

Beyond the Veil

Ronald Bagliere

PROLOGUE

June 6th, 2012 – 3° 59' 57" S Latitude, 67° 11' 33" W Longitude, 100 kilometers southeast of Santo Antonio do Içá, Amazonas, Brazil

Morning sunlight trickled down through the forest canopy, spraying golden beams on the thick dappled mats of silver fern. At length, Mahl came to a grinding halt and breathed deeply of the humid, damp air. He would be home soon. Already, he could smell the scent of water. Capuchin monkeys chattered in the spidery branches above. Reaching out, he broke off a slender branch and ripped the outer bark away with his teeth. As he chewed the sweet inner cambium amid the incessant whine of insects, he surveyed the dense forest.

A minute later, he tossed the branch aside, re-slung his bow over his dark shoulder and struck off into the waving sea of green with the black tail of his talisman head dressing flapping in the wind. From here on, the trail ran under the thick green vegetation and he would need to rely on his memory on where to place

each step. One wrong placement could mean a broken leg or worse yet, death, in one of the many gaping holes strewn out over the ragged landscape.

After several hundred meters, the landscape leveled out, and in the distance a stream could be heard trickling around rocky outcroppings. Once he came across it, the trail would veer downward toward his village. He hurried toward the stream, and just as he was about step into it, heard strange voices. His heart thudded and he crept silently into the dense thicket of heliconia with arrow drawn. Whoever they were, they were not Manaqūi, from whom his people had hid unseen since the days of old.

Anxiously he waited, peering through the veil of sword shaped broad-leaves at the forest ahead. As the voices grew louder, he considered his next move. The path leading to his village had to be protected at all costs, but he was only one man against how many? He didn't know. The sound of thumping feet on the soft brown earth drew nearer until at last he saw three men dressed in strange white skins. Who they were and why they were here, he didn't know, only that they were threatening his home. The arrow strung on his bow twitched. Slowly, he lifted the weapon, aimed it at the lead man, and let the arrow fly.

An instant later a grunt was followed by cries. He quickly fitted another arrow to his bow and aimed it, then stopped when he saw a man draw out long, menacing blade from behind his back. But he stayed where he was, and after much chattering between the other men, he dragged their fallen leader off.

Once Mahl was satisfied they weren't coming back, he slipped his bow back over his shoulder and fled down the steep, sloping path toward home. But deep inside, he was scared. The world was changing beyond his tribe's shrouded borders.

**June 6th, 2012 – University of California,
Berkley, Kroeber Hall**

Claire El-Badawy scrolled down her computer calendar. She had a Lyceum lecture at 1:00 PM, her A330 class at 3:00 PM, and an interview to conduct in twenty minutes, not to mention dinner with Jason. Turning around in her swivel office chair, she peered through the window of her second-floor office, thinking about the grant for the expedition to Brazil. After the huge disaster in Guatemala, she was taking an enormous career risk searching for a lost bushman of the Amazon. The department would only suffer one mistake before showing you the door. But if this lost man turned out to be what she hoped he was, her prestige would skyrocket. As she considered her future, a knock on her open door startled her. She spun around and found herself looking into the bluest eyes she'd ever seen.

“Hi, I’m Owen,” the man said, walking in. He extended his hand, and as they shook, went on, “We talked a couple weeks ago ‘bout my showing ya ‘round da forest. Am I too early?”

Claire took in the rugged Aucklander’s long booted legs, faded jeans, and crisp, white button-down shirt; its top two buttons were undone.

“No, have a seat,” Claire said, collecting her thoughts. “Can I get you something to drink?”

He crammed his long, lean body into the chair in front of her desk. “Nah, I’m good as gold. Quite da campus ya got here. I almost got lost.”

Claire took her seat behind her desk and tried to relax. “Should I be worrying?” she said.

“Bout what?”

“You getting lost,” Claire said, noticing the faded scar above Owen’s brow.

“Nah. Da forest an’ I do fine. It’s da ‘big smokes’ that get me turned around. Too many roads.”

“Yes, me too,” Claire said, not quite understanding the term, “big smokes”. She guessed he meant cities. “So, how’d an Aucklander end up in Peru?”

“Westhaven, actually, north of da big town, out in the wops.” Owen handed her an envelope and sat back looking her over. “My pop studied fish on da river when I was a tyke, so I grew up on it, so ta speak, yeah.”

“Wops?” Claire said, opening the envelope and glancing down at his credentials.

“Yeah, ya know, boonies,” he said. “I think ya find everything in order there.”

