

My Brave Inca Dove

A novel by Teri Ekland



Chapter 1: Night Hawk Way

February 26, 1996

“It’s two in the morning and my wife’s not home!” Steve shouts into the cordless phone.

“Muriel *always* tells me where she’s going and *when* she’ll be back.”

“Does your wife work, Mr. Tyler? Could she be at her job?” asks the officer at South Phoenix Precinct.

“She works from home. And her office is untouched!”

“What’s your address?”

“We live on Night Hawk Way in Ahwatukee. In a new subdivision. You know, stucco houses with red tile rooves.”

“Anything missing from your new stucco house, Mr. Tyler? Her clothes? Jewelry? Her car?”

“Yes. Her new Explorer isn’t in the garage.”

“Her car’s gone? That speaks volumes, Mr. Tyler.”

At the kitchen counter, Steve runs his hand through his receding brown hair. “Officer, my wife didn’t take off and leave me. Her purse is on the dresser. Her Nokia and wallet are inside

with her credit cards, driver's license and the cash I put there this morning. The only thing missing besides Muriel is the jadeite necklace I gave her. It brings out the green in her eyes. She always wears it so wherever she is, I'm sure she has it on."

"What else was your wife wearing when you last saw her?"

"Officer. No matter how hard I try, I can't remember what she had on this morning. I don't even remember if I kissed her good-bye or rushed out the door. My stomach is tied in knots over this. I can't distinguish yesterday morning from five years of mornings. They're all jumbled together in my mind."

"Try, Mr. Tyler. I can't help you if you don't help me."

"Maybe she was wearing a loose-fitting T-shirt. One with that flute player, Kokopelli. And jeans, but I'm not sure. She likes to buy clothes. Has so many I don't know what's new when she first puts it on. This annoys her sometimes."

"Any distinctive marks on your wife? Scars, tattoos?"

Steve holds out the phone. Muriel's beautiful body appears in his mind. He shudders at the thought that she's gone for good. "She's well endowed," he says. "Kind of a burden to her."

"I see. Did you check with her parents?"

"Her mom's dead and I don't want to worry her old man. Not yet. He's seventy and suffers from Parkinson's."

"Mr. Tyler. It's too soon to file a missing person's report on an adult. Call us back in a day or two if your wife's still missing or if you find signs of a break-in or foul play."

"Foul play?" Steve hangs up refusing to consider such a possibility. *She'll be back in a day or two* he reassures himself. *For some reason, she just needs a time out from her routine.*

Steve carries the phone to his La-Z-Boy recliner in the Arizona Room off the kitchen. He speed-dials Betsy Sanders, once again, hoping she'll finally pick up. Betsy's a hairdresser at Lakewood Salon in Mountainside Plaza a few blocks down the road from Night Hawk Way. Under most circumstances, Steve never thinks about Betsy, one way or the other. She's someone Muriel calls during the week and meets with for lunch and a movie. Once a month, Betsy trims Muriel's shoulder-length, light-brown hair. They sometimes jog around the neighborhoods of Ahwatukee and the manmade marinas of Lakewood. Betsy's a single mom and Steve never socializes with her like he and Muriel do with their "couple" friends from Intel and the Unitarian Church. In Steve's mind, Betsy's simply Muriel's best friend and the only person he can think of calling during this escalating crisis.

"Hello?" Betsy groggily answers. "It's the middle of the night so this better be important."

"Betsy. It's Steve Tyler, Muriel's husband." She knows who Steve is but he wants to make sure. He just woke her up. "I'm sorry to get you out of bed, Ms. Sanders. I tried calling earlier, but no answer."

"I worked late and had to close the salon. Then I went out for a nightcap with a co-worker. Is something wrong?"

"Muriel isn't home. Is she with you?"

"No. I haven't seen Muriel since last Thursday when we took the kids to the outlet malls near Casa Grande."

"Do you know where she might be?" Steve crosses his fingers.

"I really don't, Mr. Tyler."

“I was hoping you did.” Steve starts pacing the Arizona Room—from the TV and stereo to the arcadian doors that open onto the backyard swimming pool and barbeque pit. “Muriel didn’t call me all day yesterday like she usually does. To tell me about her day and ask about mine. When I checked the answering machine, a school nurse blasted out that my daughter was still at school, waiting in her office. Then I found my son outside playing with older boys he shouldn’t be playing with!”

“Calm down, Mr. Tyler. Do Kevin or Kristi know where Muriel might be? What did they tell you?”

“Here’s the thing, Betsy. My son knew nothing and showed no sign of concern until we were coming home from Kyrene de Cielo where I picked up Kristi—which Muriel is supposed to be doing. When I questioned my daughter, she started crying and Kevin began asking endless questions about his mommy. Betsy, I told my kids to shut up. That I needed to think. I felt terrible. How could I snap at them? They have every right to be upset. I have no business adding to their confusion.”

“Steve, Mr. Tyler. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“In truth, Betsy, I have a hard time dealing with emotional children. I’m a busy man and depend on Muriel to take care of them. Now I’m worried sick.”

“Have you checked her computer? Can you remember her hinting at anything?”

“Nothing’s unusual in her text messages or emails. No mystery lover. Nothing like that.”

“Lover? Muriel? Never, Mr. Tyler. Muriel loves you. She’s told me this, many times. And she loves your kids like they’re her own. She’d never abandon you and those kids.”

“I checked our bank account and credit cards. No activity during the past week. I even ran a web search on Yahoo, Netscape, and Internet Explorer. Muriel had pulled up sites about

Latin America but I'm certain this was for our trip to San Carlos last Christmas. Her camcorder's still in the closet. Nothing seems out of place. Muriel's simply vanished."

"Stay calm, Steve. I'll be right over to make coffee and help you sort this out."

Steve hangs up, wipes his brow and retreats to his recliner to wait for the doorbell to ring. When it does, he rushes to answer it and stumbles over Kristi's roller blades. Muriel, like a trooper, has always straightened up the house. *Except lately*, Steve reflects. *It seems these last few weeks Muriel simply let things go. Come to think of it.*

Steve kicks aside the roller blades and answers the door hoping Muriel's on the front stoop with an apology and good explanation. Instead, a short forty-year-old woman with curly red hair is standing in the porchlight. She looks hastily put together in a blue sweatsuit and without all the makeup she typically wears.

Steve's heart sinks as he motions Betsy inside. She sets her purse on the dining room table and goes straight to the kitchen to make coffee as if she's in her own home. As if she were Muriel. Steve follows her and sits at the kitchen bar.

Moments later, Betsy places a mug of eye-popping coffee before him. He deeply inhales the aroma, takes a sip, and feels halfway revived.

Then Kevin appears from the hallway looking pale with alarm. He rubs his eyes and asks, "Is Mommy Muriel dead?" Steve stares at his eleven-year-old son and feels as helpless as he did when Angeline passed away the year before he married Muriel. He knows his son is trying to be brave but he's trembling with fear over the answer. Kevin's first mommy unexpectedly died of an aneurism. Although Muriel quickly became the new mommy, the shock and trauma of Angeline's sudden death still lingers. **Angeline's buried in everyone's mind just as surely as she's buried in her grave.**

“Your mommy stayed out a little late,” Betsy suggests to Kevin. “Maybe she got a flat tire or took a drive to Tucson for the night.” She hugs Kevin and leads him back to bed then checks on Kristi and reports to Steve that his daughter is sound asleep. *Muriel’s supposed to be doing this* Steve thinks as he watches his wife’s best friend take charge of the situation.

Betsy and Steve sit at the kitchen counter and exhaust possibilities of where Muriel might be. Finally, Steve suggests Betsy return home. “Get some sleep. You look tired and I want to sit and think.” Steve touches Betsy’s hand. “But you need to know how grateful I am that you’re Muriel’s best friend.”

Before leaving, Betsy hugs Steve, something she’s never done before, and promises to return in a few hours to help get the kids off to school.

For the rest of the night, Steve wrestles with his thoughts on his recliner. Muriel consumes his mind. He thinks about asking neighbors if they saw his wife leaving yesterday morning. *And I haven’t even met my neighbors* he thinks. *Fine way to get acquainted. Oh? Your wife’s missing? Well, come on in, Mr. Tyler. Care for some coffee?*

He recalls falling in love with Muriel on the night they first met at the party of an Intel friend. Muriel arrived on the arm of his colleague Shiv Balakrishnan. *She’s stunning and should be with me, not a man from India* Steve remembers thinking. *And Muriel wasn’t stuck-up like a lot of beautiful women. She laughed at my jokes.*

Of course, Steve reflects, I couldn’t ask for Muriel’s phone number in front of Shiv. I thought she’d get away from me. Then she mentioned her season tickets to the Phoenix Symphony. I went to the next concert and spotted her during intermission. She was with a girlfriend drinking a glass of wine. I was so relieved she wasn’t with Shiv or some other date. And she remembered me. Laughed at one of my stupid jokes. I got her number, called her, and

*began taking her out to pizza parlors, restaurants, and movies. She liked doing the things I like to do. And we had grief in common. Muriel had recently lost her mother and Angeline had only just died. But Muriel was always upbeat with me. We never talked about **the sadness we both felt? Has Muriel been hiding her true feelings all these years? Did she leave me?***

“No!” Steve says aloud as his rocking recliner creaks. “Muriel would never abandon me and the kids. Something’s happened and I won’t stop looking for her until I find her or she comes home.”



Chapter 2: San Carlos

Muriel Tyler

My willow-green Eddie Bauer Explorer careens down I-19 toward Nogales. A few weeks back, Steve proudly negotiated the deal at Tex Earnhardt Ford just before a Super Bowl party with his colleagues. We left the dealership while the Cowboys and Steelers were kicking off the damn football. “It’s kick off time,” Steve said on our way to his party. He kept looking at his Rolex, impatient to be with his buddies, plastered to the TV eating pizza and chili nachos and drinking beer.

Why does the first minute matter? I remember asking. *They always prolong the ending second by second, inch by inch. Besides, we’ll see Diana Ross at halftime!* Was I trying to make him feel better about missing the stupid kick off? Maybe.

Steve took his eyes off the road and looked at me like I was a stupid little kid. *Muriel*, he said, *you know nothing about football*. I left it alone. I hate arguing with him and really couldn't care less about **football. I should've negotiated the deal myself, now that I think about it. But Steve had to take charge, I'm sure he thought, or the salesman would somehow take advantage of me. Like I'm so incapable. Or like Steve had to prove something to me. It makes my head spin.**

I turn up the radio to drown out my thoughts. KVVA is playing my favorite Latino singer, Enrique. "Es una experiencia religiosa and I feel revived," I sing aloud. Shout, really. It's a warm February afternoon, the windows are ajar, and the dry scent of **sage, mesquite and creosote** is flushing through **the Explorer** and cleansing me of thoughts about my husband. My ex.

This is day one of my new life. I'm Muriel reborn. Everything I now possess is in my new car. The duffle bag in back contains a few New Yorkers and books about the Maya, Aztec, and Inca, and the Spanish language. I plan to learn as much as I can during the next year. I hope it'll be a year.

On the passenger seat is my new Louis Vuitton backpack and a ThinkPad with Windows '95, Word 7, and a few games of solitaire. No bookkeeping software! No Photo-Paint! No HTML or AOL! I'm not on a working vacation. I bought the ThinkPad yesterday at Incredible Universe and plan to write about my travels if for no one but me. **They say that keeping a journal is good for the mind and spirit. And with a healthy mindset, my body's apt to follow suit. I hope.**

After Steve left this morning, I dropped the kids at school then hit the road. Took off! Adios amigos. To confuse Steve about my disappearance, I'm still wearing my wedding ring

behind. And I couldn't bear parting with my jadeite necklace even though it's from Steve. Besides, it's worth five thousand dollars and I may need the cash. *Who's the clever one now?* I smile to myself. My disappearance is as mysterious as my new life will be. In a way, it's like I've committed a murder, cleaned up the scene, and fled. There's no turning back because I've executed the unthinkable crime. No. This isn't quite true. I could turn around and tell Steve I needed a break. That's all. He'd understand.

This journey down the Pan Am has been a dream of mine since sixth-grade when I wrote a report about the Incas and learned about the highway that stretches from Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, through Arizona, to the southernmost tip of South America. My little report centered on a picture from NatGeo of a mummified Inca boy found in the Andes. The fate of that frozen child fascinated me back then. And ever since Doctor Burhan broke the news, I've been wondering how that little boy felt before he died. Was he honored to be the Inca king's chosen sacrifice to his mountain gods? Or was he as afraid as I am because nobody knows what lies beyond this life? I don't care what people say. They don't know. They may think they do, but it's just wishful thinking. And did that poor little Inca child miss his mommy, like I sometimes do? Then again, maybe I don't really miss Mom and only feel badly about the way she had to suffer and die.

"From now on I'm Mariella Prichard!" I yell out the window at a passing car as if to announce my presence. *I'm here! I'm not yet a corpse!* I decide to use my maiden name even though I don't see myself as a maiden nor do I appreciate my upbringing in Mesa during the time of Barry Goldwater, Cesar Chavez, and the murder of reporter Don Bolles. Even now, at 35, I complain to Betsy about my working-class Baptist upbringing. My folks were so unlike Steve's

Protestant parents from Boston. *What was it like to have a stockbroker dad and a mother who never needed to work?*

After Steve proposed marriage, he introduced me to his folks in their big fancy Del Webb house. Every year, Bill and Betty Tyler buy two new Cadillacs, one for him and one for her. That's the kind of people they are. Entitled. Rich. Nothing like my parents who struggled to make ends meet. Lived paycheck to paycheck, as they say. When Steve and I made the agreement between us I made him promise not to tell his folks that we were setting Daddy up in a trailer park. Why? Because of a remark Betty Tyler made.

