

Chapter One

Congo Free State, 1888

Odd One watched, as still as the tree trunk by which he stood, not moving more than his eyes as Old Grunt had taught him. His pale, furless skin caked with river mud was nearly the same gray-brown as the tree. His light hair was also matted with mud and his face smeared so only the whites of his strange blue eyes might give his position away. He could never hide in plain sight like the Others, but he did the best he could.

Something was moving loudly through the underbrush—a foolish animal without enough sense to slip quietly between the leaves or to step lightly on the ground. The footsteps were different from any creature he'd ever heard, a heavy tread. It sounded as if there were more than one. He judged that the approaching animals had the weight of a leopard but not the stealthily padded paws.

Excitement tingled through him, making the hair rise on his nape. He clenched the sharpened stick in his fist, pressed his back against the rough bark and waited for whatever was coming.

One of the creatures made a sound as it came closer. Not a screech or cry, not a groan, hoot or whimper, but a noise unlike anything he'd heard before yet strangely familiar. A dim memory struggled to float up in his mind. He reached for it, and it was gone.

His heart pounded and he breathed faster as he glimpsed one of the creatures between the leaves. It walked upright on two legs just as he did and like the Others did some of the time. He wanted to leap forward, to see all of it at once instead of flashes through the undergrowth.

There were two of them, one walking behind the other. The pair communicated back and forth with their strange calls. He caught his breath. These were like the sounds he sometimes made when he was all alone in the forest, the noises his throat and tongue made that none of the Others could duplicate.

The pair moved into the clearing in front of him where they stopped and stood looking around. His heart raced even faster. The two creatures looked like him, or what he'd seen of himself reflected in still water. Their faces and hands were naked like his with the same prominent noses and fully formed lips. Hair grew on the lower part of their faces. Their bodies were covered with something that was neither fur, skin nor scales but something completely foreign.

One of them took a thing off the top of his head and ran a hand through sweat-flattened hair—hair like his, not fur as most animals had—and white like the streaks in Old Grunt's ruff. These animals were his kind. There were more in the world like him. He wasn't alone.

He turned his attention to the other one, studying the face closely. The creature's brows drew together in a frown as he communicated with his partner, using hand motions to emphasize the sounds coming from his mouth. His hair was brown. He was younger than his companion. Odd One couldn't take his gaze from the creature's eyes, the way they blinked and moved and squinted when his

mouth widened to show his teeth. Baring teeth meant aggression to the Others, but the stranger didn't appear angry. He seemed pleased. His eyes crinkled at the corners and lines grooved his cheeks. A quiet chuckling sound rumbled from his chest and came out his mouth.

A warm feeling rushed through Odd One. He found himself mimicking the stranger's expression, his lips lifting at the corners, his teeth showing. What would the strange animals do if he came toward them now? He would drop his sharp stick on the ground and come with his head lowered, his eyes down-turned to show his intention wasn't to harm. Would they make their noises at him and welcome him as one of them? But he wasn't of their clan so maybe they would drive him away. Better he stay still until they'd moved on, then follow and learn more about the invaders in his world.

He waited and watched. After the two bent down to look at something on the ground, they rose and headed back in the direction from which they'd come. Odd One followed, slipping silently over the forest floor without rustling a single branch.

James couldn't shake the feeling something was watching him and Professor Hatchett as they forged their way through the wood. Dense foliage surrounded them on all sides, and the canopy overhead filtered the light, giving the impression of being under murky green water. The primary purpose of the expedition was to catalog the flora, fauna and primitive people that inhabited this area of Africa. It was the kind of study James had dreamed of all his life. But he hadn't counted on the unsettling feeling of vulnerability that the isolated place gave him. Nature here was huge, powerful, untamed rather than displayed

in a museum case, zoo or park as it was in London. Every time they hiked away from the base camp, James felt he'd be swallowed by the jungle, never to return to civilization.

There probably were eyes watching them. Animals were abundant on this tropical mountainside. And birds. He'd never seen so many colorful birds. Even the flocks of pigeons inhabiting Trafalgar Square couldn't compare in number. Parrots' raucous cries were nearly deafening, especially in the mornings as they heralded a new day.

As he trudged along the path he and Hatchett had beaten through the undergrowth, James suddenly realized why he felt especially unsettled today. The birds were *too* quiet, as if the presence of something dangerous had made them fall silent. The cheeky birds had never seemed too alarmed by the presence of foreigners in their midst before, but today even the gossiping colobus monkeys high in the canopy were mute. The silence was ominous. Was a threatening predator upsetting the natural noise of the jungle?