Claire nodded as she read down the list of past treks he led. The resume wasn’t exactly what she was expecting, but then, she wasn’t looking for flash. “Must have been interesting growing up on the river.”

Owen shrugged. “It was alright. Not all it’s cracked up ta be. Lots a nasty critters down there – say nothing bout yella fever.”

“And malaria,” Claire added. I’m not a tourist, Mr. Macleod. ”I take it you were sick?”

Owen’s expression tightened at the mention of the malaria. “Nah. Just a run-in with an aranhas armadeiras.”

Oh, we are trying to impress. I’ll give you the benefit of a doubt. “A banana spider? You should be dead.”

“Yeah, yeah. For a while, I wished I was. So, why ya wanna find this Lost Man?”

“To learn about his people before it’s too late,” she said folding up his resume and tucking it back into the envelope.

“What if he don’t wanna be found? Big forest down there.”

“Are you saying you can’t find him?”

“Nah, not at all,” Owen replied. He crossed his legs and shifted awkwardly in his chair. “Might take time. T’aint easy finding someone don’t wanna be found; that and where we’re going ain’t a walk in da park. Manaqüi don’t take kindly ta people tramping in their back yard.”

“Well, we have four months, Mr. Macleod, so either you can or you can’t,” Claire said, handing him back the envelope.

“Ah now, no need ta be so formal. Call me Owen, and no worries. We’ll find ‘im.”

Claire smiled. *You’re smooth. Too smooth maybe. I bet you’d tell me you could find Nessie if you thought it’d get you the job. Except, you come highly recommended.* “Where you staying?”

“Cross town.”

Claire looked at her watch. It was almost noon. “You hungry?”

Owen shrugged. “Wouldn’t mind a round of shark and taters.”

“Right . . . I don’t know if we have shark.”

Owen laughed. “Not shark. Fish.”

“Oh, like fish and chips.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Claire tried to think if the cafeteria offered fish. It was Friday. “Let’s see if we have shark and taters then. Unfortunately, I have a lecture at one, but if you want, I can have my RA give you the nickel tour.”

Owen smiled. “Sure, why not? Got no place ta be.”

one

Amazonas

December 10th, 2012, Lima, Peru

Owen opened the door to the company apartment and dropped his backpack beside the couch. Exhausted from the trans-Pacific flight, he rubbed his neck and shuffled to the sliding glass door. Pulling back the screen, he let the sound of rush hour traffic six floors below filter into the room. After a minute of looking out over the hazy coastline, he headed to the bathroom and splashed water on his face.

The mirror over the vanity reflected eyes in need of sleep. But it'd have to wait until he checked email: that, and removing his large banana spider from the shower's soap shelf. The furry critter had escaped his terrarium again and taken up residence there. He

snatched the arachnid between finger and thumb, sending its long legs into a wriggling frenzy.

“Calm down, Shelob,” He muttered. “We’ll have ya home ‘fore ya know it,” He walked to the kitchen and popped him back into his glass home.

“Now, hopefully,” he said to Shelob, “Robbie left me some coca tea.” He felt around cans of vegetables and boxes of dry goods until he found a canister. Shaking it next to his ear, he smiled as the spider pawed the pane of its terrarium. “Good boy, Rob,” he said, and set a kettle of water on to boil. Fifteen minutes later, he sat on the deck overlooking the street below sipping tea with the laptop open on his lap.

Booting it up, he saw a dozen emails. Clicking the one named, Claire El-Badawy Itinerary, he scrolled down the page.

As he read the flight information, the memory of his conversation with the cultural anthropologist popped into his head. He smiled, thinking of the tall, silky brunette with flashing blue eyes. She had a killer smile and a pair of legs that wouldn’t quit. His body stirred as the memory of her flashed before him. But, what really grabbed him was her sharp, challenging and feisty mind. He liked intelligence in a woman.

A taxi below blew its horn, and the memory ran away. Cracking his knuckles, he pulled a candy bar out of his shirt pocket and peeled the wrapper back. As he bit into it, he opened a file he’d downloaded a while back. The screen page opened to a photo of a stepped pyramid. “That’s one wild theory, Luv,” he muttered, tilting his head. He stretched and scrolled down the page to her picture. “You sure are one put-together package, I’ll give ya that. Just keep ya pretty

little nose outta my business and we'll get along just fine."

December 10th, 2012, San Francisco, California

Hot showers always refocused Claire when bad shit happened. She turned the hot water up another notch and gritted her teeth. Since her fiancé, Jason, decided his career was more important than hers three weeks ago she had been trying to forget him. But it wasn't easy. She scrubbed her hair as his ultimatum played over in her head. Of all the times to draw the line in the sand, he had to pick twenty days before the Project started. She felt her throat tighten. Screw it! CBS and New York can have him. I need to call Thad.

