibility. Patience—and commitment—are the keys here."

Brooke looked up at the sky, with the sun directly overhead. "Unfortunately, patience is what we no longer have here today. It will take close to four hours to get back to Baguio, perhaps more as loaded down as we are."

Pepe then took out two big plastic containers of gasoline and emptied them into the 4Runner until its tank was full for the trip back, since they were a long way from a filling station. Then, Brooke thanked Pepe for his help and for the supplies, and he and Rachel climbed into the SUV. Just before they left, Pepe went up to Rachel's side and said, "Thank you, miss, for helping us. I've heard a lot of good things about you and your courage."

Rachel extended her hand to Pepe, but rather than clasp it, he kissed it. And then he stepped back and waved them off.



As Brooke had predicted, it took them longer on the return trip, mostly because of the extra weight they were carrying on the uphill climb. Rachel and Brooke stared ahead as they quickly passed the dirt road that led to the cave and then started winding up the mountain for several more kilometers. Finally, Rachel decided to break the silence. "Pepe's a good man, isn't he?"

“There are a lot of good men and women working for the Family, Rachel. But yes, he is one of the best and, because of his skills, most valuable. Because he’s an Ilocano tribal leader, he also commands a lot of respect.”

Rachel then asked, “What I can’t understand is why the Japanese would have left the red maps here. Why didn’t they take them back to Japan?”

“One can assume they were left here for insurance purposes. There’s no telling what could have happened to the maps if they were in some ship or submarine sent back to Japan that sunk. Prince Takeda—known only as ‘Kimsu’ to the local servant-boy Valmores—evidently planned to return but never did. He told Ben, who he had great trust in, that he could do whatever he wanted with the maps, but only after twenty-five years. Only a few of the red maps would have been of any use to Ben, in any case, since he personally had visited only a couple of the sites.”

“And how did the white maps come to be found?”

“They weren’t all in the same location or even towns—some were found in churches, some in military installations, and such. A few were even recreated from memory—sometimes under torture—by some of the Japanese soldiers and other locals who were privy to the location of the original stashes. Without the red maps, they were basically useless and so they would periodically be offered for sale—or just outright stolen by Marcos and his men.”

Rachel was silent for several seconds and delicately posed her next question, which had been nagging her from the moment she first set foot in the cave. “So, after the gold’s all removed, what are you planning to do with the bodies?”

“You mean skeletons.”

“Yes.”

“We’ll leave them where they are; there’s no need to remove them. I know what you’re thinking, but it’s been over sixty years and no one has any illusion that the men would still be alive. So what’s the point?”

Rachel didn't reply. After another few kilometers, she opened up again. "So those two skeletons near the entrance . . . do you think they were probably trying to escape in the end?"

"That's what I would surmise. They knew the direction of the entrance and may have been clawing at the dirt and rocks, but there was too much of it. There wouldn't have been much time, either—hours at most before their air ran out."

Rachel started feeling very tired, lulled in by the undulating road and drained not just from the physical exertion but also from the depressing thoughts of all of the men gasping for air in their final moments. Just before she fell asleep, she thought, *How horrific humans can be to each other; yet, this was just a small sliver of the horror that was wreaked during World War II and an even smaller sliver of the horrors throughout all of human history.*



When she awoke, they were only fifty kilometers from Baguio and the grade wasn't as steep. She felt she had slept for days, but it was actually only an hour and a half when she glanced at her watch. She could feel that the air was cooler now, and thick clouds had formed, presaging another downpour.

"You were really out of it, Rachel. We passed through a hard rain and it didn't even faze you. You were even snoring a bit . . . but it was a very sexy snore."

"Oh, stop it. I'm surprised I wasn't crying out in my sleep after what I saw today. Had you ever been to one of the sites before?"

"To be honest, no. But I had heard countless stories about them, so perhaps that's why it wasn't more shocking to me."

"So what will tonight be like, with Tiyo Benito?"

"We're going to meet in the hotel restaurant. It should be rather informal—no evening dress necessary. You'll find

Fernandez very easy to talk to. But don't be fooled . . . he's one of, if not *the* most impressive men I've ever met."

"And the brains behind the Dragon Family?"

"There are a lot of brains in the Family. But as I mentioned before, Don Benito is perhaps best viewed as our master strategist . . . and inspiration."

