

CHAPTER ONE

Brandon Alexander looked out at the view from the balcony of his upstairs bedroom. The scene before his eyes left him with feelings of pride, but the tropical beauty went unnoticed with the unasked for help on its way to the plantation, his plantation. The land belonged to him as far as the eye could see, had for over twelve years since he inherited it from his father. He knew the sights, smells of his land; he had tasted its vitality, he had tamed it. As he grew and prospered with what he inherited, so had the people under his authority. His eyes narrowed with frustration. The muscles tensed, flexed along his jaw line. The state government was sending men to his plantation, into his domain. The letter was very clear. It was to happen, and to happen, straight away.

Brandon was tall standing over six feet two inches in height, well-muscled with wide tapering shoulders that V-ed to a small waist. His physical stature was daunting at over 190 pounds. No one could guess he was only thirty-seven because endless sun left its marks in the lines of his face. Brandon's skin was the color of polished bronze due to the many long hours of work on the plantation and its grounds. His hair was a sun-bleached chestnut brown, worn short. His eyes were the soft gray of a dove's feather and well accustomed to noticing details.

Like the plantation's endless growth, Brandon grew in his authority. He used that authority to bring the plantation's wild areas under his control. Even more so, he appreciated the efforts of his own people to tame his lands. That someone, from the state, would try to push his authority aside, didn't please him.

Brandon ignored the tropical view from the balcony. He walked back into his bedroom. He picked up the letter he received that day from the Secretary of the Interior, scanning its pages, once more. His fingers tightened along the edge of the page, tearing it, as his anger grew. The muscles flexed along his jawline hardening in response to his frustration. He filed the reports requested by the Interior Secretary. He wondered why the Interior Secretary couldn't understand he not only could, but he would solve this problem without outside help?

Brandon eased his large frame into the desk's chair leaning back into the worn cushion. The chair gave a familiar protesting groan with his weight. He pushed his shoulders into its familiar comfort trying to relax. His mind refused to abandon his thoughts on the Secretary of the Interior's decision to send his own people without first asking him if he needed the help.

Brandon's jaw clinched in protest. The thought of anyone coming from the state, to investigate matters on the plantation, caused his jaw to clench farther. This land was his domain, it was under his authority. His unease grew. He felt his authority compromised with the Interior Secretary's interference. As before, and, it probably wouldn't be for the last time, he could have been more pleased, if the Secretary, first, asked if he needed the help, second, the minister should have asked instead of taking matters into his own hands, sending the help.

A heavy, frustrated sigh escaped him. He ran his fingers over his tired eyes, pushing his shoulders farther back into the desk chair's familiar comfort. The plantation was his, his child, it

needed his protection. The last three months, and what happened, violated its safety. His thoughts angered him.

Brandon was twenty-five when his father died and he inherited the plantation. In the twelve years he controlled it, it prospered. He doubled its size to over two-hundred and fifty-thousand acres by showing the local Indian tribal chiefs the benefits of cooperation with one another.

Just over two years prior, when some native workers, he used from these tribes, were clearing trees and brush off the land; discovered the ruins of some long forgotten Indian tribe. He found the discovery to be very interesting. He used several hundred men, year round, from the Indian tribes to clear the jungle growth from the stone ruins. He filed his reports with the Secretary of the Interior and, with the secretary's permission, he took control over the project with supervision from the archaeologists sent from the state capitol by the Interior Secretary's office.

All work progressed with no fatalities, only the usual number of minor accidents. He considered the lack of deaths to be fantastic considering the size and magnitude of the project and, sometimes, its hidden obstacles. These last three months changed the plantation's everyday routine, changed it with a finality that changed him.

The first death happened just over three months prior. Although he regretted the loss of the native worker, the real loss was to the tribe and to the man's family. His foreman, Pedro Reyes, reported it as an accident. Because he trusted his foreman, he accepted his explanation, filing the paperwork for the Interior Secretary's office. He finished with the required paperwork for the first death, accepting the death as the accident it appeared to be. When the second death occurred, only two or three days later, Pedro, again, reported it to him as an accident.

This second death angered and frustrated him since it happened so soon after the first death. He didn't understand its cause. Brandon's frustrated upset with the short proximity to the first death and, now, instead of just one report to file with the state office, there were two. His teeth clinched with his thought. This second report was so soon after the first. Brandon hadn't like losing two men in such a short time considering there had been no deaths with the discovery of the city until three months ago. He wondered if Pedro let the safety measures lapse on the job. That one thought about Pedro disappeared, as quickly as, it entered his mind. Pedro wasn't just his foreman, but a true friend he would trust with his life. Pedro's knowledge of the land and the project was intimate. He trusted that knowledge, used it.

