

## Chapter 1

### *Khorat Plateau, Northeast Thailand*

The dinosaur looked more like a squashed chicken than like the fanged killers of the American movies. A curled confusion of claws and feathers and bones, its fossilized features protruded from the rock at odd angles, making its original form difficult to discern. Pakasit Paknikorn had no idea what kind of dinosaur it was, and he didn't care. Pak was a farmer, not a paleontologist. All he cared about was how much money it was worth.

Pak hefted his pickaxe. "Cut around the edges," he told his brother-in-law, Nikorn. "Get in close, or it'll be too big to lift."

"Why don't you just tell those scientists from the museum?" Nikorn said. "They'd pay us for it, and we wouldn't have to dig it out ourselves."

"Idiot," Pak said. "Ukrit will give us a hundred times what those museum people would give." Black market dealers smuggled fossils out of Thailand to foreign collectors, who apparently had a lot more money than paleontologists. And in recent months, men like Ukrit had been offering double or even triple what they had even the year before.

Nikorn made a tentative tap with his pickaxe. "This is going to take all night. What about the Americans in the village? I bet they'd pay. Americans are rich."

Pak slapped the back of his head, a little harder than he'd meant to, but that was okay. Nikorn needed a slap now and then. "Just get to work, will you?"

Nikorn sighed and raised the pickaxe over his head. He slammed it down just to the right of the embedded dinosaur. A chip of stone skittered down the slope.

"Careful, don't break it!" Pak said. "If you damage it, it won't be worth as much."

Pak made a more careful stroke on the left side. If he'd thought he could move it on his own, he wouldn't have brought Nikorn in on the secret at all. Pak had made the find all by himself. He'd gone way out past the edge of the cassava fields, where the ground turned steeply up into the hills, to cut a path so that more water would flow down the slope to his crop instead of the nearby fields. He'd done it at night, so his neighbors wouldn't see. The drought had been so severe this year that they were all desperate to claim as much of the scant rainfall as they could. But when he uncovered what looked like a tailbone with the imprint of a plume of feathers still visible around it, he knew he'd found something even more valuable than water.

Dinosaur bones had brought a lot of foreigners to Kalasin province in recent years. When Pak was a boy, he'd only seen a white European once, when a missionary woman had come to the next village over. Now, during the dry season, whole teams of foreigners set up tent camps and went fossil hunting on the plateau. Apparently this arid, rocky land had once been a lush valley where thousands of dinosaurs had lived. Or at least where they had died.

Pak returned to his find every night for a week, cutting his way into the rock by the light of an oil lamp, revealing the dinosaur little by little. The problem was, chiseling out a man-sized dinosaur made for an awfully large block of stone. There was no way he could haul it up onto the bed of his pickup by himself. He'd had no choice but to bring somebody else in to help. And while Nikorn was something of a fool, he was also family. He wouldn't betray Pak's trust, and he would do the work, even if he grumbled about it.

The temperature dropped low on February nights, but by midnight, both of them were sweating and covered in fine dust. They'd cut a channel all around the fossil and now had the more difficult job of cutting underneath to free it from the hillside.

"Maybe we should just come back tomorrow night and finish it then," Nikorn said, wiping sweat from his forehead.

Pak was too tired to smack him again. "If we leave it like this, somebody else might find it during the day," he said. "Then we'd get nothing."

"Nobody comes here. Who's going to find it?"

"When I told Ukrit what I'd found, he said he'd give us a million baht for it, if it's in good condition. A million! Think of what you could buy Boonsri with all that money." Boonsri was Pak's sister and Nikorn's wife. She had a weakness for pretty things, and Nikorn had a weakness for her.

Pak had his own reasons for wanting the money. His daughter Kwanjai was bright, as bright a girl as he had ever seen, but as the daughter of a rural farmer, she had little hope of receiving more than the most basic schooling. She had learned to read and write at the local *prathom*, but for any further education, she would need to travel eighty kilometers away to the district capital. She would need a school uniform and a place to stay. Pak couldn't afford any of that. Without money, Kwanjai would grow up making baskets and silk like her mother and never seeing the world outside of their village. A fine enough life, but he knew she could be so much more.

Cutting underneath the block turned out to be a lot harder than Pak anticipated. There was no way to take a full swing with the pickaxe. Two hours later, a central column of rock still connected the block to the rest of the hillside. Nikorn settled into a continuous complaining monologue, which Pak had long since tuned out. He took another swing at the rock, cursing. Even once they got the block free, they would have to slide and wrestle the thing a few hundred meters across rough ground to where he'd parked his pickup. He hoped they finished before sunrise.