Steve's folks spend their summers at a condo in Lake Tahoe to beat the extreme heat of Phoenix. "So, you're reverse snowbirds," I joked because typical snowbirds get away from winter's snow. "Oh no," my soon to be mother-in-law said. "We're not snowbirds. Those people live in RV trailers." She didn't even understand I was trying to be funny. To break the ice.

Poor Daddy. Forced to live in a trailer like a perpetual snowbird. He couldn't even afford the best treatment for Mom when she got sick. My parents couldn't send my sister and me to MIT where Bill and Betty Tyler sent Steve. They even pushed Steve to play the flute, piano, and clarinet. My folks didn't push me to do anything except look after my little sister Shirley. They left me to find my own way. In fact, I had no idea what I'd do after high school until late senior year when a counselor gave me some practical advice. *Train as a bookkeeper* she said. And I did. But an associate's degree from Mesa Community College is as far as I'll ever go. Had my parents been more like Steve's, I might have followed in the footsteps of Stephens and Catherwood and Hiram Bingham. I'd be going on NatGeo expeditions and writing about the frozen Inca mummies in the Andes.

Muriel! Stop blaming your parents for a crappy start in life I scold myself. *Keep your unpleasant thoughts far away like boats heading out to sea.*

In Nogales I buy Mexican auto insurance. I don't want some Mexican cop to pull me over and toss me in jail before I get started on my journey. Back in Ahwatukee, I didn't have time to work out every detail of this trip. Fortunately, Mexico doesn't require passports from US citizens.

At the border crossing, I wait in line until a customs-inspector ushers me over the border. Evidently, I'm not sounding off any alarm bells. *Welcome to Mexico, Señorita. Bienvenido!*

My first stop along the Pan-Am Highway is Playa Algodones, one of many coves in San Carlos. Last Christmas, Steve, the kids, and I vacationed here at a Howard Johnson's resort. It was my first trip ever across the border.

Typically, Steve and I spend Christmas in California so the kids can enjoy Disneyland. Face it. For Steve, vacation is Intel. It's his life's force, a fact I quickly learned after we married. He works long hours, often on weekends, and his reviews are always "exceeds expectations." I also learned that people assume Steve knows everything there is to know because he's an Intel engineer with an MIT degree. No one ever looks up to me and I doubt they ever will. Friends, family, people in general say to me things like *Nice outfit, Muriel. Where'd you get your nails done? Your hair? Where'd you buy that purse? Those shoes?*

At parties, I did enjoy bragging about Kevin and Kristi like they were my own. But then someone would inevitably turn from me and say something like *By the way, Steve, what do you think about Clinton and Gore? About NAFTA? The Middle East Peace Accords?* This bothered me. I do read a lot, have opinions, and keep abreast of world news. But I can't change everyone's

prejudices and perceptions. Besides, people are right. Steve's the smart one in our marriage. He holds all the cards and manages the finances. His finances. I'm merely a parttime bookkeeper for Blockbuster Videos. But I pushed for Christmas in Mexico. It was finally my chance to venture south of the border.

Now, as I drive into Mexico for the second time in my life, I remember how our Christmas trip to Mexico turned into a complete fiasco. Soon after we arrived we went wading in the surf and a man-of-war stung my foot. It was more painful than a wasp sting and the hotel had to give me first aid. *It's stingray season* the concierge said. *Best to stay out of the surf.* Then Steve and the kids kept messing up the sink in our hotel room. *And why does Steve depend on me to organize his luggage and clean up after everyone? I'm on vacation, too.*

To top everything off, we went for an afternoon drive in Hermosillo and Steve lost his cool in the heavy confusing traffic. He flipped off a Mexican driver in front of the kids and the irate hombre followed us all over the city until Steve pulled over, profusely apologized, and gave the man a hundred-dollar bill.

The incident ruined the rest of our vacation, at least for me. This is when the resentment really took root. I knew I'd never have my own children as long as I stayed with Steve. Before proposing marriage, he told me he needed a mother for Kevin and Kristi but confessed he'd had a vasectomy because Angeline wanted only two children. ***Pregnancy was too hard on her fragile health* he told me.**

At the time, I decided this was all right because I wanted out of Mesa and a way to financially help Daddy. He was in dire straits. Mom's illness had wiped out their savings and the equity in their home. It was a plus that I liked Steve's kids and that he was goodhearted and well-

off. And, for the first time in my life, dating wasn't about sex. The instant family seemed a good fit.

This is what you get, Muriel, for marrying a man for practical reasons! Now I'll never have children of my own unless I find a cure for my condition.

It's nearly dusk when I check-in at the resort. I freshen up then take a taxi to town for dinner, a few drinks and possibly a little romance. There's no reason I should be alone at night during my journey down the Pan Am. I want to live life to its fullest while I still can.

The taxi drops me off at a familiar seafood restaurant perched on a bluff overlooking the bay. The aroma of grilled seafood wafts out the front door. By the entry inside, a man in an embroidered charro suit with metallic buttons is playing a large guitar and singing *Cielito Lindo*. The place is packed with tourists, local Mexicans, and retired snowbirds from the US and Canada. **I doubt they're all RVers, despite Betty's ill-begotten bias. I think many of them live in beachside condos.**

I look around for an empty table feeling self-conscious. It seems everyone is staring at me, **evaluating me, like Betty herself, and** not because I'm attractive but because I'm alone.

The friendly owner shows me to a table at the far corner of the veranda. His nametag reads "Hector" and his flirtatious smile puts me at ease. "You like San Carlos?" he asks.

"Don't you remember me? I was here last Christmas with my husband and kids."

"How could I forget you? Welcome back! *Bienvenido*."

I order what I had last Christmas—shrimp *sarandeado*. My days of dieting are tossed out the window along with a lot of things! Like a supportive husband, lovely children, and good friends. A stable and comfortable life in Ahwatukee. **But really, I had no choice. And now here**

I am again but without my family. *Being alone will strengthen you*, a voice in my head tells me. Eggs me on. *You can choose your own mood. Set your own agenda.*

I nibble chips and salsa and glance at the moonlit bay and the other diners. At the far corner of the veranda, three stylish Mexican women in spike heels sit with a suave man in a white long-sleeved shirt with the cuffs rolled up a few turns. He holds a Motorola cellphone to his ear like an important man. *He epitomizes machismo* I think to myself. Perhaps he's an executive having happy hour with his secretaries. Or, more likely, a drug lord of the Sinaloa Cartel with three of his many girlfriends.

The man sees me. I turn away but glance back. He winks and keeps eying me.

After marrying Steve, I learned to ignore the stares of other men but suspect they were always there. I simply stopped noticing everything around me. Steve and his kids became the center of my world. My incredible universe!

Hector places before me a steaming plate of grilled shrimp. The aroma of garlic, lime, and chili is carnal. While eating, I glimpse at the executive man. He's stopped looking at me. *Were you mistaken Muriel?* I ask myself. *After five years of a vacuous marriage, are you completely out of touch with men?*

When the man and his lady friends head for the exit, one woman looks at me but Senor Machismo doesn't even nod as he passes my table. I'm disappointed. I felt sure we had somehow connected. The least he could do is say *hola!* on his way out.

I lean back on my wooden chair painted with colorful parrots and calla lilies and gesture Hector for another cerveza. Perhaps I'll invite him to my room.

"Todo esta bien, Señora?" Hector asks when he brings me a Modelo.

My Spanish is clumsy and when put on the spot I come up with high school French. “*Ca va bien,*” I say. Hector smiles. He seems charmed by my attempt. But I can’t find the nerve to ask for a ride to my hotel, let alone suggest he join me in bed. I’m feeling inexperienced, shy, and drunk. Perhaps tonight I’m meant to walk alone on the moonlit playa.

I notice a white Toyota Land Cruiser pull up to the restaurant. It’s the same vehicle the machismo man left in with his three lady friends. He’s alone as he enters the cantina and approaches my table with the stance of a powerful man accustomed to having his way.

“Is this seat taken?” he asks with a deep voice and slight accent. He wears the same white dress shirt, although perhaps a fresh one, and he carries his suit jacket over his shoulder. He holds the top of the chair beside me. His hands are big, well-manicured, and he’s wearing a gold wedding band. He doesn’t care.

I nod and say, “*Asseyez vous.* I mean, have a seat.”

Before the man sits, he offers a firm handshake and introduces himself as Javier. He looks in my eyes as he speaks, unlike the typical American man who zooms in on my chest. *Are you imagining this?* I ask myself. *Did he return to join you at your table? Are you having an awakening at playa San Carlos?*

“I’m Mariella,” I say, a little unsteady. Not that this matters to him, I’m sure.

Javier signals Hector for two cervezas then looks at me and says, “I think to myself *Why is such a beautiful señorita dining alone?* I had to return. The moon is full and we can make beautiful love.”

I ask what he does, wondering if he’ll admit to being a head honcho for the cartel. Instead, he suggests he manages the Sonoran Bank in Guaymas. “That’s a beautiful set of green pearls,” He adds, touching my jadeite necklace. “Are you traveling alone?”

I really don't want to explain my situation to him. Or to anyone else for that matter. It's better to reveal nothing. To live day by day and relish each moment I have. **My past is gone and my future is what my present creates.** I do, however, mention my drive to San Carlos from Phoenix.

"You must go to Mexico City, Oaxaca, and the Yucatan," he says just as Hector returns to my table.

"I can drive you to your hotel myself," Hector says. "If you wait an hour."

"*Gracias.*" I grin. "I was planning to walk along the beach under the full moon. *Muy bonito.*"

"Very well. Can I get you anything else? A flan dessert to go? On the house."

I feel sorry for Hector. He looks disappointed. Perhaps he thought I *was* going to invite him to my room, after all. No matter. I really do want to walk on the beach or else drive off with Javier, a man who makes me feel sensual. Hector merely flatters me.

"*La cuenta, por favor,*" Javier says. Hector glances at him and walks away.

Javier turns to me. "The beaches in Mexico aren't safe for a woman alone at night. I'll drive you to your hotel and show you El Mirador viewpoint along the way."

He places his hand on my shoulder. I look into his masterful brown eyes and tingle all over. "And then what?"

"Only as you like, Señorita Mariella. I'm here to please you. Nothing more."

Javier pays my bill and we head for the exit. On the way out, he hands the guitar player a large peso note.

When we arrive at the viewpoint, *la luna llena* shimmers on the dark Sea of Cortez. Javier doesn't kiss me or even pull me near him like I expect him to. It's as if he's easing me into

the night by first showing off the beauty of his native San Carlos. He's nothing like Cliff Turner at Mesa High, the boy who took my virginity in the back seat of his daddy's Duster which smelled like dirty socks. Not like Javier's Land Cruiser which smells of new leather and his aftershave. Perhaps it's Brut.

I make the first move and lean on Javier's shoulder. I can't help myself. I'm drunk with passion. I've never felt this way about Steve. He was shy around me when it came to sex, like he was embarrassed about meeting his own needs. In fact, sex between us was rare and quick. At first, this was a refreshing break from the lustful men I had typically dated, starting with Cliff Turner. *What occurred between Steve and me?* I ask myself. *Does it even matter anymore? I like Javier and we're in the perfect setting.*

At the Howard Johnson's parking lot, Javier covers my shoulders with his jacket to fend off the night's chill. He takes my hand and leads me beyond the nasturtium gardens and grassy sandbanks where crickets are playing their fiddles.

In a secluded spot before the clashing surf, he places his jacket on the sand. He doesn't care if it's ruined. I'm sure he has many and can afford a new one. Then he untangles my jadeite necklace from my hair, unclasps it, and places it in my backpack like a considerate gentleman. Like Steve was most of the time.

As Javier helps me onto his jacket, everything clatters around me and my thoughts make the sound of waves. I look at the dark horizon. Moonlight is touching Isla Venado in the northwest part of the calm bay. Orion and his dogs are locked in their starry world. *Unlike me. I'm free and unleashed. Nothing is pinning me down or locking me away.*

Javier's kiss brings me back to the moment. His touch is warm and comforting, unlike that of Cliff or even Steve. And Javier's a mere stranger. I know nothing about his work, his life, his family, or whether he really is a Sinaloa drug lord.

When Javier ends his kiss, I catch my breath and ask, "Are all Mexican men so macho?"

"*Si, por supuesto.* We are lovers of beautiful women."

We make love and I realize how much I relish what a man can offer me, especially considering I had a terrible first experience and a vacuous marriage. *Face it, Muriel, you've had a passionless life. Until now.*

The next thing I know, Javier is waking me from a dreamless sleep. The moon is nearer to the horizon and I don't recognize any of the stars above. It's as if I'm in another universe. Perhaps I am.

"I must go," Javier says. "I'll see you later today."

As he walks back to his car, I curl up on his jacket and fall asleep until cawing seabirds stir me. I stagger to my hotel room and flop on the bed to sleep away a pounding headache.

Later in the day, I return to the beach to sunbathe and read a *New Yorker* and one of my books on the Aztecs. I plan to lounge all afternoon. After about an hour, while I'm looking at Hubble pictures of the Pillars of Creation in my *New Yorker*, Javier unexpectedly shows up and invites me to lunch at the San Carlos Grill by the marina in town.

When we return to my hotel, Javier moves me into a suite and we make love. He stays until midnight. The next few days are more of the same and I tire of the situation. I have nothing to say to Javier and he has nothing to say to me. We just make love, make love, make love.

Besides, it's time I start looking for a curandero who can offer me a natural cure for my condition. I can't lose sight of the main reason I'm on this journey.

Without bothering to check out, I gather my things and leave the Howard Johnson's. Under gray clouds tumbling inland from the Sea of Cortez, I drive to Guaymas. According to my AAA map, it's about fifteen miles southeast of San Carlos.