Brandon had all the work at the project stopped until he could check with Pedro about the safety of the men. Pedro came to the main house to explain what he thought caused the sudden deaths. Brandon read all of Pedro's reports, but he wanted to hear, in Pedro's own words, what he thought happened.

Pedro explained a day before the first death, the workers uncovered a strange, large rock wall with an over-sized stone doorway in its base. Pedro bypassed the doorway with the archaeologist's approval. The doorway remained shut until the natives pulled all the growth from the large wall. Several days later, he broke the seal on the doorway. The archaeologists discovered nothing but a large room behind it.

Early the next morning, the first body appeared near the doorway. Pedro's report explained how the man's chest was crushed inward with all the chest area bones broken. Pedro assumed the man fell from the top of the rock wall to his death at the bottom. The second man's body was discovered near the same location and, like the first body, almost all the bones in the upper chest area were crushed. Pedro's report, again, reported the man fell from the top of the large rock wall to his death at the bottom.

Brandon and Pedro returned to the project, checking all the work and safety procedures in place. He found nothing lacking in either Pedro's work standards or the safety procedures. He left the project with Pedro's assurance there would be no more deaths if he could prevent them. Brandon returned to the main plantation with the assurance Pedro's work and safety procedures were well within the archaeologist's standards.

Brandon had been back at the plantation, for just over two weeks, when Pedro informed him seven more of the native men vanished from the project. Before this was reported in his report to the Interior Secretary, several more native's bodies were discovered at the base of the rock wall. He reported all this to the Secretary of the Interior. Before he could take any action to solve the causes of the deaths or the reason behind the native's disappearances, he received the damnable letter from the Interior Secretary's office.

Brandon tossed the letter back on to the top of the desk, pushing up from the chair as it gave a useless groan. He gave the chair a quick push backward towards the desk. Brandon's anger grew at the lack of understand on the Interior's Secretary's part. To his own dismay, the letter confirmed he would have government people overseeing the project. His teeth clinched, the muscles flexed along his jawline. They would stay at the plantation and at the project on a permanent basis.

Brandon's steps back to the balcony were loud as his boots hit the floor. The evening sun was setting, casting a warm glow over the trees and the plantation's grounds. He took a deep, calming breath of the warm, humid air. Some of his anger disappeared as he looked out at the beauty he saw, but the anger returned as his thoughts returned to the usurping of his authority and the people under that authority.

Brandon refused to concentrate on anything that had taken place at the project, more concerned with the safety of his people returning from there. He swallowed hard. He hoped they followed his instructions to evacuate the project, as quick as possible, returning to the plantation or their various tribes. Pedro and the plantation's natives still hadn't returned, and it was getting late. He was anxious. Behind the anger at the Interior Secretary, he was wondering what was delaying Pedro.

Brandon pushed away from the balcony. He felt the taste of bitterness in the back of his throat. A drink should dilute the taste of the bitterness of not being able to do anything, but would it dilute the frustration having to wait before you could do anything. His need for the drink, to take away some of that frustration and the anger, took him to the stairs. Brandon sled his hand over the banister's aged, hand-smoothed wood, walking with quick steps down to the bottom. As he removed his hand from the banister, he decided he would give the men only an hour, but not

much more, to return. Brandon frowned, knowing Pedro would be the last to depart the project. He gave a slight shake of his head. Pedro would wait until all the others were safe, on their way before he would leave.

Brandon pulled a glass from the counter top, adding ice. He heard the tinkling sound as the ice bounced around the inside of the glass before it settled to the bottom. He ignored the sound. His eyes followed the bourbon gurgling out from the bottle, pouring like golden silk over the ice. He swirled the glass after the bourbon settle to the bottom not raising the ice. Brandon frowned. He then up-ended the bottle, pouring a healthy shot of liquor into the glass. Brandon swirled the golden liquid over the ice cubes and around the glass. His mouth watered anticipating the drink's bitter taste. The glass was raised to his lips. He took a long, slow drink, wincing as the bourbon passed through his mouth and throat. He swallowed.

Brandon was drinking the last of the bourbon from the glass when he heard the sounds of trotting horses. He looked up, hearing the noise behind the horse's hoofs. Brandon released his held breath. To his relief, which appeared in the guise of a relieved smile, he heard the unmistakable background noise of a lone jeep.