Pak started to imagine he saw the dinosaur moving. He knew it was just a skeleton, and not even that—just the impressions of bones left in the rock long, long ago. Gleaming in the light of the oil lamp, however, the bones seemed to dance in the flickering shadows. Pak breathed in dust and coughed as dirty sweat ran into his eyes. Ukrit better not have lied to him about the million baht.

"Do you think they will bring it back to life?" Nikorn asked.

"What?" Pak looked up at him, startled at the question. "You mean like in those movies? Don't be an idiot."

"I mean like in Massachusetts. I read that they brought a woolly mammoth back to life in Massachusetts. Is that in the United States?"

"Of course it is," Pak said, though to be honest, he had very little idea of where Massachusetts was. He remembered something about a woolly mammoth being born, though. It was like a big hairy elephant that was extinct—only now, apparently, it wasn't.

As he struck at the rock yet again, Pak felt the block shift. "Watch out!"

They scrambled out of the trench they'd dug around the dinosaur. With a crack, the block broke free. Angled against the hillside, it slid forward, hit the edge of the trench, and started to roll over. "Catch it!" Pak shouted, but it was heavier than both of them put together. There was

no stopping it. It rolled once and then slid down the slope, picking up speed until it struck a boulder and crashed to a halt.

Pak and Nikorn scrambled down after it, Pak carrying the oil lamp. The block was face down now, hiding the dinosaur from view. Pak prayed it hadn't been damaged by the fall. Nikorn pulled a tiny LED flashlight out of his pocket and shone it on the block. No damage that Pak could see. They couldn't slide it to the truck like this, though; the fossil would be worn down to nothing. "Got to flip it over," Pak said.

They lifted one side together, straining at the weight, until they heaved it up on its side. "Careful, now," Pak said, but too late. The uneven block kept turning, so that instead of gently lowering it, it slipped from their fingers and slammed down hard. A thin section of what Pak guessed was vertebrae sheared off and fell to the ground. Pak cursed and picked it up, wondering how many baht had just fallen off their prize.

He slipped it into his pocket. "We'll just tell Ukrit we found it that way," he said.

Nikorn reached out to touch the dinosaur's skull, just visible as a bump on the surface. It was a gentle touch, almost a caress, but instantly a fine network of cracks radiated out from the spot. Nikorn jerked his hand away.

"What did you do?" Pak shouted.

"Nothing! I just touched it!"

Pak watched, horrified, as the cracks spread, racing through the stone like shattering glass, accompanied by a sound like corn popping over a fire. When they stopped, Pak peered at the fossil. It looked much the same as it had before, only split in places with hairline fractures. Maybe it would still be okay.

A strange smell caught Pak's attention, and he noticed a fine mist drifting up from the stone. It smelled sweet and vinegary, like a fresh durian fruit. That was odd. A cold shiver passed through him. The night was getting cooler.

"Almost there," Pak said. "Let's get this thing on the truck."

They wrestled it meter by meter down the slope, careful not to let it tip again. Both of them were strong from daily manual labor, but it taxed their endurance all the same. Finally, they reached the outcropping where Pak had parked his pickup. He had backed the truck against the hillside, allowing them to slide the block right into the cargo bed from the hill. He was glad he'd thought of that—if they'd had to lift it, they might not have managed.

Pak threw a tarp over their treasure and tossed their pickaxes in the cargo bed next to it. Time to hit the road. Not that there was much of a road where they were headed.

"Where are you going?" Nikorn asked as Pak pulled the truck away from the hillside and headed west.

"To Ukrit's. This way's quicker." The straightest path was across the foothills of the mountain range that marked the northern edge of Kalasin. Pak's truck could handle the terrain, and he didn't want to take the time to go around, or risk being seen by any nosy neighbors. He drove carefully, though, not wanting to bounce their precious cargo.

The moon rose over the mountains, giving him a clear view of the way ahead. They would make the trade, get paid, and be back home before their wives woke to start preparing the day's meals. Pak could already picture Kwanjai in her smart school uniform, learning English and mathematics and making a life for herself in the wider world. Pak would miss her, but he would be glad knowing he was providing for her future.

He caught a whiff of that durian smell again. Some kind of gas, he guessed, trapped in the rock for millions of years. It made him nervous. It wasn't poisonous, was it? Or flammable?

"Hurry," Nikorn said, fear evident in his voice.

"Why? Did you see something?"

"Just hurry, okay?"

The truck hit something, bouncing over it with a jarring bang. Nikorn shouted, jerking back from the window. Pak stepped on the brakes, wondering what he had hit. Something hidden in the brush that he hadn't noticed?