"Hold up, Professor," James called to Hatchett. "Listen."

The older man obligingly halted, removed his pith helmet and mopped his brow with the sweat-drenched handkerchief from his pocket. "What am I listening for?"

James scanned the area, trying to see between the trees and green leaves, ignoring the brilliant flowers or flashes of feathers as birds darted to and fro. He knew jaguars sometimes hid in the branches overhead and leaped down on their prey. One of the big cats might see a strolling Englishman as a weak, easy victim.

James reached for the holster at his side and pulled his revolver. He had no wish to harm any of the beasts they came across. This was no game hunting trip. But in

order to measure, photograph and catalogue the local fauna, the scientists must sometimes collect specimens of the beasts. He tilted his head back and scanned the branches overhead, searching for a spotted pelt, but there was only green, green and more green.

Suddenly there was a flurry of movement in the woods and a streak of gold burst from the undergrowth in front of him. A leopard bounded across the clearing. James raised his gun to shoot but knew claws and fangs would rip him apart before a bullet stopped the beast, and that was assuming his aim was good. He depressed the trigger at the same moment a blur of motion from his right intercepted the beast hurtling toward him. A man exploded between him and the leaping leopard, arm raised, and drove a spear into the animal.

The big cat gave an unearthly scream and twisted in mid-air, knocking the spear from its side. Landing paws down, the animal vanished into the brush as quickly as it had appeared, yowling as it ran.

James sucked in a breath and chambered another round in the Enfield just in case his rescuer decided to attack him with that spear. The naked man, covered in mud from head to toe, turned toward James. For one breathtaking moment they stared at one another, primitive and modern man connecting across the vast chasm that separated them. Worlds apart yet both human, their gazes stitched them together.

James's heart pounded so hard he could hardly hear. An honest-to-God aboriginal stood before him. He wasn't slight as the Pygmies of the Congo were rumored to be but stood average height, his build lean and well-muscled. It was difficult to distinguish his mud-covered features, but beneath the gray mud his skin did not appear to be

dark like the natives James had encountered so far in Africa.

James's gaze flicked over the man's face and body to fix on the hand clapped to his shoulder. The primitive had been shot. James's bullet had missed its target and winged the man who'd rescued him. He took a step forward and reached out a hand. "You've been hurt."

As quickly as the leopard had disappeared, the man melted into the forest, the lush tropical plants closing in behind him.

James started after. "Wait!"

Hatchett came up beside him and grabbed his arm. "Don't try to follow, lad. He could be dangerous."

Considering the man had gone out of his way to save them, James doubted it, but he knew there was no way he could catch up with a native who didn't wish to be approached. Disappointment flooded him. This may have been his one chance to interact with an unspoiled primitive and he'd ruined it by moving too fast and frightening the man away.

He stooped to pick up the man's spear from the ground and examined the pointed end. "Look at this."

"No iron, which isn't surprising. But this doesn't even have a head of stone or bone," his mentor said. "This is hardly a spear at all. Merely a sharpened stick."

They both marveled over the point, which appeared to have been charred in fire then shaped with something hard—perhaps a bit of flint. It was amazing the thing had even pierced the leopard's hide. Nevertheless, it must seem an engineering marvel to its owner, who'd labored to make it. The stick-spear would be a loss to the hunter.

James weighed the weapon in his hand, testing its heft and balance. He could leave it here in case the man

returned for it, but as an artifact of a primitive culture it was too precious to surrender. He raised the stick like a walking staff, feeling the warm, smooth groove left by the other man's hand. A shiver went through him at the sense of connection to a life so utterly foreign to his own.

"Well, that was remarkable." Hatchett's voice drew him back from his reverie. "Come. Let's return to camp before something else befalls us. It must be nearly time for tea for my stomach's rumbling." The older man started down the trail.

With a last look at the emerald leaves hiding the spot where the man had disappeared, James followed after him.

Odd One clutched his upper arm where the wasp had stung him, pulled his hand away to examine it and found blood coating his palm. Perhaps not a wasp sting after all. There had been a sharp thunderclap of a noise right before he was stung. If he hadn't been so intent on stopping the leopard, he might have been frightened by the sound. As it was, his entire attention had been focused on saving the foreign creature before the jungle cat ripped open his face.

Now he was hurt and the strangers had walked off with his weapon. He had no choice but to follow them, not only to find out where they came from but also to get his sharp stick back.

Odd One packed cool, damp leaf mold against his oozing wound. He looked up the mountain where the Others would be foraging, then he turned and trotted after the strangers. They hadn't attempted to hide their trail, but instead blazed a path through the forest that was easy to follow.