Brandon was waiting at the main gate into the house as the men dismounted from their sweating, exhausted horses. He looked up the driveway at the approaching jeep with anxious eyes. He released a sigh on a heavy breath when the jeep pulled to a stop behind the horses. He could see the dirt-streaked face of its occupant. Sweaty dirt caked the wrinkles on Pedro's face, making him appear older. As Pedro walked towards him, Brandon remembered their first meeting when he was seventeen.

Pedro Reyes had been a young, healthy native his father hired to come and work on the plantation. He had been educated at one of the white schools on the coast, speaking good English. He hadn't been as tall as Brandon but stood at five foot, eleven inches. His hair was jet black and shown with a blue cast in the sun. His eyes were the dark, native brown, alert to their surroundings. They retained the alertness, even with age. Just as Pedro grew with his father to become the plantation's foreman, and had been the right hand of Brandon's father, Pedro gave the same respect, same honor to Brandon.

Pedro stopped in front of Brandon. He spoke in a low voice with his words edged in pain, "Seven more men were killed at the project." The pain in his voice increased. "More vanished during the night. We could not find them."

Brandon understood Pedro's sorrow. He still felt his own remorse with the first of the deaths. His response came in a subdued voice, "Did they vanish or run away to their tribes?"

Pedro looked at the ground. His thoughts seemed to turn inward. He looked at Brandon. "All I know is that they vanished." His words faltered. "I do not know what happened. We saw nothing. It happened all at once, Brandon." Pedro's words were almost a groan. His movements were uneasy, matching the emotion behind his words. His eyes took on a frightened, questioning stare. "We have the bodies of the dead men in the truck. They will be here, soon. You can see for yourself what they look like." Pedro's voice became shaky with his next words, "They are

different, Brandon, from the first ones." His frightened eyes carried the fear he still felt. He looked at Brandon's face, but didn't see him. "The bodies were squeezed. They were squeezed, Brandon." Pedro's voice faltered, again. He couldn't believe his own words.

Brandon reached out pulling Pedro forward. They walked down the path leading to the house and then up the steps. Brandon could hear Pedro's heavy breathing. "Let's get you a drink."

Pedro downed the amber liquid in one swallow, placing the glass on the counter top. He looked up when Brandon questioned. "What happened up there, Pedro? What happened three months ago, anyway? It was about that time all this started, wasn't it? What happened?" Brandon stared into Pedro's face, waiting for his answer, hoping to find out more information about the deaths other than what he already knew.

"Yes, it was about that time, I think." Pedro's eyes narrowed. He seemed to focus inward, recalling his memories of the events at the project. Pedro's eyes opened wide. He shook his head with a recalled thought. "We encountered the doorway on the rock wall. That is it, Brandon. We found the doorway. I broke the seal, and I opened it, but I never entered, just the archaeologist entered. They said it contained nothing. I re-shut the stone doors, sealed them." Pedro's eyes narrowed to slits. He seemed to, again, focus inward, looking for memories. "We found nothing there. I am sure it goes nowhere. It was empty. Maybe, it had been used for storing something?" finished Pedro. His look was direct, pleading for Brandon to believe what he was saying was true.

"Are you certain no one went inside the room other than the archaeologist?" asked Brandon. He took a short, shallow breath, his eyes narrowing as Pedro's eyes looked away and seemed to look inward, once more.

"No, not that I know," answered Pedro, in a low voice. "I did not go myself and I told no one to go there. Maybe, someone went in there on their own but it is just a large room. It goes no..." Pedro's voice trailed off; his eyes carried a plea looking at Brandon. He wanted Brandon to know he was speaking the truth.

Brandon heard the break in Pedro's voice and, quickly, said, "Don't worry, Pedro, we'll clear this thing up." Brandon's voice, his words carried the re-assurance Pedro was waiting for, needing to hear.

Pedro's eyes opened wide with fright. Pedro looked at his trembling hands and then looked back at Brandon. There was panic deep inside Pedro's frightened eyes.

Brandon knew Pedro. What he saw in the man's face caused him to take a shallow breath. He asked, "Is there something else you need to tell me?"

"My son is missing, Brandon," said Pedro. The anxious words were spoken low. Pedro's voice broke with his admission.