She stepped out of the shower, toweled off, and marched into the closet. In the corner, sat a new tan duffle bag. Next to it, stood her Zamber boots and a dozen pair of 150 thread ultra-light hiking socks. She eyed them as she pulled a pair of nylons on, wondering if the duffle bag was big enough for all the gear she'd need for the expedition.

Twenty minutes later, she pulled her Volvo out onto the arterial, and after stopping at Double D's to get her regular morning bagel, turned the radio on to listen to the morning news. As she settled in for the hour-long commute, her blackberry buzzed. Setting her breakfast bagel on the passenger seat, she dug into her purse and pulled out her PDA. Thad's number showed on the screen.

Thaddeus Popalothis, or Poppy as he was known on campus, was her research assistant.

"Hey, what's up?" she said.

"You on the 880?"

“Just getting on.”

“Well, you might want to get off at Artesia and hook up with the 680. Tractor-trailer jackknifed at Exit 120. It’s a mess.”

“Shit. Okay.” She tapped her finger on the steering wheel as five lanes of traffic began slowing down. “You hear anything more from this guy, Owen?”

“Yeah, he emailed back. We’re all set. He’ll meet us at the airport,” Thad said. He cleared his throat and his voice dropped down. “There’s something else.”

“What?” Claire said, bracing herself. When Thad’s voice dropped, trouble lurked.

“Noah’s rethinking my going to Brazil with you.”

Claire blinked. *What is it with fucking Noah? He just can’t let go of shit.* She collected her nerve, and with a level controlled tone, said, “Don’t worry, Poppy. I’ll take care of Noah.”

“But he’s department chair.”

“Yeah, I know. Don’t worry about it, okay?”

A long pause ensued on the other end. Finally, Thad said, “Okay. And if he doesn’t change his mind?”

“He’ll change it,” Claire said exiting onto the 680. Oh, shit, a cop. She glanced at the needle touching 80. Wonderful. “Got to go. Bye.”

Claire threw her office door open and set her purse on her credenza. Her desk was in disarray. Files piled up four and five deep. Post-its with phone numbers and to-dos were stuck all over her computer. Beside the screen, stood a framed photo of her parents. Tucked in the corner of it was a small, faded wallet shot of her grandmother. She cleared a stack of mail from her chair, sat, and checked email. As usual, a long list stared back. She triaged a few, shot off some

replies, then quickly reviewed her day's schedule while debating if she should phone Noah. *No. Better to deal with him face to face. Problem is, I have class in thirty minutes.* Tapping her nails on the desk, she heard a knock on her open door.

Looking up, she saw Thad leaning against the frame with his arms folded across his chest. Tall, with jet-black curly hair that framed a Mediterranean olive complexion, Poppy was quite popular with the young ladies on campus.

"Oh, there you are. I need to see Noah, but I have class in--" she looked down at her watch, "--twenty minutes." She dug the lesson folder out of her bag. "Would you mind filling in for me?"

He stepped up to her desk and took it from her. "Well, I'm not really prepared, but okay."

"Thanks."

Thad nodded. Then cleared his throat. "Hey, just so you know, don't go nuts trying to change his mind. I'll be all right. Really. I mean, don't take me wrong, I wanna go--who wouldn't? But I don't want to be shoved down his throat. He can really fuck with me, Claire."

Claire studied Thad's long, angular face, feeling his guarded concern. She knew he was right. Noah could really do a number on Thad come dissertation time. "Don't worry. I know how to handle Noah."

The walk from her office in Kroeber Hall to the other end where the Department Chair ran things gave Claire some time to plan how she might twist the silver-haired Scotsman around her finger. She saw Noah no differently than she saw the rest of the men in the department. He was self-centered, arrogant, and stubborn. Unlike the rest of the men in the

department, Noah was her ex-husband, and therein lay her advantage or disadvantage. She took a deep breath as she came to his office suite and opened the door.

“Hi, Claire. Can I help you?” the admin assistant said, looking up from her typing.

“Noah busy, Maggie? I need to see him.”

“He’s on the phone. Anything I can do for you?”

“Don’t think so,” Claire said, eyeing Noah through his open door. “I’ll wait.”

“Coffee?”

Claire shook her head.

Maggie got up and joined Claire. “You hear about that horrible accident on 880 this morning?”