Chapter 3: Guaymas

On Mexican Highway 15, lumbering trucks and a few old Chevys shoot past me. Occasionally, I pass tour buses and beat-up sedans. The vast Sonoran landscape with saguaros and scrub brush on rocky hills reminds me of the drive between Phoenix and Tucson, except for the clumps of organ pipe.

Guaymas turns out to be a sizable city with lots of caballeros and Yaqui native inhabitants. I learned about the Yaqui people while delivering food to the poor in Guadalupe, a Yaqui pueblo north of Ahwatukee. When Spanish ships arrived in Guaymas Bay, Yaqui tribes were living in the area. Around 1900, the Mexican government sold them into slavery or sent them on a death march like the US sent the Cherokees on the Trail of Tears. Subsequent wars between Mexicans and Yaquis caused many Yaquis to migrate to the southwest US. In Guadalupe, I met a few Yaqui shamans who make kachina dolls. After learning of my condition, I considered asking one of them for a spiritual and natural cure. But my urge to travel to the end of the world drove me to seek treatment across the border. Guadalupe is too close to home.

Guaymas doesn't have the charm of Hermosillo, I immediately conclude. It's fairly rundown. As soon as I enter the city, boys on the streets eagerly wash my windshield and juggle beanbags at my driver's side window for a small price. Beat-up VW bugs, small Japanese cars, old Thunderbirds, Chryslers, Chevrolets, and lots of old Ford pick-up trucks rumble down the dusty avenues and lanes while honking horns and spewing exhaust.

I turn down Aquilas Serdan, the main street of town, and pass a Pizza Hut and the Sonoran Bank where my Mexican lover supposedly works. I'm not sure I believe he's a bank manager. I still think he's a cartel honcho. In either case, I'd hate to run into him after leaving without a word. As if it really matters.

Down a side street, I pull into the July 15 Park where Yaquis and Mexican caballeros are sitting on green park benches. They're telling stories to one another. One caballero sits by himself, loudly singing like the sparrows in the surrounding palm trees. An old gringo is sprawled out on one of the benches apparently sleeping off his drunkenness. In Phoenix, he'd be a derelict on Van Buren. Here, he's probably an expat beach bum. An old hippie alcoholic who smokes weed.

In the center of the park stands a white gazebo where a woman watches two little girls play on the steps with their dolls. It looks like a safe place to park my Explorer—a family park out in the open. No boys around. Besides, the alarm will go off if anyone tampers with my car. I park across the street from a cathedral and near a vendor selling fired pig skins, sodas, and plastic cups with cut-up coconut, pineapple, and watermelon.

I buy one of his sodas and walk to an American Express, exchange dollars for pesos, and, to be safe, convert nine thousand dollars into traveler's checks. If I lose my cash, I'll have nothing but credit cards and my jadeite necklace. Once I start using my cards, Steve will track

me down even though the cards are in my name and I arranged for the bills to go to a box at Mail or More. I considered using Betsy's address but didn't want to involve her in my plans and tell her about my condition. I just wanted to be on my way.

By the time I finish my business at the bank, rain is pounding the busy street. Along with half a dozen people, I wait at the entry and hope the rain will subside. But it doesn't. The Explorer is only a few blocks away and I need to find lodging or a guarded place to park for the night—perhaps a campground down the road where I can sleep in the car. I don't feel safe driving in Mexico at night.

I cross my arms, bow my head, and dash down the wet slippery street crowded with pedestrians under umbrellas heading home after a day's *trabajo*. As I near the Explorer, I notice three boys in their early teens peering in the windows.

"Stop!" I yell through the rain.

The soaked boys remain at the Explorer ignoring my shouts. They try to open the front passenger door and the alarm goes off but the boys merely giggle, undeterred.

The gringo who was sprawled out on a park bench suddenly appears from the rain. He wears a baseball cap and has a long, drenched braid hanging down his back like a wiggly gray snake; his long gray beard drapes over a soaked SDSU T-shirt. The man begins threatening the boys with his closed umbrella. They laugh at him as they dash away, gesturing and yelling, "*Viejo gringo, hijo de puta!!!*"

I reach the old gringo standing by my car, turn off the alarm with my fob, and say, "*Gracias, señor.*"

The park is nearly empty now except for a few caballeros at the gazabo passively watching the incident at my Explorer. Their day's entertainment, I'm sure.

“Those boys are local thieves.” The gruff old man grins, revealing a missing front tooth. He opens his umbrella. “This is too nice a rig to park here.”

I check around the car for any damage and the man politely holds his umbrella over my head to shield me as I enter the driver’s seat. “Had a nice rig myself once.” He holds the door ajar so I can hear him. “Got stolen in Mazatlán a few years back.”

I gaze at his weathered and bearded face under the Padres cap. He’s a harmless drunk, hungry for company, I think. And he did fend off the pesky boys in such a comical way. I chuckle aloud, feeling grateful, sympathetic, and in need of simple, unimposing company, not a handsome debonair man interested only in making love. “Thanks again, mister.” I smile.

“Name’s Jack Senna. But for thirty years folks’ve been calling me Moby Jack. I once owned a sailboat in San Diego.”

I smile at the old man while thinking that he’s scraping by in Mexico living off a merchant marine’s pension. “All right, Moby Jack,” I say. “Can I buy you some coffee or something to eat? I mean, I really appreciate what you did for me.”

“Well, thank you, ma’am. It was nothing. I’d do it again in a flash. And yes, indeedly, I’ll take you up on your offer. May I suggest cerveza and dinner and a better location to park your Explorer? I know this town, although I can’t say why the hell I’ve been hanging out here this past week. Cheaper than San Carlos. We can go to Los Barcos across from the shipyard. It has great seafood and steaks.”

“Hop in.” I unlock the passenger side feeling ravenously hungry, all of a sudden.

Moby Jack gives me a wide, crusty grin. He swings around and enthusiastically jumps into the passenger side as if embarking on a major event in his life. He’s as wet as I am, but he reeks of alcohol and the stench of a wet shaggy dog.

At Los Barcos we sit at a wooden table with turquoise chairs carved with Mexican folk art. A waiter brings us two Negro Modelos, salsa and chips, and a bottle of tequila for Moby Jack. We order fish dinners and I buy my new friend a pack of Mexican brand cigarettes. It appears he has very little money and I'm feeling increasingly sorry for him. **I'm a compassionate person, perhaps to a fault. Betsy and a few other people have told me this. You let people walk all over you I remember Steve saying once when I dropped what I was doing because the charity I volunteer for asked me to deliver food. Aren't you walking all over me when asking me to do this and that for you and the kids? I asked Steve. This pretty much shut him up at least for a while.**

I smile at Moby Jack and help myself to one of his smokes. The tobacco is harsh, like a cigar. But I like it and I like Moby Jack. Perhaps this is what I've been needing—a little harshness and a crusty old barnacle of a man to take my mind off what's happened to me and what I've done—abandoned my father, husband, and stepchildren. **Maybe I'm showing Steve he can no longer walk all over me. Seems logical.**

Moby Jack belches after rabidly guzzling his beer. "Excuse me." He downs a shot of tequila. "My dad fought in the South Pacific," he says as he sets down his shot glass with a thump. "His wartime adventures inspired my love for the sea." Jack pours himself another shot of tequila. "How about yourself?"

"I'm on a journey down the Pan-American Highway to Tierra del Fuego."

"Hate to spoil your plans, ma'am." Moby Jack downs his shot glass. "But you can't drive straight to Tierra del Fuego. There's no road through Panama to Colombia. Only jungle swamps and a rainforest. It's a *selva espesa* called the Darien Gap."

“Can I ship my car?” I ask with concern. “Or can I hike through this Darien Gap? I want to blaze a trail on Earth from Ahwatukee to Tierra del Fuego. It’s been a dream of mine since childhood.”

“I don’t recommend you trek through the Darien Gap. It’s a haven for drug traffickers, head hunters, cannibals, kidnappers, and terrorists.”

I drink some cold Modelo and sip a shot of Moby Jack’s tequila. “How could there be a gap in the road? Are you sure?”

“Positive, ma’am.”

I already asked Moby Jack to call me Mariella but he seems incapable of calling me anything but ma’am. It makes me feel older than I am. Like I’m his age or something. I don’t bother correcting him because now I’m concerned about what he’s telling me. “I could’ve sworn the Pan-Am was a direct route from Prudhoe Bay to the tip of South America.”

“Nope, ma’am.” Moby Jack eats some chips and I watch the salsa drip onto his showcase beard. “There’s a ferry that takes cars to Colombia. But that’ll cost you.” He sits back as the waiter serves our fresh-caught sea bass grilled with chilies and lime.

With a napkin, Moby Jack wipes beads of sweat across his ruddy brow and asks for another Modelo. *Perhaps he was attractive a long time ago*, I think to myself. *People change. God intervenes. I changed when I turned 16. When I became endowed. I’m changing now.*

I ask my new friend about his situation and his face lights up. “About a month back,” he says. “I took a bus from Tijuana to San Carlos to check out real-estate opportunities. I came to Guaymas last Wednesday to pick up money wired from my oldest boy.” He pauses to take a stiff drink. I think it keeps him going. “A thief stole my money from my pants pocket while I was sleeping in the plaza.”

“That’s terrible,” I say, picturing him in a drunken stupor on a park bench as the same young boys at my Explorer pick through his pockets, probably knocking over his bottle of tequila in the process. And not even waking him.

“You know,” Moby Jack says. “I’ve been planning to go to Costa Rica. I speak Spanish, and if you see fit, I can join you as far as San Jose and watch your car along the way. Sleep outside it at night. With a rig like yours, you’ll never make it past Mexico City. And there’s still a lot of trouble in Chiapas with the Zapatistas demanding their land. I won’t get in your way,” he adds, as if anticipating my thoughts.

I consider the idea but am not sure about having this penniless old man as my constant companion. I’ve got serious things to do, like finding a cure for my condition. And now it seems I must figure out a way around this Darien Gap. I don’t want to adopt Moby Jack and lavish him with alcohol and food. He would most likely be a burden and I’ve just set myself free from burdens and responsibilities. I’m beholden to no one but myself. God? Well, probably not. It seems someone put a curse on me and that someone is most likely God! On the other hand, I feel apprehensive about heading off by myself. “I’ve heard the beaches are magnificent in Costa Rica,” I say.

“That they are, ma’am. I’m hoping to visit an old college chum. Arturo Barrantes teaches astronomy at the University of Costa Rica. He’s a stellar man, if you’ll excuse the pun. My son sent word that Arturo was visiting SDSU and tried to look me up. During our college years, we surfed together and worked as summer crew hands on yachts.”

I nod and encourage Moby Jack to tell me more to distract me from stressing over this gap in the Pan Am.

“Ma’am, I have a graduate degree in physics from SDSU. Had a good job at Honeywell, an expensive house in Del Mar, and a wife who left me after our youngest son turned fifteen.”

“Sorry to hear that,” I say, while thinking she probably left him because of his drinking, But I don’t comment.

“I was a successful man.” He grins.

“What happened?”

“Just fell off the boat, so to speak. Left everything to my wife and kids. Actually, we’re still married and I have an interest in the house. I think Angel, my wife, sold the boat. She lives up in Encinitas with her elderly parents. Guess she needed the boat money for that.”

“But why leave behind all you’ve worked for?” My question makes me think about my own situation. I also left everything behind but hadn’t labored for the money, except for my little parttime jobs from home. Steve had earned it, if that really makes a difference. Maybe it doesn’t. I agreed to marry him and be mother to his kids. I wonder if Moby Jack’s wife kicked him out. Maybe he comes from a tragic past and that’s why he drinks.

“Honeywell gave me early retirement which I grabbed. That’s the money my son sends me. Got no bills otherwise, only taxes, and Jack Jr. handles that. Leastwise, I hope he does.”

“Is that when you let your hair grow long? When you retired?”

“What, my tresses? Nah, I’ve had long hair since the sixties, believe it or not.” Moby Jack takes another drink. His hands are slightly trembling. I wonder if he has Parkinson’s like my dad or if it’s just alcoholism. “I’ve always wanted to see more of Costa Rica,” Jack continues. “Maybe even buy a plot of land down there, if I can pry Junior out of my house so I can sell it. That’s what I’ve been thinking about lately. If you’re game, I won’t be much trouble. And once Junior wires my money, I’ll pay for the gas.”

I take another swallow of Modelo and warm up to the idea of having a traveling companion. He seems harmless enough. But I don't want to eagerly commit to anything. It's my own personal journey and only I can plot it out. Still, I like this old salt. He seems to have plenty of stories to tell. *Call me Ishmael . . . There is a wisdom that is woe.* I remember reading Moby Dick sophomore year at Mesa High. Possibly, Moby Jack once had money and under his crust and rust, he's a man as smart as my engineer husband. But he's deteriorated and now talks with a slobbery slur. He drinks to live, or lives to drink, and I doubt he has a check arriving.

"Actually," I tell him, "I'm ready to return to a beach and relax. I just left the beach in San Carlos and want to see . . . I don't know . . . maybe Acapulco. I'm hoping to find a curandero who can put me on a health regimen. Maybe a health spa. You know, rejuvenation and all that." I of course don't reveal my condition.

"In that case, ma'am," Moby Jack says with great enthusiasm. "May I suggest we head to Mazatlán where my youngest son and his friends are camping along the beach during spring break. Mazatlán's beaches are spectacular and if you're looking for a health spa, there's one there too. Or a curandero. They're everywhere in Mexico. As common as a plumber in the U.S. or language schools in Costa Rica. As for Acapulco, that town is old hat of a bygone Hollywood era. Way overcrowded. You'll fall in love with Mazatlán. I'd bet my youngest son on that!" He laughs and orders Modelos for both of us and another bottle of tequila to go.