Juan was the mirror image of the younger Pedro. He was fourteen-years-old, very intelligent. As the boy grew older, Pedro used him, more and more, on the plantation. Pedro made arrangements with Brandon when the boy's primary education ended, he would enroll him in the college down

on the coast. Brandon walked over to Pedro placing his hand on Pedro's shoulder. He looked down on Pedro's gray-streaked head.

"I have to go back," pleaded Pedro. His voice, again, broke. He looked at Brandon with an unmistakable plea in his eyes. "I have to search for him, Brandon."

"We'll go together, my old friend," assured Brandon. He gave Pedro's shoulder a slight squeeze to confirm his commitment. "The people from the state will be here tomorrow morning. We'll see to them and then we'll go search for Juan."

Pedro lowered his head into his hands, shaking it from side-to-side. "He is my only child. I sent him to the back section of the project to make sure no one was there when we were ready to leave," mumbled Pedro. His guilt edged his words explaining the boy's disappearance. "He never came back, Brandon." Pedro raised his head.

Brandon heard the muffled words and said, "Go get your rest. We'll leave just as soon as possible." Brandon's voice carried a gentle, but firm command. He knew Pedro's over-all condition would never let him relax, much less, sleep. He patted Pedro's shoulder, knowing Pedro would get little, if any rest.

Pedro rose. With a last look at Brandon, he took a shaky, deep breath, walking out through the door. Moments later, the outside door shut with a gentle, slamming sound. Brandon swallowed hard. He remembered his own father's death. How it affected him with the consequences to his life because of the death. Pedro was like a father to him and had been since his father's death. He, now, felt Pedro's loss.

Brandon poured a drink from the bourbon bottle, walking over to the large window looking out. The evening sun had already set, but his eyes caught the scene the light from the room gave to the small area in front of the window. The large palm tree gave back a monstrous silhouette with the insect's shadows dancing through the dim light.

Brandon swirled the liquor in the glass ignoring what he was doing. The ice's tinkling sound disappeared lost to his hearing. His eyes moved through the dim light watching the insects dancing in the light. His thoughts continued to return to the truck. How long would it take the truck to arrive at the plantation? He took a swallow of the amber liquid and, with ease, it slid down his throat in one long swallow. It didn't burn his mouth or throat as it had, earlier. His thoughts took another direction. He shook his head. What had Pedro meant when he said the bodies were squeezed?

Brandon looked out at the area in front of the large window. His eyes tracing, retracing the same features, over and over, again. He frowned, finding no answers to any of his many questions. He needed those answers.

Brandon raised the glass to his lips finishing the rest of his drink in one long swallow. His hand fell to his side. The last drops of liquor in the glass dropped to the floor. He swallowed what little of the liquor remained in his mouth, resuming his search of the area outside the window.

Brandon thoughts turned inward to his own life. He smiled. There had never been a marriage. He found no reason, at this late point in his life, to complicate it with a wife. His smile widened with the thoughts, crinkling the skin at the corners of his eyes. He appreciated his encounters with women, and looked forward to them when they occurred, but he never considered making any one woman a permanent part of his life on the plantation.

Pedro's wife, Maria, was the only woman he ever wanted in his house. She took excellent care of the plantation house and him. He gave a small, snorted laugh. His thought completed itself. If he married, it would only be an extra woman to complicate his way of life.

Juan grew up on the plantation, attending the English school located there. His smile widened into a grin showing his strong, white teeth. When Juan came back from college, Brandon, long ago, decided the boy would make an excellent foreman after Pedro's retirement.

Brandon's grin vanished. A picture of his father popped into his mind. If his father had still been alive, his next thoughts would get him a quick slap to the back side of his head. It was important to Brandon, the plantation and all its lands, were returned to its rightful owners. This would take place through Juan. Just watching the boy, on a day-to-day basis, showed him Juan would be fair in his dealings with the other natives, sharing what the land gave.

Brandon's father wanted him to marry and have children, but Brandon knew he would have the responsibility of the plantation. It would require almost all of his time. His father tried, on more than one occasion, to get him interested in some of the local white women they encountered through their association with the other plantations. Brandon's own personal association with these women left most of them wanting, undesirable. He considered most of the women weak, silly things. Marrying a local woman displeased his father and, more than once, his father asked him to return to either England or America choosing a wife from among the many women there. With his father's silent objections, and because his father could no longer operate the plantation, they agreed, though reluctantly, the plantation could be Brandon's first priority.