“Yeah, tractor trailer and a bus? Oh, he’s off,” Claire said. “Sorry, I need to catch him before he skates.”

As Claire stepped into Noah’s office, he swiveled around in his chair.

“Well, hullo, Claire,” he said, pushing his wire-rimmed glasses up over his forehead. “I wondered how long it’d take before I saw your face in here.”

Claire crossed her arms and eyed him. “What are you doing?”

“Doing?”

“Yes. My project? You’re screwing with it. Why?”

Noah leaned forward. “No class today?”

Claire smiled. “Thad’s filling in.”

“I see. Well, to answer your question, I’m looking out for the college’s interests. Thad’s an excellent grad student, but you need someone who knows his way around down there, don’t you think?”

“Thad can hold his own,” Claire said.

“I’m sure he can,” Noah replied as he met her challenging gaze with one of his own.

“So, I suppose you have someone in mind?” Claire said.

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

“And that would be?” Claire said as Noah’s gaze slipped over her blouse and down her skirt.

“Name’s, Jorge, Micheal’s boy.”

“Jorge? Are you kidding me? He knows nothing about my project!”

“He is, however, a native Brazilian who knows how things work down there. Need I remind you, the only reason you got funding for this folly of yours is because I put my ass on the line for it.

“I’m well aware of that,” Claire growled.

“And make sure if you find this lost man, which you have as much chance of doing as finding canopic jars in a stepped pyramid, that you remember you’re there to observe only. No contact.”

Claire forced a smile. “Why is it you can’t find it in your tiny little pea brain to question why they found cocaine in the Pyramid of Giza?”

“That’s all anecdotal, but hey it’s your career. If you want to flush it down the toilet, be my guest. Anyway, it seems a moot point. You have your grant.”

“Yes, I do,” Claire replied.

“However,” Noah said, “It’s my job to see it doesn’t end up in a waste basket.”

Claire leaned forward. “Then leave it alone. Look, we both know what this is all about. You’re still trying to control me.”

Noah laughed. “Oh please, what makes you think I’d spend one second of my precious time with screwing you? Believe me, I have better things to do.”

“Right, but you certainly liked screwing me a few years ago, didn’t you? Better be careful with Maggie. I’ve seen how she looks at you. The newest Mrs. Henderson might not like it.”

“What are you talking about?” Noah snapped back. His face reddened as he furrowed his brow.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.” Claire let him sit with that a moment then went on. “Noah, dear, if there’s one thing you’re not very good at, it’s keeping your pecker in your pants.”

“Are you threatening me?”

Claire almost burst out laughing. “Honey, I don’t have to make threats, you self-implode without any help from me.”

Noah studied her with talon-like eyes. “Might I remind you, I’m Department Chair here, so unless you want to be standing in front of glassy eyed freshmen all day for the foreseeable future, mind your manners. By the way, how’s Jason these days?”

Claire’s eyes widened, and she fought to keep from blowing up. Through tight lips, she hissed, “Jason has taken a job in New York.”

“I heard. Long commute, don’t you think?”

“It’s what they make planes for,” Claire said, with her best fuck-you grin. “So, back to Thad.”

“Yes, back to Thad,” Noah said averting his gaze out the window. “Smart kid, but I’m not sure he’s your best choice. Did you know Jorge speaks several tribal languages? Can Thad say the same?”

Claire considered her ex-husband’s loaded question. This was the one area Poppy did not excel in, and to be truthful, it bothered her. But his involvement with her work trumped that deficiency. She said, “He holds his own.”

Noah steepled his fingers. “Really? In what, besides a dalliance in ancient Egyptian, unless you plan on running into some pharaoh?”

“He speaks Quechua, and some Ayaya,” Claire fired back, ignoring Noah’s sarcasm.

Noah cocked an eye. “Fluently?”

Claire paused and thought about her answer. She wanted to be careful not to say the wrong thing. Noah grinned, and obviously taking her silence as a ‘no’, said, “What I thought. Tell me, what is it about this RA you’re so hot on bringing with you. Are you fucking him?”

Claire closed her eyes and balled her fists. “You asshole! Why am I wasting my time here?”

“I don’t know, why are you? Unless perhaps, you thought you could manipulate me. You were good at that once, you know. Sit down.”

“Fuck you!”

“Sit down!” Noah snapped. He locked his eyes on her like a tomcat sizing up a mouse. Finally, he said, “Let’s cut the crap. This is more than just a goddamned grant here. A niece I’m very fond of is involved and I’m going to make damned sure she comes back in one piece.”

He pushed his glasses back down onto his Romanesque nose and looked off through his window. “You need more experience down there.”