Chapter 4: Spring Break in Mazatlán

On a blazing mid-afternoon, I drive down the main street of Mazatlán passing shopping malls, banks, restaurants, and grocery stores. College kids have overtaken the city. Some are riding in the back of Señor Frog's Giftshop trucks parading around town. They hold up beer bottles and shout *yahoo!* Signs posted everywhere read "*Bienvenido*, spring break crowd!"

"This looks crazy." I wake Moby Jack from his slumber. "Why didn't you tell me it would be like this?"

Moby Jack straightens up and wipes the drool from his mouth. "It shouldn't be too bad at the campground. Mostly retired folks go to Mar Rosa. The college kids hit budget hotels or camp on the beach."

Outside the main part of town, we buy liquor at a small, shabby liquor store called Los Manganesos. I then follow signs to Mar Rosa. At the entry, magenta bougainvillea surrounds a stucco sign that reads *Mar Rosa Trailer Campground. El Playa Bonita*. Fortunately, I don't see anything saying "welcome spring-breakers." The campground contains mostly snowbirds with pop-up vans or large RVs. The kind of retired people my mother-in-law looks down on. All the sites are neatly plotted with portable barbecues, lawn chairs, and hammocks strung from coconut palms or tall sea oaks.

Near a path to the beach, an old caballero, the camp guard, approaches the Explorer. He's wearing a straw cowboy hat and carrying a menacing machete. Moby Jack explains to the man that he's looking for his son.

"Well, if it isn't Moby Jack!" A young man with a pocked face approaches the Explorer and greets the guard. He's wearing Texas and cut-offs. His brown hair is slicked back in a

ponytail. “I was playing frisbee on the beach and noticed this awesome Explorer wandering the campground. I knew it had to be you, Pops.”

“Told you I’d catch up one day.” Through the open window, Moby Jack shakes the young man’s hand. “This, Mariella, is my baby boy Eric. But folks have been calling him Lizard since he ate one alive when he was about ten.”

“That was on a dare, Pops.” The young man laughs and punches his dad in the arm.

I pay the camp guard for a night’s stay and for guarding my car. After I park at Lizard’s campsite, we head straight to the beach to join Lizard’s spring break college buddies. The men carry the case of ice-cold cervezas and a box of Monte Alban mezcal tequila, each bottle with a worm inside.

In the dazzling sea, students are parasailing toward three offshore islands. A speedboat splashes through the clapping waves towing a long banana boat carrying reveling students. On the stretch of sloping white sand, young gringos are playing football, frisbee, and volleyball. Many young women are sunbathing in slinky bikinis and thongs.

A beach vendor carries carved ironwood armadillos, lions, and marlins to sell to tourists and an old Mexican woman sells colorful string bracelets. Lizard’s wearing a dozen on each wrist. He sits under a beach umbrella beside a woman with brown shoulder-length hair in tiny braids and beads. Her small breasts are bare and sunburned.

Lizard motions his dad and me to sit on a blanket under the shade then he takes a joint from the bare breasted girl. Along with the reefer, Coppertone permeates the air.

Moby Jack sits but I remain standing. I’m uncomfortable with this group of young vagabonds smoking weed. In Mexico! I don’t want to die in a Mexican jail and never reach my destination. That would be a dark Shakespearian tragedy. Or, more likely, one by Sophocles.

Antigone in fact, a Greek tragedy I slogged through in high school English, along with Melville's Moby Dick. I don't want my life to turn out pathetic. Or stupid. Like Antigone who was given a death sentence for wanting to bury her brother. Then she hung herself in a cave.

"Mariella," Moby Jack says, awakening me from my thoughts. He nods at the bare breasted woman. "This is Lizard's girlfriend, Ashley."

"I call her Cinnamon." Lizard smiles. "She's the spice of my life."

She seems too attractive for Lizard I'm thinking as I detect a slight smile on Cinnamon's face. I can't be sure. It might be a shadow.

"Cinnamon and I skipped a semester at USD," Lizard explains. "To surf along the coastline. We got bored with classes and needed a break." He glares at me and takes a hit off his joint. "Sit down."

"In a bit. I've been sitting all day." I rub my back.

"They're both majoring in astrophysics," Moby Jack remarks with pride. He lies on his back and props his head on a piece of driftwood like an ancient mariner on his barrel of whiskey—*as idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean*. "And she's spoiled rotten," Moby Jack continues. "But so's Lizard. That's why they're made for each other. I spoiled my kids with too much play money."

Lizard and Cinnamon pay him no mind. They're too involved with each other, at the moment. In love, I guess, or maybe just high.

A barefoot Mexican boy in loose white trousers approaches with a green iguana peering over his shoulder. "You want a picture, sister? Only five dollars." The iguana turns its head and stares at me.

"Scram, you little shit!" Lizard hides his joint.

“He’s been here three times today.” Cinnamon is leaning on her elbows squinting at me.

“I ought to buy the poor thing and let it go.”

“Or let my son eat it,” Moby Jack says and everyone laughs. His shirt is off now, revealing a chest of nappy gray hair. He’s already downed most of his bottle of mezcal tequila.

“Sit, Mariella.” He playfully motions me beside him.

I sit but really want to turn around and drive away. I don’t like Moby Jack’s pocked-face son and I find his bare-breasted girlfriend snobbish and weird. But I drink a cold Pacifico and try to relax so I can clearly decide whether or not to stay with this group of spring breakers.

Although I’m now somewhat wayward myself, I don’t feel obligated to do anything I don’t want to do. I don’t owe anyone any allegiance, especially strangers. I guess in a way I *am* like Antigone.

“We could rest here for the night,” Moby Jack suggests as if sensing my concern. “Then head straight to Costa Rica in the morning.”

“Costa Rica?” Lizard turns to me. “What’s this old fool been telling you?”

“I told her about Arturo,” Jack says.

“Barrantes?” Lizard sucks on his roach as if he’s in the Andes desperate for air.

“None other. I thought I’d take him up on his invite. Got a problem with that, Son?” Jack suddenly rises and playfully wrestles with Lizard, kicking sand on me in the process. I brush it off and look down the beach, trying to ignore them. When I look back, Lizard’s releasing his old man from a neck hold. He then lights a joint and hands it to me.

I shake my head and glance around the camp for the machete-carrying camp guard who might be watching us. Certainly, city police are out in full force during this rowdy week, maybe even the federales.

Lizard shrugs and passes the joint to his father. Jack deeply inhales then holds it out for me. “Don’t worry.” He releases a puff of smoke. “People are cool around here as long as we’re cool. It’s good bud. Will help you relax.”

I sit back and look at old Moby Jack. I haven’t smoked pot since before I got married. Steve never even smoked a cigarette, let alone pot, and I would never smoke marijuana around him. I’m suddenly feeling a bit daring and take a hit, although not as deeply as Lizard or Moby Jack.

Cinnamon looks at me as if first noticing my presence. “Where are you from, honey?”

Being called “honey” by someone young enough to be my daughter annoys me but the warm sun is soothing, the cerveza cooling, and the pot stimulating. I loosen the buttons of my blouse and consider sunbathing bare breasted. *Wouldn’t that draw attention?* I look at Cinnamon who seems to be waiting for my response. “I’m from Arizona, darling,” I tell her.

When the sun nears the horizon north of the offshore islands, seagulls and pelicans soar across the reddening sky and three other young men who had been playing frisbee join us at the beach fire. No one introduces them to me, which is fine. I don’t really care to know them. It’s not like I’m a spring breaker.

As I silently watch the sun sink into the sea, Lizard suddenly interrupts my tranquility. “Hey, lady,” he says to me. “Why don’t we pile into that Explorer of yours and drive to Playa Sabalo? It’s a deserted beach. We can all go skinny dipping under the stars.” He pinches his girlfriend’s slender thighs.

“I don’t know about that,” I respond. “Are we talking about all six of you?” No one answers and I let the question slide, hoping Lizard is too wasted to remember his idiotic idea.

But within ten minutes I'm pushing aside my duffle bag of books in the back of the Explorer and Moby Jack and five spring break revelers pile inside with blankets, sleeping bags, alcohol, and food.

Moby Jack offers to drive and I quickly shut him down. I feel sober enough to drive my own car and I don't trust anyone else to do so. Maybe I feel a need to watch out for everyone else. As if the responsibility has somehow fallen on me. Maybe I am a push over as Steve seems to think. I let people walk all over me. Take advantage of my compassionate heart. I don't know but at least I'm not careless. Or am I?

It's dark by the time we arrive at the secluded cove before the murmuring sea. Cinnamon sets out cold chicken for dinner while the men and I gather wood using flashlights.

Moby Jack suddenly appears beside me and places a hand on my waist. His other hand holds a tequila bottle. "How are you feeling, Mariella? You've been rather quiet tonight." He swallows his mezcal.

"I think it's the pot. I'm not used to it." I'm stumbling with words because I can barely manage whatever is going on in my head.

"That'll do it." Jack takes my hand.

A shift suddenly occurs in my mood. I don't have any interest in Moby Jack. I no longer care to know him personally. He's become a remote Steinbeck character adrift on the Cortez Sea. I have no attraction to the man holding my hand as if I'm his girlfriend, as if he's clinging to the last moments of his life.

I search my foggy mind for something to say. *What the hell are you doing, Muriel? Moby Jack disgusts you. Get out of this situation.* I release his grip and walk to the surf for solitude. I wade to where the water hits my calves while trying to recall, in the haze of my mind, where I'm

headed and what I'm doing. I feel like I'm in an awakening, in a Kate Chopin novel. Am I Edna Pontellier? Are my wings strong enough to fly?

I think about the NatGeo picture of the frozen Inca boy that I shared with my 6th grade class. Recently, at my in-laws' house, I relocated that picture and studied it, amazed at how the child had died in a glacial crevice and remained there for centuries until he was discovered and placed in a museum in Chile. I want to be that child. Left alone. Frozen in time on top of the world. I don't want to die like Edna or Antigone. And I don't want to be anyone's sacrifice.

I gaze at the dark clashing waves, hear voices from behind, and continue walking in the surf, not looking back to see if Moby Jack is following me. I no longer care about him. I don't care about anybody. As soon as my head clears, I'll move on, most likely alone.

The shouts of men and the shrill of a woman grab my attention. Cinnamon, Lizard, and his three buddies are running naked into the water. Moby Jack is running toward me, yelling, "Come on, babe! Let's go!"

The festive energy seems to pass through the sea and ensnare me, instantly changing my mood. Moby Jack reaches me and hands me the tequila bottle. "Come on, girl! The night's happening!" He stands before me, stark naked under the quarter moon and stars. The sight of his long grey beard and glittering eyes makes me laugh.

I swallow the strong alcohol, enjoying its warmth oozing down my throat like the pleasure of smoking a cigarette. I'm alive! I'm still among the living! I strip off my blouse and shorts. Moby Jack throws them ashore then bellows and ambles farther into the waves.

Even Cinnamon blossoms with excitement, making an incredible transformation. "Hey, Maria!" she yells, forgetting my name. "Come farther out!"

I follow Moby Jack into higher waves. He's holding up his tequila bottle and shouting nonsense. I suddenly remember my attraction to him. He conjures a sense of being in love with the moment at hand. Or, at least, being under the influence.

Jack tosses his tequila bottle to Lizard who tosses it to one of his friends. When they tire of this game, Moby Jack pulls me around him in a dance. The moonlight catches his bearded grin with a missing tooth.

Moby Jack awakens sensations that pulsate throughout my body. He's a companion and nothing more until I feel ready for more. *He must have had a long, difficult life*, I think in my fuzzy mind. *A life that gives him the power to thrill me like the Phoenix Symphony. He must have learned from someone that to truly be with a woman means to love her when she aches for love then to fade into the background until she desires you again.* Steve never had a clue. Or else he didn't want to relive the passion he once had with his first wife, Angeline, his true soulmate and the birth mother of his children.

Moby Jack embraces me. I'm as drunk as he is. Then, without warning, a tremendous wave knocks me down. I struggle up, gulping salty water, and look around for Moby Jack. Another wave hits me in front and, at the same time, someone grabs my waist and pulls me down again. I scream in surprise but know it's Jack from the feel of his long seaweed beard against my neck. Giggling, I sit on his lap, tantalized by his touch. I playfully free myself and shove him back in the water.

"Are you having fun, Mariella?" Jack's beard is dripping wet and his long gray braid dangles over his shoulder.

I laugh and he pulls me against him. His strength snares me. At first, he kisses me like a friend then his bristly lips probe my neck and face.

I'm astonished that his wild, pulsating kiss is magnificent.

"I'm afraid I won't be of much use," he confesses, still clenching me in his arms and shielding me against the splashing waves. "I no longer operate."

I don't care, I'm thinking. I want him to take me wherever he can in this romantic moment in the surf. Take me on an epic seafaring voyage, somewhere I'd never go without you! That somewhere is now—this very moment that makes me thirst in a thriving sea of waves.

In the moonlight shining over the sea, Moby Jack leads me to shore. We put on our clothes and return to the blazing bonfire. Lizard and the others are already at the fire, eating, drinking, and smoking weed. They have their sleeping bags and blankets laid out for the night.

Moby Jack provides a little privacy for me and spreads out a blanket about eight feet from the bonfire and everyone else. Lizard lights another joint and passes it around with a bottle of mezcal. When it's handed to Moby Jack, he gets up and retrieves it.

As Jack puffs on the joint, I sit comfortably beside him and stroke his bare back. *He's extravagant. More exciting than anyone I've ever known.* More than Javier. Certainly, more than Steve could ever wish to be in his wildest dreams. *Moby Jack pulls me back and forth between insanity and reason.*

"I can't tell you how young you make me feel," Jack whispers in my ear as he holds me. His bristles find my neck again. "You're the young maiden of quetzal feathers and flowers. Xochuquetzel."