"Don't stop!" Nikorn said. "Drive!"

Pak didn't understand, but he heard the near panic in Nikorn's voice, and he was starting to feel that way himself. Something was wrong here that he didn't understand. He pressed the accelerator. The pickup jolted over a few bumps and then came to a halt, wheels spinning. Pak threw it into reverse and tried to back up, but the engine just whined. They were stuck.

Pak's heart hammered. Had he run into an ambush? But what kind of thieves set an ambush in the middle of the night on a barren stretch of terrain? Had he stumbled upon some kind of smugglers route? There were regions of Thailand controlled by gangs of smugglers and sex traffickers, but those were in the jungles, and closer to the border, not out here on the plateau.

He clambered out. Some fallen tree branches that he hadn't seen in the dark lay snarled underneath the truck. Nikorn climbed out the other side. Pak examined the barrier by moonlight. Two of the thickest branches blocked the rear wheels; if they could slide them out, maybe the truck could back up and they could go around a different way.

"Come on," he called to Nikorn. "Get that side and help me..." He trailed off as he saw a gigantic brown bird standing on the rocky outcropping, looking down at him. It was the largest bird Pak had ever seen, at least as tall as his chest. The bird sidestepped lightly on taloned feet and cocked its plumed head at him.

Only, it wasn't a bird, not exactly. For one thing, its feathers were more like little spines sticking out along the top of its body and tail, shades of brown rippling as the breeze ruffled them. For another, it had teeth. Long and slender ones, like railroad spikes, but slightly curved, filling a long jaw topped with a bright, bare red patch. Pak had lived here all his life, and he'd never seen a bird like that.

This was no time to gawk at wildlife, though. They had to free the truck and make it to Ukrit's before first light. Pak called to Nikorn, who didn't answer.

The durian smell was very strong now. Pak felt suddenly afraid for the cargo. Had the jolt damaged it? He ran around to the back and threw the tarp off of the stone block. A rush of the sweet aroma washed over him, gagging him. Green liquid bubbled up out of the cracks in the fossil.

He whirled to see the bird-creature, who had impossibly appeared on the other side of the road, stepping from one foot to the other and bobbing rhythmically. Pak called for Nikorn again. Fear swelled in his chest, intensifying to a pure animal terror that paralyzed his muscles and squeezed his lungs. He couldn't breathe. His bladder let loose, and warm urine ran down his leg. He wanted to leave the fossil and run as fast as he could away from that place, but the smell, still sweet but now shockingly acrid, prevented him.

The creature angled its head, staring with unreadable yellow eyes. As unobtrusively as he could, Pak reached into the truck bed and pulled out his shotgun. He took one step back and pumped it to chamber a round. The creature opened its mouth and screeched, a bone-jarring sound that drove a wedge of pain deep into Pak's ears. Its teeth looked very sharp.

The air around him looked different, felt different. He realized he couldn't see the truck anymore. He couldn't see Nikorn. What was happening?

He raised the gun. Quick as lightning, the creature lunged, as agile as a sparrow but with the jaws of a crocodile. A scream rose to Pak's throat, but it stuck there, choking him. All he could manage was a high keening that seemed to come from the center of his soul. He fumbled with the gun, aimed it, and fired directly into the creature's face.

The thunder of the gun's report echoed back from the hills. Dazed, Pak looked around, ready to fire again. The truck was back. The creature had vanished. Nikorn lay on the ground, clutching his chest. Blood pumped over his hands and soaked into his shirt. Horrified, Pak ran to his side, seeing the shotgun pellet holes in his brother-in-law's body, but unable to process them. The creature? Where was the creature?

Nikorn's mouth moved, but no sound came out. His eyes stared at Pak, full of accusation and betrayal.

"I didn't!" Pak said. "I didn't mean...!"

He whirled around, looking for the bird-thing that had attacked him, but there was no trace of it. Not a single feather. Not even any birdlike footprints in the dust.

He looked back at Nikorn, whose eyes had gone glazed and distant. There was no saving him. But he could still save himself.

Pak ran to the truck and jumped inside, tossing his shotgun into the passenger seat. He slammed his foot down on the accelerator. The truck revved and lurched, surging forward over the tree branches. In the back, the fossil slid with a scrape of stone against metal and tumbled out of the open truck bed onto the ground. Pak didn't stop. There was no way he could get it back onto the truck by himself anyway, and he didn't want to stay here a moment longer than he had to. Somehow, that fossil had killed his brother-in-law. He leaned forward against the steering wheel, his hands shaking and his heart slamming against his chest, urging the truck on as fast as it could go.