“I’ve run expeditions before.”

“Yes, yes, I know – Togo,” he said, looking back at her. He shook his head. “Look, this isn’t some little dirt village on the west coast of Africa. It’s the damned Amazon!”

“I know that,” she spat back.

Noah shook his head. “No, you don’t!”

“And you do? I wasn’t aware you’d ever been there.”

“A long time ago, yes.”

Claire was taken aback. “You never told me that.”

Noah stared at her, and for a moment she saw a pained expression on his face. “It’s hard to talk about.”

Now it was Claire’s turn to lean forward. “We were married for five years, and I’m just finding this out now?”

“It was personal and if you’ll shut up a minute I’ll tell you why.” He paused. “Twenty-five years ago, my brother and I received a NSF grant to research some of the indigenous tribes.”

“Really?” Claire said.

Noah cleared his throat and frowned. “As I was saying, my brother led a small team of men into the forest one morning while I stayed back to mind camp. It was just a short day trip, reconnaissance and collecting data. He was supposed to be back by dinner, but he and his team never returned. A week later, we found him and his boys. They were skewered alive and left on long bamboo poles: a warning to stay out of where they didn’t belong. They’d crossed some hidden boundary. We got them down and ran the hell out of there. Am I making myself understood?”

Claire was dumbstruck. She knew Noah had lost a brother, but never knew how. Though she’d asked about it many times, he wouldn’t speak of it, nor would his sister. Noah went on, “You have no idea what you’re going into Claire and I’ve tried to keep my mitts out of it. But you need someone who knows his shit down there. And who’s this guide, Owen

Macleod? I hear he leads tourist treks? Christ, woman!”

“True, but he’s spent a good deal of his life right in the backyard of where we’re going,” Claire said, still trying to wrap her head around Noah’s revelation.

“Yes, I looked into it once I found out. But you need a guide. Living there might have only taken him a few kilometers into the forest. You’re going deep into that world. And can I ask you why you’re going through Peru to get there?”

You never stop! “Because that’s where his company operates out of. And his references are excellent.”

Noah sat with that a moment then said, “Well, I do see your point about his living there being worthy. But a tourist guide? Really?”

“He’s multi-lingual and fluent in most of them, not to mention a naturalist with a BA in Forestry and Land Management. He knows the river. He knows the people,” Claire said. She looked at her ex-husband with fresh eyes. “Noah, we’ll be okay.”

“Hmmm . . . And Molly?”

“I’ll guard her with my life.”

“See to it and you better bring her back alive.” He took his glasses off and looked at her hard. “I know you don’t like me after what happened between us. Few people do now-a-days it seems. Tell you the truth: I don’t really care. What I do care about is people getting hurt or worse yet, killed, on my watch -- especially family and talented professors.”

Claire looked at him agape and against her will, felt a twinge in her heart for the man. “Thanks,” and added, “And like I said, I’ll look out for Molly, don’t you worry.”

“You do that. We done?”

Claire got up, fighting the urge to thank the man she had come to despise over the last five years. “I expect so.”

TWO

December 11th, 2012, Lima, Peru

Owen towed the scattered daubs of shaving cream from his face. He had slept dreamlessly for a change and that he prized. The nightmares of his past rarely left him alone since his son died years ago. He stared at the man in the mirror. A faded scar across his hip peeked over his boxers. It was a gift from a jaguar three years ago during one of his tramps to supply one of the many Manaq̄ui splinter tribes with weapons against a Brazilian copper conglomerate. Even now, the ragged wound still pained him. The Jadatani medicine man said the great cat had marked him for its own. The recurring visions of the black hunter of the forest only confirmed it.

He ran a tooth brush over his teeth, then stepped into his closet and pulled a pair of khakis from the hanger.

An hour later, he walked up Circuito de Playas under a bright blue sky. He liked walking, the feeling of melting into his surroundings. The smoky aroma of

La Patarashca wafted in the air. Salsa melodies floated out from the upper windows.

He grabbed a butifarras from the café and found a bench across the street. As he ate, he listened to the thwapping waves of the shrouded ocean and the cries of sea birds. He thought about the expedition, the long haul up the river into uncertain waters. It had been a long time since he had gone so deep into the bush.

Ten minutes later, he sat in the back seat of a cranky yellow taxi sipping yacón tea from a Styrofoam cup as the driver wove in and around traffic. It had started to rain and tiny drops were pelting his window. The taxi turned left, then right, and motored through the maze of cobblestone streets until at last it came to an old brick building. A sign read, 'Amazon River Tours' over the door. The driver pulled through an open gate and crossed a rutted gravel lot dotted with puddles.