"Don't get carried away, Moby Jack!" Lizard remarks from across the crackling flames. Everyone laughs, including Moby Jack.

“This is fun,” I whisper to Jack. “But I’m not sure I care for these young spring break drifters of yours. To be honest, they bother me, especially Cinnamon. There’s something about her I don’t like. She’s snooty.” I look over at the bonfire to make sure Cinnamon isn’t listening.

Moby Jack opens a new bottle of Monte Alban and suggests we “fiesta” in Mazatlán tonight and take off in the morning. “For now, I want to please the hell out of you.” He strokes my face with his rough hand.

I reassure myself that Moby Jack’s not seriously thinking of “getting down” in front of everyone else. *No. He’s already admitted he’s impotent. And he can’t be that big of a clown, no matter how drunk or wasted he is.* To my relief, Jack becomes lost in the beach party—in his drinking, smoking, and rapping with the spring breakers, while I, his little quetzal flower maiden, lie down on the blanket, rest my head on Jack’s leg, and gaze at the Milky Way over the Cortez Sea. A shooting star crosses the sky.

“You know. I’ve been reading about the Aztecs,” I say. “They thought shooting stars were gods smoking cigars.”

“That’s true, Maria,” Cinnamon says. I see her through the roaring flames of the bonfire snuggled with Lizard. “The Aztecs had 13 realms in their cosmos, their astrophysical world. They thought comets and shooting stars came from the fifth realm.”

“Yeah,” says one of the spring breakers. I still don’t know their names other than dude or bro as Lizard tends to call them. They all call Lizard, Lizard and Moby Jack Pops. “The Aztecs believed snakes shot the smoking stars from the fifth realm. As a bad omen.”

“Bad Ass!” someone says. I really can’t see who but he makes us all chuckle.

“Who’s the Aztec god of the Milky Way?” I ask, knowing someone in the group must know. From the discussions I’ve been hearing, they all know the history of Mexico as much as Cinnamon and Lizard know their astrophysics.”

“Star Skirt lives on the Milky Way serpent,” Cinnamon says. I glance at the fire and see she’s stilled cuddled with Lizard. “Her Aztec name is Citlālīcue and her lover, Smoking Mirror, is god of the night sky. He holds up a mirror to show us our true nature.”

“That’s lovely,” I say, feeling dreamy from the weed. My heads spinning with curiosity, with a hunger to learn about everything. I guess it’s the munchies for knowledge, I chuckle to myself and scope the Milky Way serpent for this smoking mirror. “There it is,” I say and point straight overhead at a dark patch in the Aztec snake of stars. “I can see this mirror reflecting me as a tiny little speck on Earth.”

“Right on, lady,” Lizard remarks after he passes a joint to one of the dudes. “What’s really trippy is the 9th realm of the Aztec cosmos. It’s where bright light swirls and spins and spirit women live.”

“Spirit women?” I ask. “I like that.”

“They’re called the Tzitzimime,” Cinnamon says more to Lizard than to me.

“Tsunami?” I ask while gazing at the Milky Way, trying to imagine all these cosmic realms the Aztec created in their minds.

“Cute. But no,” Cinnamon continues. “These spirit women are the Tzitzimime although maybe they’re like a tsunami.”

“That’s right, babes,” Lizard picks up where his girlfriend left off. “During a solar eclipse these Tsunami women barrel down to earth to wreak havoc particularly to men. The Aztec believed that one day the Tzitzimime would end the human race.”

“Why is it always the female who corrupts the male?” I ask, making Moby Jack chuckle.

“No. I mean really. Like Adam and Eve and the forbidden apple. The bible teaches that Eve brought sin to Adam. Corrupted him. And, what’s worse, that she came from his rib to be his little helper.” My remark makes everyone burst out laughing. I do too but am reminded of the role I played as Steve’s wife. What was I trying to accomplish with my life as his wife? Whatever it was it wouldn’t have worked out in the end even if I didn’t have this condition to contend with.

“No Lizard, dear,” Cinnamon says. “You have it wrong. The Tzitzimime were actually beautiful spirit women. Their leader was the butterfly goddess Itzpapalotl. During a solar eclipse Itzpapalotl sent her flock of Tzitzimime spirit women to surround the sun as butterfly stars. As the stars that appear when the eclipse is at its maximum.”

“I love this image,” I say. “It’s as spectacular as the Pillars Of Creation.” I suddenly feel a kind of connection with the only other woman at our bonfire beach party. But only slightly. Cinnamon is nothing like Betsy.

“Right. Hubble.” Someone says. One of the spring breakers in the crowd.

“Okay, babes,” Lizard says. “I’ll give you that. But after totality when the moon continues on its orbit, the Tzitzimime attack the sun, descend to Earth and send men to the 9 places of hell.”

“I’ve read a about these 9 hells,” I say once I stop laughing with everyone else. The weed and alcohol are making me giddy. “Mictlan reminds me of Dante’s Inferno and the 9 Circles of Hell. It’s interesting that Dante died shortly after the Aztecs founded their city Tenochtitlan. Do you think there’s some kind of connection? Or is it just one of those cosmic coincidences, like the Aztecs predicting the return of Quetzalcoatl the very year Cortez invades their shores?”

“Could be part of the collective consciousness at the time.” Moby Jack suddenly sets down his bottle and enters the discussion. I thought he had fallen asleep. “In the Aztec worldview, the dead had to cross a treacherous river before entering Mictlan. Those who didn’t drown, entered the 9 places of hell.”

“How can they drown if they’re already dead?” I think to ask. Everyone burst out laughing.

“Good point,” Lizard picks up where his dad left off. “In my opinion, and I’m just saying, the 9 places of hell is a psychological mural of the human journey into the depths of consciousness.”

“That’s heavy, man,” a breaker remarks.

“I know. The journey of life is a struggle toward understanding of ourselves, our consciousness.”

“What? I thought we were talking about Mictlan and the 9 hells,” one of the spring breakers remarks. I’m getting the impression that not everyone in the group is as bright and knowledgeable as Lizard and Cinnamon. I don’t think they’re all students in astrophysics. One may be a fine arts major, another a student of economics. I think they’re all childhood pals of Lizard. But I don’t ask because I couldn’t care less. And they don’t seem that interested in me. I feel like I’m kind of a tag along. Maybe they see me as an intruder or a party crasher. But I’m fascinated with what everyone has to say about Aztec cosmology.

“The journey through the 9 hells is about learning from difficulties. Learning to use the powers you can control, the resources you have at your disposal. Your intelligence, in other words,” Cinnamon says like she’s up on Lizard’s train of thought, his brain waves.

“What happens to dead if they make it to Mictlan? In this Aztec philosophy,” I ask as I adjust my spot on Jack’s lap to get more comfortable. It seems he’s fallen back asleep. “Do the good people end up in one of the 13 heavenly realms?”

“No, quetzal flower.” Moby Jack suddenly comes awake and starts petting my head. His touch suddenly annoys me for some reason. But I keep my head rested on his leg and continue to gaze at the sky and listen to Lizard’s story.

“In the Aztec world,” Lizard says. “Everyone goes to hell except warriors and women who die in childbirth, or babies or drowned people. They have a one-way ticket to heaven.”

“How sad,” I say and sit up to drink from my bottle of Pacifico. And to back away from Jack. “Then the people who drown when crossing the river before the 9 hells are better off.”

“Good point, Mary,” Cinnamon says while looking straight at me. I see her face through the bonfire like she’s in one of the places of hell. It’s an eerie thought.

“What were these 9 places of hell?” one of the breakers ask.

“First was the Place of Dogs at the river bank,” Lizard says. “And this is kind of cool. People who loved dogs in life, like I do. . .”

“No son, you love lizards.” Moby jack interrupts and makes everyone roar with laughter.

“Right pops. But seriously, those who love dogs are treated well in the first place of hell and they pass through smoothly. Those who were mean to dogs during life. Well, the dogs have their revenge. The dog god Xoloit guides the dog lovers through the next 8 realms.”

“I like that. But would I pass through? Will Xoloit guide me?” I ask in jest. “I’ve never owned a dog. I’m more of a cat person. Or will I find Dante’s guide the Roman poet Virgil?”

“I’m sure Xoloit will guide you too, Mariella. Because you’re a quetzal flower,” Moby leans my way and whispers to me. He’s becoming too attached to me and this in itself makes me

uncomfortable, despite my giddiness. I don't like feeling possessed, not on this new phase of my life, on my journey along the Pan Am. And I'm just getting started. I wiggle away from him like I need to stretch, then sit against my own driftwood log.

"You get the point, lady," Lizard continues. "In the second place of hell the dead navigate through colliding mountains. It means we must measure our steps and calculate the right moment to proceed."

"Or you're fucked," one of the breakers cracks us all up.

"**The third** place is of howling winds where storms of obsidian blades strip the dead of whoever they once were while alive."

"Can't they hide from these storms?"

"There's no shelter in the 9 hells. The dead must navigate through the shards and ignore the wind."

"In other words," Cinnamon picks up where Lizard left off. "Don't let the world scare you from your chosen path. Knock you off track. It's the same as the fourth place of raining arrows but here the dead proceed in pitch darkness."

"Like moving forward in blindness," I suggest. "And what if an arrow pierces them? Oh yeah, I forgot. They're already dead. Right?"

"You got it quetzal flower," Moby Jack again whispers to me as he scoots beside me at my log and puts his arm over my shoulders. It's like he doesn't want to let me slip away. It's certainly not to keep me warm because the fire's blazing and the late evening's still warm.

"What's the fifth place?" I ask when the laughter quiets down. The alcohol reeking from Jack's breath is stifling. I want to get up and completely move away from him but I don't want to disrupt the enthralling discussion.

“In the fifth place of hell the ground shifts beneath your steps,” Lizard continues. “Like in a fun house at the county fair.”

“Yes,” I say. “My folks used to take me and my sister the Maricopa County fair. We loved the bending mirrors in the fun house that made us look thin and fat at the same time.”

“The fifth hell is where you struggle for balance. If you lose your step, you’ll tumble into the abyss,” Cinnamon suggests. I look over at her snuggled with Lizard and wonder if Moby took a cue from his son. To make a move on me. I don’t know. So many things are spinning in my head like I’m in the Aztec fun house. I’m intrigued with the discussion while wondering what Moby’s doing and how I really feel about him while knowing I’ve just left my family and home because of an incurable condition I hope to cure. “It’s insanity,” I say aloud after calming my mind enough to think.

“Point is,” Lizard continues. “If you fall pick yourself up and move on to the next torment, the sixth place of the Aztec hell where monsters lie in wait ready to pounce on you and devour your heart.”

“For the Aztecs,” Cinnamon now says. “The heart is our lifeforce. Our spirit. Or as some say, our soul”

“Love it,” I say. “Wonder why we think all our mental capacity is in the brain? Maybe we’ve got it wrong.”

“Because we’re dead heads,” a breaker says to stir laughter.

“The seventh place crushes the dead heads,” Lizard continues after the laughter dies down. “And breaks them into quantum particles. To pass through this realm, the grateful dead must abandon all ties to their mortal lives. Reduce themselves to their basic essence. It’s like the

Buddhist concept of emptiness. When we're broken down to our vital self, we become delusion free."

"Are you sure you're not an astro philosopher," I ask as Jack starts kissing my neck. Now he's truly a nuisance and I scoot from him again and stretch out my legs.

"Maybe an astro cosmologist. I love Mexico's heritage. I love the Aztec worlds. That's all. A journey through the 9 Aztec hells is about forgetting past trauma and abuse. And bad karma. Past regretful deeds."

"This sounds like a good place to enter," I say. "I need to forget about a lot of things in my past."

"People? You mean?" Cinnamon asks. "Are you escaping something Marilyn? Did you leave your husband or boyfriend?"

"No. I'm just saying." Cinnamon's caught me off guard because she's spot on about me. "I think everyone's had a shitty childhood, don't you?"

"Lizard doesn't think so, right son?" Moby says and takes a swig of his tequila maybe to shield his clumsiness with me.

"Right on, Pops."

"Neither do I," Cinnamon says. "I had a great childhood and am having the time of my life now. With my incredible man." She and Lizard start locking themselves in another kiss.

"What about the next place," I ask when I see, through the flaming bonfire, Lizard come up for air from his kiss.

"Yeah right, the 8th place is the most severe. It's where suffocating smoke obscures our path, chokes our breath, and makes the way forward difficult to see."

"Sounds like when we really need our guide dog Xolotl. Or Virgil the poet. Right?"

“Right on. Except in the 8th hell, we’re on our own without Xolotl or a poet guiding us.”

“Why’s that?” a breaker asks.

“Because when we conform and follow someone else’s lead, we surrender our individuality, our inner strengths and wisdom, and we become useless to ourselves. We give our powers to others rather than using them to our own advantage or for our survival.”

“We need to think by our own accord or we merely slip into a role,” I suggest remembering how glued I had been to Steve and his ways. I didn’t like being his little side kick. His “better” half as he sometimes put it. It never built me up, empowered me. Never made me feel good about my self-worth.

“Well put, quetzal flower,” Moby says as if he’s read my mind. He gives me a hug I don’t need or want at the moment. I’m interested in the conversation I’m having with his son. I want to push him away, but don’t want to be bluntly rude. I reach for my warm Pacifico to free myself from Moby’s embrace. “There’s one more place,” I say and distract my thoughts from the crusty old barnacle smothering me with unwanted affection. “The ninth. In Dante’s *Inferno* the ninth circle is where scammers with their limbs cut off and forgers with STDs go. Bad people with bad conditions. At the center of this circle, Virgil and Dante meet Lucifer then claw their way back to Earth to see the stars like those shining above us now. What’s the 9th place like on this Aztec’s philosophical or psychological journey?”