Brandon's smile returned. The smile turned into a deep, throaty laugh. He dismissed his thoughts about his father. At thirty-seven, he was set in his ways and had no wish to complicate his way of life. He would make it a priority, when they returned to the project, to find either the boy or his body. He cared too much for Pedro and Maria to do otherwise.

Brandon walked away from the window. His troubling thoughts returning to the bodies in the back of the returning truck. He set the glass down on the counter's top, frowning in frustration, realizing waiting for the truck's arrival would be a maddening ordeal. Pedro's explanation about the bodies' appearances was incomplete. The more his thoughts returned to Pedro's description, the more it troubled him.

In the large den, which doubled for his workroom, he sit down at his over-burdened desk. The straight backed chair, like the desk chair in his bedroom, made the same familiar groaning noise with his weight. He neglected the plantation's paperwork, for several days, in favor of the Interior Secretary's needs. The paperwork accumulated, occupying a large portion of the desk. If

he became involved with it, maybe by the time the truck arrived, he could be through most of the papers.

Brandon picked up several sheets of the papers scanning their words and figures. He shook his head trying to free his mind so he could concentrate on what he was reading. His hands dropped back to the desk top almost in slow motion. He took a deep, frustrated breath, laying the papers down, forgetting them. He eased his shoulders back in the chair. His eyes searched the bookshelves lining the den's walls. His eyes moved over the books, but the books disappeared with his thoughts.

Brandon remembered the reluctance of the tribal chiefs when he requested they send their men to help with the work at the project. This thought caused him to frown. His eyes narrowed in angry frustration to his reaction about their fears. He listened to their stories, trying to understand their reluctance, what they were saying. His frown deepened. He hadn't believed what the tribal chiefs related to him. Now, because he hadn't believed the reluctance on the tribe's part, His disbelief was returning to play havoc with his mind.

Brandon rubbed his forehead and the small ache between his eyes, remembering some of the taboos related in their stories. His own experience, with the local native tribes and their beliefs, taught him this belief system ran deep. Even though, he had their trust, it was hard to make them understand they could break the taboos. He had an even harder time convincing them, once they broke their taboos, they would survive with no penalty when they broke them.

The project and its ruins were one of their greatest fears. He spent many hours with each tribe trying to convince them the ruins weren't something they had to fear. The tribal chiefs, after he made many promises to them he would protect the tribe's people, the chiefs relented. The men worked at the project, but their fears concerning the ruins and the surrounding area remained.

Pedro informed him, at the end of each workday, the natives would leave to find their nightly rest in the surrounding forest. The large, dormitory-style buildings, he constructed, did little to rid them of their fears concerning the dangers of the project or what the project represented. As his fingers continued the back and forth motion across his forehead, his eyes shut. He needed to relieve the tension building between his eyes. Had he made a mistake convincing the natives there would be no penalty if they broke their taboos?

Brandon tapped the desk's surface, unaware of his movements, unable to find an answer, but one. He frowned. His eyes narrowed. He didn't care for the answer or its meaning. The deaths were his responsibility. His insistence to be in charge of the project was one part of the answer. His insistence the tribes take part was the other part of the answer. What caused the death was the missing part in the answer he sought. He took a deep, frustrated breath, blowing it out, knowing he would only find the answer at the project.

Brandon looked at the old, large, wooden clock hanging on the wall. Its constant ticking, the slowness of its pendulum as it swung back and forth, combined with the slow movements of the minute hand, did little to help his mood. How much longer would it be before the truck arrived? His eyes narrowed in thought. He asked a silent question. How far behind Pedro had the truck

been when it left the project? It would have to follow the road instead of the cross-country route Pedro and the horse-riding natives took. The flex, he gave, released some of the tension in his cramped shoulders. Brandon rose. The chair gave the familiar groan as his weight left the indented cushion.

Brandon turned the lights off taking a final look at his over-burdened desk. He frowned, leaving the room. Down stairs, he leaned against the door frame in the front room, looking out into the night, marveling at the clear, star-studded sky. The insects made the night come to life with their clamber of different, distinct noises. He checked his watch, waiting for the truck's lights to come down the driveway to announce its arrival.

Brandon smiled, remembering the letter on the upstairs desk. Who was this person mentioned in the letter, this Dr. A. McPherson. What kind of man would he be? This doctor would be another one of those boneheads accompanied by his staff of workers and some soldiers. What could this doctor do at the project that hadn't already been done by the hordes of archaeologists the state sent since the ruins were discovered?

Brandon brushed the insect away from his face, frowning. The light coming from the room behind him was attracting the insects. He, again, brushed at the insects around his face, knocking several away.