As the taxi splashed along, Owen eyed the ratty, chain-link fence battling cacti and pink cinchona, wondering where all the money the tour company took in went. He drained the last of his tea and directed the cabbie toward an open overhead door leading into a large corrugated metal-sided warehouse. As the taxi pulled up in front and stopped, Owen dug into his pocket for the agreed-upon fare, handed it to the driver, and got out.

Ducking inside, he was met by his long time tramping partner, Manny Ortava. "Você está atrasado," he said in Portuguese, wrinkling his leathered, bronzed face. He pulled his work gloves off and dragged a small hand-made cigar from his gaucho's pocket.

Owen shrugged. "Overslept."

Manny cocked an eyebrow and struck a match. "Good flight?" he said, breaking into English.

Owen tossed his empty cup in the garbage can. "Sucked. How's Loretta?"

"Very good," Manny said.

"I was plenty worried 'bout her, yeah. What with her pneumonia and all."

Manny wedged the cigar into the corner of his mouth. "Ah, si, she was very sick, but now is all better. And you?"

"I'm all right. And da crianças?"

Manny smiled. "They are very well."

"An' Ernesto?"

Manny sighed and put his work gloves back on. "Same. He still has his head in the clouds. All he see is the big money he make at the mine. I keep telling him, go to school; learn something. But he does not hear me. He is more interested in meninas. Oh, well, what can I do?"

Owen shrugged. "Not much, I expect. Lads 'ill be lads. They like their chicas fast an' furious."

"Like a certain Kiwi I know," Manny said, then shut his mouth when he saw Jack Burgess coming toward them. He shot Owen a knowing glance, furrowed his brow and walked away as the boss walked up.

"Hey, you ready for this?" Jack said, nodding toward the pile of gear on the warehouse floor. Translated: 'Don't fuck this gig up'.

Owen pulled a chocolate bar from his shirt pocket, tore the wrapper off. Biting into it, he narrowed his gaze on the man. "Morning, Jack. How's tricks?" Translated back: 'Kiss my ass'.

"Cut the shite," Jack snarled.

They faced off like a pair of tomcats: Owen in his tan khakis, a faded T-shirt and frumpy jandals against the wiry Kiwi's three-piece suit and leather loafers. Jack pointed to the pile of canvas bags on the pallet. "You really need all this shite?"

Owen took another bite of his candy bar, looked off into the shadowed warehouse. "Yeah, I think I do."

Jack didn't say anything for a moment but Owen knew the man resented him. Most likely, it was because of the respect and camaraderie he enjoyed with co-workers and patrons alike. Finally, Jack said, "You know, I don't see what my pop ever saw in you."

"Well, ya not your pop, are ya?" Owen said. He stared back at the man, waiting for him to pick a fight - not that Jack would against a man head and shoulders taller than himself.

"No, I'm not," Jack growled and tightened his jaw. "But I run this show, if you follow me,"

"Yeah, I think I do," Owen replied in a level tone. "'Cept I bring da business in, mate."

Jack bristled. "Is that what you think?"

"It's what I know," Owen said, and after he said it, realized how angry he really felt. But the anger went beyond Jack to something he couldn't put his finger on. He took a deep breath. "Look, just leave it alone, okay?"

Jack reached into his pocket and pulled a pack of cigarettes out. "You know what your problem is?"

"No, what's that?" Owen said, looking toward the rear of the warehouse. Owen heard the lighter click, then the sound of a long exhale.

"You're an arrogant son-of-a-bitch who probably hasn't been banged in a month of Sundays."

Owen almost broke out laughing. “Yeah, yeah, Jack. I’m sure a nice piece would straighten me right out. Now if ya don’t mind, I’ve got work ta do, eh?”

“Yeah. And, mate . . .”

“What’s that?” Owen said.

Jack butted his cigarette under his shoe. “Try to keep your paws off that pretty college professor. Your wit falls flat on its arse with the highly educated.” He turned and as he walked away, Owen flipped him the middle finger.

December 12th, 2012, San Francisco

Claire threw the rest of her salad together for dinner, thinking about what Noah had said. Why had he divulged the secret of his brother’s death now, unless he still cared about her? She shook her head, turned up Alanis Morissette’s, *You Ought’a Know* on the CD player and took a sip of her wine.

Since Jason left, Alanis’s hard driving lyrics had become Claire’s mantra. But things were looking up now. Soon, she would be heading down to the Amazon, and if everything worked out the way she hoped, she would be on top of the world. She eyed the framed photo of the gray wolf her aunt her given her upon completing her thesis defense and danced into the dining room with plate in hand.