“A place of 9 vast lagoons,” Cinnamon says as she stokes the fire with a driftwood branch. “Deep and endless waters. The end of the journey is the place of our deep and endless mind. If we make it through all the trials of life, we reach the wisdom of knowing ourselves as a part of this world.”

“That’s brilliant, babes” Lizard says. Past the flames I see him and Cinnamon once again lose themselves in a passionate kiss

“There’s no devil?” asks one of the breakers.

“Nope,” Lizard says as he breaks from Cinnamon. “There’s no Virgil no Xolotl no Lucifer or Gabriel at the pearly gates. If we make it through the 9 Aztec hells, we stand before the lord and lady of Mictlan. The self. It’s all about facing yourself. Knowing yourself in a world of torment chaos and destructive forces.”

“I like your interpretation,” I say. “Even more than the Milky Way mirror. Although, maybe the mirror of Smoking Mirror reveals the same thing.”

Moby Jack scoots beside me once again and whisper in my ear, “What’s that, Mariella?”

I inch away. The old man has become an albatross around my neck. Was Steve one a few months ago? Or is it strictly my own precarious condition. It becomes eerily quiet. For a moment or two I hear only crickets and the sound of waves as I try to clear my head of what’s going on with me and Moby Jack.

“Right on, lady,” Lizard then breaks the silence. “The Aztecs were a trippy people on psychedelics like peyote, mushrooms, mescaline, and psilocybin. Even their gods were strung out on acid.”

Everyone bursts into laughter, including myself. I inch farther from Moby and lean back on a different log like an old mariner myself while feeling a lot more respect for this spring break crowd, at least for Lizard and the spice of his life. They’ve really stimulated my thoughts about what I’m doing on my journey down the pan am. And they’ve given me a new perspective on the Aztec cosmology.

“The moon is high among the Milky Way gods across the celestial sphere,” I say and look to see what Moby Jack’s doing. I’m relieved to see he’s talking with his son. After such a philosophical discussion, I need some quiet time to myself. Maybe that’s all I’m feeling about the ancient mariner. And I believe he senses this and doesn’t want to smother me with his old man lovey dovey. He wants to go to Costa Rica with me.

As I gaze at the constellations, trying to remember their Greek and Arab names, the configurations begin shapeshifting into Aztec gods in brilliant, sharp colors, with fangs, belts of snakes, necklaces of skulls, and tongues hanging out. *They’re violent gods who demand blood sacrifice* I can’t help but think. Maybe all gods are cruel and violent. Since my prognosis, I’ve been feeling like the god who took my mother from me, cursed me to die like a sacrificial victim. Like the Inca boy in the Andes. **I didn’t curse myself. And I alone embarked on this journey hoping to survive** long enough to make it to the end of the world.

I turn from the sky and listen Moby Jack and Cinnamon discuss stellar dynamics as an offshoot of the Aztec gods. It’s a conversation over my head and I dreamily return to star gazing. I’m about to doze off when suddenly, out of the darkness, a man shouts, “*Manos, Arriba!*”

I look at the others in the firelight. Everyone appears startled and sobered up.

A flashlight shines in my face. A man shouts, “*Su dinero, gringos!*”

The flashlight shines on Lizard’s face. Three Mexican intruders hover at the fire. One has a gun pointed at Lizard’s friend. They appear to be teenage boys.

Jack motions me to keep still as the bandits shuffle through the bags around the fire. Everyone’s frozen in place as they take watches, cameras, and wallets.

“Let me at least get my film,” Lizard says after the bandit grabs his SLR camera which he brought to take night shots of everyone skinny dipping, although he forgot to do so.

“Shut up, gringo!” A bandit points his gun at Lizard’s mouth.

“Do as they say, boy,” Moby Jack admonishes. “They mean business.” He moves over to where I’m now sitting up and tightly holds me as if to protect me. I’m too startled myself to push him away.

“That’s right, *Viejo!* Do as we say!” The light beams on Moby Jack’s face, on mine again, then back to Jack’s.

“Give him the film,” I say, pulling myself from Jack’s protective embrace.

“You sleep with your daughter, *Viejo?*” The bandits burst into laughter, as if they too, are high on intoxicants. Maybe they’re drunk. I can’t tell. Tequila and alcohol reeks from everyone’s breath and pores.

One bandit approaches me and pulls a long Mexican bowie knife from his waistband. He taunts me and Moby Jack with the blade, stroking my hair and running the blade down to my chest. I don’t move as I tell myself *Have no fear. You’re going to die anyway. DIE BRAVELY.*

I stare at the young bandit, daring him to continue. After a moment, he stops taunting me and grabs my bag defiantly. Fortunately, I hid most of my cash and traveler’s checks under the front carpet of the Explorer. In a hidey hole I made.

“What’s this?” The bandit finds my keys.

Moby Jack, Cinnamon, Lizard and his buddies remain seated, speechless. To everyone’s astonishment, including my own, I stand and say, “They’re keys to that Explorer.” I point toward the road beyond the sandbank. “Take it, why don’t you? Just go away! And give him back his film. You don’t need it.”

“What did you say, *Putita?*” the bandit asks.

“I said, give him back the film.” I’ve never felt so bold. So alive. So uncaring about my mortality.

One of the Mexicans translates what I’ve said and the man holding the camera grabs the gun from his *compañero*. He approaches to frighten me. “What did you say?”

“Mariella, stop it!” Lizard implores. “I don’t want the film. Really.”

“Sweetheart.” Jack stands and takes hold of my hand to pull me back down beside him. “Please. Let’s not fool around here, babes.”

“Sit down, *Viejo!*” the bandit yells. Moby Jack stoops back down.

“No, it’s all right.” I peer at Moby sympathetically. “These fools are just boys. I don’t care because *it doesn’t matter*. I’m high. I saw the Aztec gods among the stars. I’ve already traveled through the 9 Aztec hells. I can wait for the bandits to give up or shoot me. What happens will happen. I’m living in a moment of eternity.”

“I said, sit down!” the bandit runs the gun under my chin, poking my neck.

“No.” I gaze at him, dare him. He’s nervous, an amateur. He’s frightened of a situation out of his control. I see it in his eyes lit by our bonfire. “How many times have you done this?”

“Stop, Mariella,” Moby Jack pleads.

“I don’t want the film,” Lizard insists.

“Mary, back off,” Cinnamon speaks out, along with the other college kids. Everyone’s begging me to sit down.

“No! I won’t!” I have no control over my words. They just fall from my tongue like a shooting star slung by snakes in the darkness. Like I’m in the fifth layer of the Aztec cosmos which is also a realm of hell.

The bandit stares at me then he backs away. His companion holds up my keys like a trophy and accidentally presses the red “panic” button on the fob. Immediately, the Explorer’s horn honks, the headlights flash, and the alarm wails just as it did in Guaymas. This terrifies the bandits. They think the policia have arrived and drop my keys and dash down the beach.

While the horn is still blaring, I gather my keys. The robbery was, without a doubt, the single most exhilarating event of my life. I now know what adrenaline is. It’s a rush more fantastic than any drug could possibly be. Peyote, mescaline, LSD, step aside! I’m immortal, alive, at the pinnacle of life. I’m peering over the world like a god. Like the Aztec gods who shapeshift and transform according to the situation. To the momentary need. To the particular place. I don’t know what tomorrow might bring or what I might do, but for now, I feel vital and want to keep feeling this way. It’s as if I’ve cured my condition.

“Are you all right?” Moby Jack reaches me and gives me a hug. I don’t want the hug or the reassurance the old man offers, so I ease him away and shut off the alarm.

“Let’s get out of here and report this,” I urge. “Before they come back.”

The others are already gathering their things and heading for my car.

At the Oceano Palace Hotel we call the police to report the theft then return to Mar Rosa. It’s sunrise and nobody feels sleepy so we sit around the camp patio and listen to Lizard lament over the loss of his film. “Money, you can replace,” he says. “But not pictures. And I had some damn good shots of Cinnamon standing along the surf at sunset. Man, oh man! What a shame!”

“Forget about it.” Cinnamon stands. “I’m sleepy now and am going to lie down in the tent. Lizard, are you coming?” He follows close behind the spice of his life and his spring breaker pals head to their respective pup tents.

At the picnic table, I remain seated for a moment and watch Moby Jack drink his tequila. He's slouched against a coconut palm, holding the bottle at his chest. He hasn't said much to me since the robbery, except for how brazen I'd been. In fact, I've been ignoring him since then, finding him tiresome. Not full of vigor and merriment. Perhaps Moby Jack thinks it's best now to remain aloof and keep his peace? No matter how foolish I was during the robbery, no matter how much I risked everyone's life, he probably doesn't want to jeopardize our relationship or alienate me from him in any way. He wants to go to Costa Rica with me.

I get up and head to the Explorer where the camp guard with the machete is standing. We told him about the robbery and he feels obligated to see that my car remains safe at the Mar Rosa Trailer Campground. I hand him ten dollars and say, "*Gracias.*" He nods but says nothing as he stuffs the bill in his shirt pocket.

The Explorer's engine purrs to a start. I glance over at the camp. Moby Jack hasn't budged from the palm trunk where he's still slouched. He's staring at me, as he so often does, even if his eyes aren't really seeing me. I suspect he's asleep in a drunken stupor but I can't tell for certain.

I look at my AAA map and decide to head for Guadalajara. Or maybe I'll continue down the coast to Puerto Vallarta or even to Acapulco. I'm not sure.



Chapter 5: Sun City West

A week passes since Muriel went missing. Steve's anger surprises him. He's basically calm and levelheaded, except during heated Intel meetings. All the nuances of his wife's disappearance are getting to him. The police seem to think things weren't right between him and Muriel. Every time Steve calls the precinct, their questions imply he's the reason his wife left, that he's a cad, or worse, that he's somehow a suspect in her abduction and murder.

Steve parks his titanium Taurus GL at the curb of the beige stucco house with Spanish tiles and a yard of white rock and two queen palms. As with every house in the Del Webb retirement and golf club community, not a single stone is out of place. A sealcoating as clean as the kitchen floor inside covers the driveway before the three door garage.

Steve approaches the front door of his parents' house, feeling more helpless than when growing up in Buffalo and his younger brother fell from the schoolyard slide and broke his arm. Little Stevie, as his parents called him then, could do nothing but stand there and watch his mother gather up his screaming brother.

Steve's brother lived in Buffalo until he died of leukemia about ten years ago. He was a bachelor and a patent attorney. Now Steve and his parents are living in the Sunbelt, which is a good thing. Steve needs his mother's help now like he did when Angeline unexpectedly died.

He rings the doorbell, worried his parents are concerned about this unexpected visit during a workday. At their age, he wants to be with them when he break the news. They're fond of his second wife and their grandchildren's stepmother. The idea of her disappearance might traumatize them. His mother suffers from high blood pressure and his dad recently had a heart attack.

Betty Tyler opens the security screen door. She's a small woman of seventy-one with well-styled purplish-gray hair, rouge, and lipstick. Her perfume nearly knocks Steve off his feet. "Stevie," she says. "What's going on? Something's happened to Muriel? The children?"

Without a word, Steve enters the house and hugs his mother.

Bill Tyler, a bald man of seventy-three, walks down the front entry to greet his son. They hug, which they don't usually do. Most often, they shake hands. Bill seems to sense his son needs a hug. Bill's a smart man, a retired financier who did quite well for himself, Steve likes to brag to his friends and acquaintances.

Steve holds back his tears but Muriel's unexplained disappearance has shaken him to the core. For the second time in his life, he must explain to his parents that something terrible has happened. It's overwhelming. He'd rather spare them the news but can't. It's possible they hold clues to Muriel's whereabouts. If nothing else, he'll need his mother's help with the kids. He can't keep imposing his situation on Muriel's friend, Betsy Sanders. *Why is life treating me this way?* He's been asking himself over and over again. *Why me? I've done everything I can to be a good son, a good husband, a good man.*

In the Arizona room at the back of the house, Steve and his parents sit on the apricot soft suede sofa and armchairs around a large glass coffee table. The windows and patio doors are covered with white wooden shutters. At one end of the coffee table stands a tall pink and turquoise feathered kachina doll holding up its arms in a dance. It dominates the room and is crass, Steve can't help but think.

A few months before he spent a fortune on the damn thing for his parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary. *What was I thinking?* Muriel even suggested it might be too extreme for a wedding anniversary. But he convinced himself it was the perfect gift for his parents' Arizona

room. His mom seemed to love it. Now it's taunting Steve with its Hopi spiritual dance. He avoids looking at it but senses its presence.

Bill brings his son an icy Amstel beer.

Steve takes a drink. "Muriel's missing," he admits.

"Missing?" Bill Tyler asks. He sits in the armchair next to his wife who's sitting in her armchair. Between them is a glass table with Time Magazines and National Geographics and a glass lamp filled with shells.

"Try not to think the worst," Steve suggests as his mother hands him a box of tissues from the side table. *She's astonishingly calm*, he thinks. Her reaction isn't what he expected. After Angeline died, Betty Tyler moved in with her son until he found a nanny to care for the kids. That was before he met Muriel.

"When did she leave you?" Betty asks.

"She didn't leave me, Mom. She's missing. Don't you get it? Her purse is still on the dresser. Her clothes, luggage, camera, and laptop are untouched at home." Steve finally breaks down and sobs while hating himself for showing such weakness in front of his parents. It's embarrassing. They've always expected a lot from him, especially after his brother died, but he's feeling exactly how he felt when Angeline passed away.

Betty rises from her armchair, sits beside Steve on the sofa, and hugs him. "Start from the beginning, son. You're confusing us. Take a deep breath."