Brandon took a deep breath, releasing it with a small laugh. There was, always, one or two of the archaeologists at the project. They came on a regular basis to insure no harm came to the ruins as they were cleared of the jungle's growth. Pedro worked, almost, hand-in-hand, with them to insure no damage would occur. The work was according to their own... The smile spread across his face. Brandon shook his head. The smile deepened, showing the teeth just under his lips. His thought completed itself, 'set of high standards'.

Brandon eased his weight into a more comfortable position against the door frame. No sooner, had he found the comfort his large-framed body required, when the glint of headlights on the road leading up to the plantation caught his attention. He pushed away from the door frame. He stood waiting in the driveway when the truck circled around, coming to a halt at the gate in front of him.

The truck's driver, Albert Ranos, like Pedro, came from the coast to work on the plantation. He smiled with his remembered thought about Albert when he first met him. Brandon's father hired both Pedro and Albert, and there couldn't be a bigger difference between two men. Albert was the same height and weight as Pedro, but his complexion was lighter. Albert's mother was white. Albert's eyes were hazel. Brandon smiled. Albert looked out from the truck at him. There could be no doubts, Albert carried his mother's genes. Even though Albert was a hard worker, his abilities were far below Pedro's.

As Albert stepped out of the truck at the gate, Brandon met him halfway down the driver's side. Without waiting for Albert's report, he asked, "Albert, were you the last to leave the project?"

"Yes sir. Pedro and me left there at the same time. He made sure we were on the road to the plantation before he left behind us. He said I was to come to the main house so you could see the

bodies." Albert walked to the back of the truck, throwing the canvas tarp up and over the top. He stepped away so the light could expose the truck's contents.

Brandon's eyes opened wide in disbelief, mixed with sympathetic, remorseful pain. The sweet, over-powering smell of death assailed his nostrils. He looked from body to body. He took a deep, shaky breath, looking at the crushed chest areas on the natives. Brandon saw the inward motion of the crush, and winced. These men suffered before their deaths and, as before, he felt responsible for the suffering.

"Take them to the cold storage building. Leave them there. We'll notify their tribes tomorrow." Brandon lost sight of the bodies when Albert grabbed hold of the canvas tarp, pulling it down across the back of the truck.

"Mr. Alexander, may I return with Pedro to search for his boy?" asked Albert.

Brandon didn't speak there was no reason. He looked at Albert. Brandon had no doubts he would hear the request, more and more often. He nodded his head in the affirmative, knowing the responsibility for the plantation and its people would weigh on his mind. As Albert drove the truck into the plantation's large yard, he walked towards the house with its welcoming light. The truck's contents produced a very unpleasant thought. Would he find Juan with his chest crushed, surrounded by that sweet, unforgettable smell?

Walking into his bedroom, he realized just how important Pedro's friendship... His thought ended before it could finished. He and Pedro shared more than friendship. Their relationship surpassed friendship. When the plantation came to him from his father, he relied on Pedro to help him run it. And, because of Pedro's unselfish attitude, he succeeded. He owed Pedro a great deal. Pedro treated him as one of his own sons, teaching him the plantation's true values. He knew the truest value Pedro taught him wasn't the plantation or its lands, but the people that worked the land. They ran it for him. He learned this from Pedro, and it insured his success with the plantation.

Even though he was getting sleepy, the bed held no invitation. Brandon sit down, pushing his large shoulders into the over-sized cushions of the recliner. He released a deep breath, resting his head back against the cushion. He pushed the recliner into its reclining position, but the recliner's familiar comfort wasn't doing its work. His mind was too active on what happened and was happening at the project. Brandon's neglect of the tribal chief's advice lay just behind these thoughts. His thoughts mixed, centering on what caused the natives fear of the project. He had no answers for the many questions he continued to ask himself. His frustration grew because he needed those answers.

He blinked his eyes, several times. They became heavy with fatigue. The recliner's familiar comfort beckoned. He eased his shoulders farther into the cushion's soft comfort, relieving the discomfort between his shoulder blades. His eyes closed. Without realizing what was happening, he eased the rest of his body into the chair, relaxing. Several minutes later, he was asleep.

He woke, startled, looking around the room. A quick look at the clock on top of the desk showed that it was almost five o'clock. He took a deep breath, stretching his arms above his head to

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relieve the kinks in his neck and shoulders. He laughed. Even with all the unneeded, unwanted events from the previous day, he had slept.