Sitting down at the table, she nibbled at her salad while sifting through her mail. “What’s this?” she muttered, picking up a small, white envelope. Her eyes zeroed in on the return address. “Jason?”

Her heart pounded as she looked at it. Easy Claire. Remember, he’s the one who walked out, not you. She took a deep breath and ran a fingernail under the

flap, prying it away. When she saw her townhouse key, she was furious.

“You son-of-a-bitch! You asshole!” she shouted. She poked inside to see if there was a note and found nothing: no good-bye, no ‘sorry things didn’t work out’. The end of their five-year relationship reduced to nothing but a returned key.

She held it up in front of her, and felt her throat tighten. “Fucker!” she muttered, feeling like a deleted paragraph in one of his shitty editorials. She clenched her jaw and ripped the envelope in half, then again and again until it was in tiny pieces on the floor.

THREE

30,000 feet up over the gulf of California

Claire peered out the passenger-side window as a long peninsula jutting out into the ocean crept into view below. Wisps of thin clouds were casting faint shadows on its muted hills. In the seat beside her, Thad was busy with his thesis research. Behind them, sat Jorge and Molly, both second year grad students. Jorge was going for his doctorate in social anthropology and Molly in evolutionary anthropology with a second understudy in computer sciences. Just now, Molly was preaching to Jorge about her upgraded search engine for the department. But Claire wasn't listening. For the last three hours, she had been fighting persistent background nausea, and it was getting stronger.

Thad turned a friendly smile toward Claire, nodded over his shoulder and pursed his lips.

Claire took a deep breath and leaned over and peeked at the open document on his laptop. "How's it going?"

“All right I guess,” he muttered. “Just can’t find a lot of data to draw conclusions from.”

“Perhaps your subject matter is a little too obscure.” she said. As his advisor, she had warned him about tackling the migrations of the South Pacific peoples during their Neolithic period. “Why don’t you shift your argument away from why they left and focus on their arrival and cultural myths?”

Thad shook his head. “It’s been done to death.”

“Yeah, but there’s always something new to discover,” she suggested.

Thad sighed. “That’s what Molly said.”

“She’s right,” Claire pointed out. “So you’re working with her then?”

Thad shrugged. “Yeah. Ms. Tech-Head offered to help me dig through the web, so I took her up on it.”

Claire shook her head. Though Thad wouldn’t ever admit it, she knew he liked Molly, but seeing how she was Noah’s niece, knew better than to spit into the wind. “I’ll leave you to your torture then,” she said, opening to the first page of an article she had been working on over the last two weeks for *Anthropology Today*.

They landed at Chavez International Airport four hours later, and after playing twenty questions with the customs agent, Claire and her team pushed through the terminal’s front doors into the oppressive heat of Lima’s afternoon sun. Claire looked right, then left before seeing Owen standing next to a red mini-van that was ready to fall apart at any moment. Behind the mini-van, sat a bus boasting painted trees and plants on its side panel. Two smiling bronzed men in pressed tan shorts and button-down shirts stood in front of it.

“Ya made it!” Owen said walking toward her with an outstretched hand.

“That we did,” Claire said, shaking hands with him while glancing toward the van. “Those our taxis?”

Owen pushed his wide-brimmed canvas hat back off his forehead and took her pack. Handing it to a middle aged man coming up beside him, he said, “At your service. This is Manny here, yeah. He’ll be looking after ya gear and such.”

Claire took in Manny’s rugged brown complexion and toothy smile. But behind the beaming grin, she felt an air of suspicion. “Hi, Manny.” She put her hand out, and as he shook it, his dark, brown eyes burrowed into her.

“Welcome to Lima,” he said, turning toward Molly, who had quietly drifted beside them. “And who is this pretty moça?”

Claire put her arm around her feisty grad student. “This is my queen of tech, Molly.”

“Uma rainha,” Manny said taking Molly’s hand. He bowed with such graciousness, Claire couldn’t decide whether he was playing along or truly meant it. Molly blushed and Thad rolled his eyes.

Claire aimed a down-boy stare at her RA. “And this is Thad. Thad, come around and say hi to Manny.”

Manny turned and gave Thad a long, measured gaze. “O meu Deus. Owen, look at him! He and my Ernesto could be irmãos.”

Molly tapped Claire, and motioned her out of earshot of the men. “You okay?”

“Yeah, just a little upset stomach is all. I’ll be fine.”