Steve gathers his wits and sobers up because his parents aren't as distraught as they should be. "Look," he says directly to his mother. "I'm here to see if she said anything to you, left any kind of clue concerning her whereabouts. You two talk a lot."

"Not that often, dear," Betty says. "Only when I call and you're not around."

“Mother.” Steve pulls away, stunned by her indifference. “Don’t you understand? She could be dead somewhere. Murdered. Raped. Oh God!” He takes a deep breath and shakes his head. His mother’s perfume is giving him a headache. He thinks it’s from the Estee Lauder sampler he gave her last Christmas. That was another mistake.

“Stevie!” his mother exclaims. “Where are the children?”

“With Betsy, our friend. She’s offered to take care of them until Muriel comes home.” Steve looks at his mother, then at his dad who’s leaning back in his recliner nibbling on a bowl of mixed nuts. “What did she say to you Mom, when you last talked?”

Betty glances at Steve’s father. “A couple weeks ago, Muriel stopped by. Said she was in the area on a fundraising errand for that charity of hers.”

“She never told me she dropped by here,” Steve says. “I don’t even remember her coming up here. Oh hell, I can’t remember anything.” He blows his nose. The scented tissue bothers him more than his mother’s perfume. He sneezes.

“Bless you son,” Betty says. “It was a rather odd visit, wasn’t it, Bill? Didn’t I say how odd it was that Muriel dropped by like she did?” Bill says nothing.

“What did she want?” Steve’s growing impatient. The kachina doll appears in his peripheral vision. He’s trying to concentrate and not let the stupid thing or his mother’s ghastly fragrances get the best of him. *I’m an engineer at Intel* he tells himself. *I know how to focus!* “Has she come here before without me and the kids?”

“This was the first time in all the years you’ve been married.” Betty straightens the magazines on the side table. “She wanted to borrow some of our Geographics. You know we’ve saved every issue for the past fifty years. I told her I never lend them out and she got upset.”

“God, Mother! What’s the big deal?”

“I have a right to keep them in good condition. Someday, they’ll be worth something.”

“That’s all she wanted?” Steve looks at his mother then at the expensive artifacts around the room—the Burntwater Navajo rug, the sand painting mural, the Santa Clara black vases, and the Hopi kachina that continues to gawk at him in its frozen dance. He suddenly feels sick, completely out of place. *This is my parents’ home* he thinks to himself. *All this will be mine when they pass. Maybe I’m just feeling disgusted and angry with myself. Or with Mother’s lackadaisical attitude. She should be as upset as I am.*

“Guess so.” Betty draws Steve’s attention back to her. “Seems she stopped by for my Geographics. I said she could look at them and she searched through the index and pulled out issues about the Inca Maya and Aztec civilizations. She left them on the coffee table when she suddenly stood up and said she had to go. Without even a goodbye hug. Very odd behavior. I sensed something was wrong.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this? You could have called me.”

“I didn’t want to tell you because I don’t like interfering in your life and certainly didn’t want to tell you that Muriel was rude to me. She should have thanked me and put the magazines back in their proper order on the shelves.”

“This *is* odd,” Steve remarks, ignoring his mother’s concerns. “I have no idea why she’s interested in these cultures. Mother, can I see the issues?”

“Naturally, I’ve put them back in order on the shelves. And I’m not sure which ones she saw. I do remember one issue was about an Inca mummy frozen in the Andes. An Inca boy. I think she came specifically for that issue. Soon as she found it, she wrote down the issue and left.”

“Mother, get me that magazine.”

“As I told your wife, son, I don’t lend out my Geographics. Not even to you. They’ll get messed up if I do. I’ve always taught you that if you want to keep something nice, you can’t lend it out.”

Bill Tyler looks at his wife then at Steve. “I’ll go get it.” He heads to the clean, orderly garage off the kitchen where the floor is sealcoated and the walls are lined with professionally constructed oak shelves for keepsake first-edition books and Betty’s sacred Geographic collection.

“Mother, I’m afraid something terrible has happened to Muriel.” Steve hopes to stir a little compassion in her. For his second wife and for his own situation.

“I know.” Betty pats her son on the back and looks at him sternly. “You must be strong for the children. In my opinion, something was going on with that new wife of yours. I’ve noticed it for years. She never seemed quite sincere. I’ve always been afraid something like this would happen. I think she’s run off. In fact, I somehow know she has. Why else would her new car be gone?”

“But her purse.”

“She doesn’t need her purse to take off. The car, yes. Her purse, no. She’s a tricky one, remember. You married too soon after Angeline died. She married you because you have a good and stable job at Intel, not because she loves you.”

Before Steve can respond to his mother’s offensive comment, his dad returns with the specific issue about the Incas that Muriel had marked down. Steve takes hold of the magazine and shakes his head. “I don’t understand your petty feelings, Mother. Whatever they are. The woman I love is missing.”

He rises from the apricot sofa with the magazine in his grip and leaves the house knowing his mother will call him tonight and ask about Muriel. Like she's really concerned. She'll act as if nothing unusual happened between them. She's always been this way, willing to easily forget any upsets between her and anyone in the family. Steve usually admires her for this but now he's hoping—praying—that Muriel will be safe at home to answer his mother's call.



Chapter 6: Spring Equinox at Teotihuacan

Muriel

When I first leave Moby Jack, I'm relieved to regain my privacy. But after half a day on the road, I miss his briny company and consider returning to Mazatlán, fetching him, and seeing him through on his own journey to Costa Rica. He's probably still slouched against that palm tree. I chuckle to myself and dismiss the idea. There's no turning back—that's my credo. Maybe I'll head to the beach, look for a bar or discotheque, and meet a brand-new *hombre guapo*. I really have nothing to accomplish by being alone. And I'm not even tired after nearly thirty hours of being awake. My adrenaline is still pumping. This has to be good for my condition.

The Pan-Am along the coast is straight until it winds through the Sierra Madre foothills. Along the way, several Primera Plus tour buses pass me as well as old rickety buses obviously for the lower than middle class. The campesinos. I pass lots of Chevy pickups and old Fords, a few family vans, and even an Explorer as new and nice as mine.

As I near the crossroad cut-off to Puerto Vallarta and Guadalajara, I slow down with the traffic to pass a Primera Plus that's broken down at the side of the road. It straddles the nearly nonexistent shoulder and blocks part of the right lane. Some of the passengers are already walking down the road. I consider giving someone a lift but the conditions are unsafe with all the traffic and pedestrians and the blind spot ahead at a curve in the road.

After the turn, I arrive at a pull-off with a small eatery under a metal canopy. *Carne Asado. Pollo. Delicious grilled chicken* the sign reads. I park among pickup trucks in the gravel near a crude shack with the sign *Baños, dos pesos*. A skinny girl with black braids sits outside the door to collect coins. I make use of the facility which is surprisingly clean and odor-free, except for the chemical smell, then sit at a picnic table under a flimsy wooden structure with a palm-frond roof.

The grilled chicken at the shack has an appetizing aroma of chilies and lime and I ravenously hungry. When the waiter arrives at my table, I order a full chicken dinner with papas fritas, tomatillo salsa, and green onions.

While I'm waiting for my dinner, Primera Plus passengers begin appearing from the road and approaching the eatery. Among them is an older gringo couple that I hadn't noticed on the highway. They sit at a neighboring picnic table and warmly greet me. The man is possibly seventy, tall and thin with thick-rimmed glasses, a neatly trimmed beard, and shocking gray hair combed to one side. He's wearing a light-blue polo shirt. The woman, also tall and thin, is beautiful. Her smile brightly accentuates high cheekbones and blue eyes. Her gray hair is bluntly short but it suits her face and white embroidered Mexican blouse. They're both wearing sturdy Eddie Bauer hiking shoes. It appears they've been traveling a while and probably plan to do a lot

more. They both carry knapsacks and look strong and hardy for their age. They're smart people of import. Professors, I venture to guess.

"Are you traveling alone?"

The woman's question takes me by surprise. Feeling a bit self-conscious about being on my own, I say, "Yes, but I was with some friends up in Mazatlán."

The waiter delivers a huge plate of chicken and fries, enough to feed a family of four. I feel a little stupid. Maybe gluttonous. "What happened to your bus?" I ask and take a bite of the pollo asado. It's tender with the precise amount of lime and smoky mesquite. It's unlike anything I've ever prepared for Steve and the kids which isn't saying much. Most of our meals consisted of takeout food from Ahwatukee restaurants or my version of spaghetti and meatballs. If Steve really liked my cooking, as he sometimes suggested, then why did he insist on bringing home so much takeout?

"Transmission went kaput," the man says with a slight accent. I wonder if he's German. The woman's definitely American. "The driver told us to wait here until another bus or their repair truck arrives. Either way, I'm sure we've got a long wait ahead. But what's the hurry, right?" He winks.

"Where are you from?" the woman asks. She seems to always smile.

"Arizona."

"You're not so far from home." The woman takes a soda from the waiter. "We're from Pennsylvania, a little farther away." She introduces herself as Martha and her husband as Henry. "He's professor emeritus at Temple University where I recently retired as head librarian at the law library. Henry teaches physics. He's on the board of trustees," she proudly adds.

“My friends in Mazatlán are astrophysicists,” I think to say. I’m about to add that my husband is an engineer at Intel but stop. I don’t want to tell anyone about myself. Then they’ll start asking questions and my business is nobody’s but my own.

“Would you care to join us?” Henry graciously invites me to their table.

I happily invite them to join me and share my meal. “I don’t know why I ordered a full chicken. It smells so appetizing and is so cheap.” They laugh and sit at my table.

The waiter brings us extra plates and utensils and my new friends help themselves to tender pieces of the grilled chicken. *They’re just the kind of company I need, perhaps crave*, I’m thinking. They have such a positive, inviting aura about them that echoes *Life has wonderful promises and interesting avenues, especially during retirement. The end of the road is the beginning and we have each other.*

“We travelled by bus from Temple because the university didn’t need Henry to teach this semester. We’ve also been to Mazatlán, on a different trip.

“This is our fifth trip to Mexico,” Henry adds.

“Are you from Germany?”

“I’m originally from Norway, but Martha and I have lived in Pennsylvania for the past thirty years.”

“Did you meet at Temple? It’s not that I want to pry but I’m thoroughly enjoying your company. After being with my friends in Mazatlán, I’m craving good stimulating conversation but **without all the alcohol guzzling and pot smoking. Most of them were college kids on spring break, if you catch my drift. Students of astrophysics and philosophy. We had fascinating discussions about Aztec cosmology.**”

“That’s delightful,” Martha says. “Henry’s read a lot about the Aztecs as well. He reads just about everything there is to read.”

“That’s why I married a librarian,” Henry says for a laugh.

“I met Henry in Norway,” Martha says. “I was an exchange student at his college in Oslo. We’ve been married forty-two years.”

“You’re a fascinating couple.” I take a bite of chicken. “I mean, you’re in such harmony with each other and the world.”

“That’s a beautiful thing to say. So very kind of you. And what a lovely jade necklace,” Martha comments.

“Jadeite,” I reply, touching it at my neck.

“Jadeite?” Henry asks. “That’s one of the most valuable minerals on earth. Is it Burmese?”

“Yes,” I say but don’t elaborate because it was a gift from Steve meant to win me over, to match my eyes, as he liked telling me. I value the gift far more than any of Steve’s sweet talk and now I appreciate Martha’s compliment. It’s not about how I look which is so different from men who’ve flattered me all my adult life as a way to seduce me.

Henry seems to pick up on my vibes and changes the subject. Maybe he thinks I’m embarrassed. I’m not. I love my jadeite beads I just don’t want to travel down the road of explaining myself, my past, my leaving my husband, step kids and dad. That’s all.

Henry talks about their travel adventures throughout their marriage, generally ending with a humorous twist. “That was back in ‘61. Before you were even born.”

I’m amused. The fact is, I was born in ’61 but don’t correct the professor.

“We’ve been all over the world,” Martha continues. “Alaska, Siberia, Egypt, Kenya, the Galapagos, Tibet, Indonesia, South Africa, Patagonia, and Tierra del Fuego.”

“Tierra del Fuego? That’s where I’m headed.” My heart flutters. “I’ve never met anyone who’s been there. What’s it like at the end of the world?”

“Lots of sheep,” Henry says. “It’s a lot like the Outer Hebrides.”

“You’re thinking of New Zealand, dear.” Martha affectionately pats his hand. “Islands, lakes, forests, snowcapped peaks, glaciers, Cape Horn, and the Beagle Channel. Named for Darwin’s ship.”

“Gateway to Antarctica,” Henry adds.

“And penguins, dear,” Martha suggests. “They don’t have penguins on the Hebrides. I’m glad you’re heading there, Arizona. I know you’ll like it.”

I don’t correct her even though I introduced myself as Mariella. I like being called “Arizona.” It has a nice, almost mystical ring to it. More so than “Mariella” or “Muriel.” Like I’m the free-spirited girl in the old hippie song Mark Lindsey sang in the 60s. I sit back and hope that one day I’ll be like my new friends, elderly, well-traveled, having been to Tierra del Fuego at least once, and talking to a younger traveler about it.

The couple make me feel comfortable enough to ask if they have children. I’m hoping they’ll somehow ease my guilt for abandoning my step kids. Lately, I’ve been missing Kevin and Kristi, something I fight against doing.

Martha seems to welcome my question with grace. “We made a conscious choice. And never had any accidents.”

I’m relieved. A *conscious choice* is safe territory. But I’m reluctant to press further. If I do, maybe they’ll start asking about my background and my choices about having kids. I don’t

want to say that my husband had a vasectomy and I agreed to be his wife and mother to his children and not to have children of my own. This is now a big messy regret unless I find a cure for my condition and get pregnant before my biological clock runs out.