Molly frowned. “You’re not a very good liar, but you’re the boss. Anyway, my Spanish isn’t very good

and my Portuguese is worse. So help me out here, I get the reference to Uma rainha, but what is irmãos?" She said, murdering the pronunciation.

"Brothers," Claire said.

"Hey, Claire," Owen called over. "Where's da rest of ya gear?"

"Inside. The rest of our equipment's coming in on a cargo plane later tonight."

Owen looked back at the porters and nodded at the terminal doors. "Rammy, Hector, would ya go fetch their gear for me?"

The men left and ten minutes later the gear was loaded into the bus. Claire climbed into the mini and sat in the midsection beside Owen with Thad and Jorge behind her. Molly sat up front, riding shotgun with Manny. Claire thought of asking about air conditioning but dismissed it because she doubted the rust bucket had it. Besides, they needed to start getting used to the heat if they were going to get through the next few months in the forest.

"Sweet as, Manny," Owen said, pulling the mini door shut. "Let's get a leg on."

"Excuse me?" Claire said.

"What?"

"Sweet ass?" Claire said. *Foreign men, they're all the same, doesn't matter where they come from!*

Owen shook his head. "Yeah, what about it?"

"You might refer to women like that in your country, but I'd appreciate it if you didn't do it with us."

For a moment the man looked at her as if she just stepped off another planet, then laughed. "Oh . . . I said, 'sweet as'. Means everything's under control; real good."

Claire cocked an eye. "Under control?"

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Slang,” Manny put in.

“Right,” Claire said, eyeing them dubiously.

The city of Lima sprawled out before them like a quilted tapestry. White-washed stucco and cinderblock buildings hugged an endless maze of cobbled and semi-paved macadam streets. Here and there, open-air markets sprang up, and with them echoed the staccato come-ons of shopkeepers hawking goods and produce to the meandering masses. They drove for what felt like an hour, and Claire wondered if they'd ever get out of the city. “What’s that smell?” she said, fighting the persisting nausea.

Owen chuckled. “Cuy. Roasted Guinea Pig. I assume you’ll be passing on that one, eh?”

Claire nodded her head as the mini bounced over a bone-jarring pothole. *Very funny, mister, but I’ve eaten stranger things.*

“Easy, Manny. I’d like ta keep my teeth in my head,” Owen said. He turned back to Claire as she took a deep breath. “Queasy?”

She swallowed hard and tried to smile, but failed miserably.

Owen reached into the pocket on the back of the driver’s seat and pulled out a crumpled paper-bag. “Here,” he said, flattening it out and handing it to her. “Sit tight. Almost there.”

“You said that a half-hour ago,” Claire grumbled, loosening the collar of her shirt. *What is going on with me? I’ve flown a thousand times. The heat? And there’s no way I’m blowing lunch in front of you.*

“What ya need is a spot of coca tea. Straighten ya right out.”

Claire looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. "I'm not drinking anything."

"Ya funeral," he said, and tapped Manny on the shoulder. "Hang a right."

The mini turned, and a minute later came to a large open space where ancient, brown adobe buildings stood in decay.

"That's the Pachacamac Ruins!" Molly gushed, looking out the passenger window.

"Yeah, yeah," Owen said.

"Oh my God, I can't believe it," Molly said, and proceeded to grill Owen and Manny about everything they knew about the ruins and whether they could arrange a visit to it after the expedition.

Despite how Claire felt, she couldn't help craning her neck as well. The mini passed around the ruins and turned down a long four-lane street leading toward a poor excuse of a highway. But at least they were no longer in stop-and-go traffic.

The highway veered toward the ocean, following a long curving coastline dotted with grassy bluffs that were bursting with red flax. Here and there, clusters of palm trees swayed in the breezes. A deep blue ocean piled waves upon a long crescent beach as a rambling stucco villa with terracotta-tiled roofs came into view.

Owen pointed toward it. "Ya digs for da night."

Manny pulled off the highway and drove down a cobbled road bordered with pink and red lupines. At the end of it was a broad loop that slid under a vaulted *Porte Cochere* that was supported by polished wood timbers. Owen jumped out, opened the back of the van, and set their bags on an empty luggage cart.

Behind him, Thad, Jorge, and Molly piled out, leaving Claire alone. She watched them stretch their

backs, then pried herself off the seat and stepped out. As she eyed the ocean between the tall grasses, Owen came up behind her.

“Pretty nice, eh?”

“Yeah, real nice,” Claire muttered, and she could just imagine the look on Noah’s face if he knew they were booked in a five-star villa.