“After we first married,” Henry picks up the conversation. “We worked for a year on a medical team in Nigeria, an opportunity we embraced.”

“And neither one of us knew anything about the healthcare business,” Martha adds.

“The Nigerians desperately needed volunteers and my physics degree and Martha’s management degree were good enough to help set up a hospital.”

“A powerful experience.” Martha sips her soda. “We saw a lot of sick children and there was nothing we could do to help them. We left after a year of frustrated effort.”

“And I doubt that hospital ever got built.”

“The long and short of it, Arizona,” Martha says. “The more we traveled, the more we wanted to travel and the less we felt like bringing children into a world already so overpopulated that thousands of children starve every day.”

“Maybe we’re a little selfish. We’ve enjoyed so much in our lives that having children would have kept us from doing a lot. But everyone’s different. Got to follow your bliss, as Joseph Campbell says.”

I smile, although the discussion isn’t helping me overcome the guilt I sometimes feel. My stepchildren are precious, wonderful human beings, not mere statistics that add to the problem of overpopulation. At times like this, I don’t know who I really am or who I’m supposed to be.

I suddenly feel anxious about leaving before it grows dark. But I hesitate parting ways with Martha and Henry. They’re so knowledgeable and interesting. I could learn a lot from them

like I had about the Aztec mindset from the spring break crew of Moby Jack. “Where are you heading?” I ask. “Obviously, your replacement bus hasn’t arrived.”

“Guadalajara then on to Mexico City for the spring equinox festival at the pyramids of Teotihuacan.”

“That sounds intriguing. Maybe I should go there.”

“It’s a massive gathering,” Henry chimes in. “People from all walks of life gather for healing.”

“Healing?” A surge of enthusiasm showers me. Maybe it’s hope, the hope I have for my journey’s goal, for my life.

“Yes,” Martha says with her bright inviting smile. “The event is a vortex for healing the Earth and the self.”

My new friends don’t know about my illness but I can’t help but think our meeting is more than a mere coincidence. It’s the answer to my prayers. On the spot, I decide my next destination. Forget about the beaches of Acapulco. It’s time I find a natural cure, or an astronomical one. “I’m heading to Mexico City myself and would be happy to give you a lift. That’s my Explorer over there.” I point out my car between two old Chevy trucks. “I’ve got plenty of room and I’d love your company.”

“Remarkable!” Henry breaks from the meal he’s been slowly eating because of his many stories. “You drove all the way here from Arizona? By yourself?”

“Well, as I’ve said, I was with a physicist friend for part of the way. Anyway, I’d love your company. Do you have luggage on the bus?”

“This is it.” Martha indicates their knapsacks on the ground beside them.

“Just your day packs?”

“We travel light. Best way,” Henry adds.

Martha smiles affectionally at Henry. “One pair of hiking shoes on the feet, one pair of sandals, one jacket, three shirts, two trousers. And shared toiletries. What more do you need but money?”

“Toilet paper,” Henry quips and we all chuckle.

“I can relate,” I say. “I’ve been buying what I need along the way. Hardly took anything from home, except my ThinkPad and lots of books.”

“And that beautiful Explorer,” Henry suggests. “Say, are you planning to drive all the way to Tierra del Fuego?”

“Actually, yes,” I say definitively. “There’s a car ferry from Panama to Colombia I’m planning to take. My friend told me about it. He’s done it himself. Several times.”

“That’s wonderful!” Martha says. “Sounds like you’re having the journey of your life. We drove from South Africa to Cairo one summer with a group of folks on a caravan to feed the hungry. I really admire you for going at it alone.”

“I plan to hook up with a friend in Costa Rica,” I say with Moby Jack’s friend in mind. “He’s a physics professor like you Henry. I’m hoping he’ll travel with me.”

“That’ll be nice,” Martha says. “If we weren’t called back for the summer semester, I’d suggest we join you.”

I suddenly feel embarrassed about my grandiose expedition, as if I’m after some sort of record for driving alone, like a headline seeker. And I’m not on a mission to deliver food boxes to starving children along the way. I haven’t thought about my journey this way before. I’m not out to impress anyone or gain attention. But the notion of driving to the tip of South America on

my own does seems overly ambitious for someone like me. I'm hardly a seasoned globetrotter. Just a simple Blockbuster bookkeeper from humble beginnings.

"I tell you what." Henry leans back in his chair. He looks satisfied after finishing his meal like Steve always does. "I'll even drive if you need a break."

"Yes, I'd love to take a break from driving. Shall we get going?" I stand from the table, eager to begin this new venture that will cure my condition, I'm certain. It's a feeling that's overtaken me. Too many things have fallen into place not the least of which is my meeting this enlightened and charming elderly couple. It's all too serendipitous. As if all the spiritual forces of Earth and the cosmos are joining together to cure my condition. The gods actually want to spare me from becoming their sacrifice. Or a mere statistic.

When we reach Mexico City, Martha suggests we stay at the New York Hotel near the Monument to the Revolution off Paseo de la Reforma. "It's clean, inexpensive, and has a guarded garage," Henry assures me.

As it turns out, the hotel is a few stars beneath Howard Johnson's. But I need to start budgeting because I don't know how long I'll be stretching out my money—whether I'll find a cure and live to a ripe old age, like my new friends, or have only a year to spend all of my cash. It's such a dilemma at times but I'm happy to be in *la Ciudad de Mexico* and hope to gain travel insights from Henry and Martha. I'd hate to be by myself exploring this *massive offspring of the Aztecs and conquistadors*, as Henry describes it.

Every moment I spend with Henry and Martha energizes me. I keep asking myself how they can be so in love after 42 years of marriage. Maybe it's the freedom they have without children. Or perhaps they're simply soulmates, spiritually and intellectually, so

unlike Steve and I, or me and anyone else I've ever been with. Henry and Martha hold hands and give each other little kisses throughout the day, and toast to each other all the time, even with food. I'm hoping to stay with them as far as their next stop in Oaxaca, where they plan to fly back to Pennsylvania for the ninetieth birthday of Martha's father.

On the morning of the equinox, the phone on my nightstand rings At 3:30. "Are you ready to leave in half an hour," Henry asks.

I throw on the white blouse and skirt and red sash I bought yesterday in the Mercado de Artesanias. Martha helped me select it. "Everyone at the festival wears white and red," she told me. I also grab my new digital Kodak 240DC Zoom which I bought near the Zocalo for pictures to go along with my travel journal.

"You look stunning, Arizona," Henry says when I enter the lobby promptly at four. "Like Juno herself." He's leaning against the counter looking dapper and academic in his white slacks and cardigan sweater. He holds a cup of coffee from a vendor near the hotel setup for the night construction crews in the vicinity. Beside him, Martha is standing poised and slim, dressed in a long white wrinkle skirt, a long-sleeved white turtle neck sweater, and a red rebozo shawl. Henry warned me that the morning won't heat up until well after sunrise.

We arrive at the pyramids an hour before dawn. Beyond the entrance to the park, flagmen are waving drivers toward the parking area which is already half full. Vendors are setting up food and souvenir stalls with colorful ceramic, stone, and plaster Aztec gods, skulls, calendars, and pyramids.

Henry pays the entry fee and we walk to the Pyramid of the Sun, the focal point of the festivities. "The Aztec gods created the sun, moon and the giant pyramids," he remarks along the

way. “On top a priest sacrificed victims, tore out their hearts, then flung the body down the steps to a priest portraying the god Xipe Totec.”

“The god of resurrection. Of spring,” I suggest, remembering what I read just the night before. I wanted to gain a little insight about what would take place at the equinox event.

“That’s right. Xipe Totec flayed and donned the victim’s skin as a symbol of the spring’s renewing powers.” Henry smiles, probably enjoying that I can contribute to the discussion. He’s a professor, after all.

“They sacrificed humans to resurrect the sun and moon.” Martha adds

“Rather gruesome. But as my friends in Mazatlán explained, Aztec cosmology make a lot of sense psychologically. Their nine realms of hell is a metaphor for the difficulties and obstacles we face on our journey in life. Just like Dante’s Nine Circles of Hell. And Dante and the Aztec existed around the same era. Funny how that works.”

“Well put, Arizona,” Henry says while police direct us with the crowd up the right side of the stairwell on the west face of the Sun Pyramid. The left side is exclusively for those coming down but no one’s descending at this point.

In the pyramid’s artificial lights, hundreds of people, all dressed in white, are climbing the stone structure, some are already on the top. With Martha beside me and Henry a few steps ahead, I easily ascent to the first tier where the steep stairs narrow. As I climb, my breath grows short from the high elevation or perhaps—I worry—from my condition. I can’t help but think of the Aztec thirteen places of heaven. Or, a Lizard put it, the thirteen cosmic levels.

“This is the first tier of the thirteen heavens,” I suggest to Martha to get my mind off the fear creeping through me. The crowd in white is smothering me. I feel like their energy is sucking my breath into the pyramid.

“That’s right. The dark place where the Moon travels. Home to Meztli the moon goddess.”

“What about Coyolxauhqui? I thought she was the moon goddess! Her brother Huitzilopochtli chopped her up and threw her to the sky where she became the moon.”

“The Aztecs had gods for everything,” Henry looks back and says. “They’re like particles in quantum mechanics. Solid and elusive at the same time. In past and future places. Maybe they had worm holes.”

“Or used the strings in string theory,” I chuckle. “The first level of the Aztec cosmos is also where the drowned people go. Which means they don’t have to forage the river of Mictlan and journey through the nine treacheries of hell.”

Martha laughs and steps up to Henry to tell him my little Mictlan joke.

When I reach the third tier, people are tightly packed. Now the crowd is really bothering me and I stop climbing and watch Henry and Martha continue up the steps. I look down and see nothing but waves of approaching people; some are brushing against me. My instincts tell me to retreat, go back to the haven of my car but descending looks impossible. I scan the people around me and can’t find Martha or Henry. The morass of pilgrims has swallowed them up like the moon swallows the sun during an eclipse. Is it **Meztli or Coyolxauhqui or a jaguar? I wonder. Who actually swallows the sun?**

I move to the side and sit. My thoughts drift to Steve. I find myself wishing he were here to lead my way. To make things easy for me. I’m too weak to continue, too weary to fend off thoughts of him, the kids, my father, and my dying mother. The power of prayer didn’t work for Mom and her dying didn’t bring me closer to God. It made me feel more distant from religion. There’s no divinity, no master force overhead looking down from the top. There’s only particles

and light bearing down on me. I'm an empty dark void place where nothing exists but me. **I'm in the cosmic realm where night spreads its darkness. At least in my mind.**

I wish a god existed to make everything all right. But that's just not what happens. Mom died. Steve's first wife passed away. Now I'm in peril and have trouble believing in anything anymore.

I gaze at the approaching faces then turn to see how far I must climb to reach the top in time to welcome the rising sun. I'd rather sit where I am and wait for the sun to break through the horizon. But I'm on the wrong side of the pyramid. The wrong side of the Aztec thirteen realms. I'm on the wrong side of everything, I tell myself.

The equinox festival will energize your spirit I recall Martha's words. My mother said something to this effect. Christmas will make you happy she'd say when I was a child. And then she died a terrible death. And I married Steve. We were each other's saving grace. But marriage became tedious after a while. Then, deus ex machina stepped in and announced my prognosis.

I look around. Many people on the pyramid are New Agers. Some are Mexican Catholics, possibly descendants of the Aztecs. Like the Aztecs, they worship their ancestors, saints, and many gods. But unlike the ancient pre-Columbians, they aren't sacrificing people on this pyramid. No high priest stands on top prepared to plunge his knife into the victim and tear out her beating heart and hold it up like a trophy. No one is waiting at the bottom of the steps for the priest to toss me down. No priest will flay me and wear my skin as a symbol of spring.

Then I see him, Xipe Totec, dancing at the bottom of the pyramid among a large gathering. I watch him and see myself before him. But I'm not dancing. I'm lying prone, frozen. I'm the sacrificial victim tossed down the steps of heaven. I watch his aura flare in his dance

over my bleeding chest and missing heart. I can't move. I'm destroyed. He raises his knife to cut my helpless body. But he stops. I shake. Grow cold.

Xipe Totec looks up the steps. He sees me. He wants me to join him for the spring equinox. He wants to become me, wear the cape that is my bleeding veins creating his dance of spring.

"I don't want to be your sacrifice," I say aloud. "Go. Leave me to rest in peace."

Xipe Totec looks back at my corpse and resumes his dance. The crowd tightens around him. I see him no more. My heart patters like thunder. I am whole. The priest didn't cut me and take away my trophy heart. He is no more. I am.

I deeply breathe, hold my chest and look up the pyramid to see how crowded it is at the top. I climb about eight steps and feel like I'm in the **place of storms sent to Earth. Where gods are hurling obsidian knives all around me. Heaven is no different from hell. I'm in the place of cold frost and misery. I'm the god Crooked Knife. I create the storms and blow them beyond Earth to the nine places of hell where I live here with the lord and lady of hell. Mictlantecuhтли and Mictēcacihuatl of Mictlan. We are particles of light and live in many dimensions at once. In heaven. In hell. On Earth. I'm in darkness with the gods of sacrifice. Sure. I sacrifice myself for them for others in this cold frosty place of storms and chaos. I don't know if I'm in a realm of heaven or one of hell. *Lord and lady of Mictlan, tell me where I am?***

I look around to clear my head. About ten feet away, in the pre-dawn light, I notice an older woman's face in the crowd. She has stopped among the moving flow of ascending people and is looking down the pyramid, perhaps to see how far she has climbed. She is like me.

Assessing her steps. Measuring. Navigating. Calculating. I have entered regions of the unknown in my mind.

All at once, the woman peers at me like Xipe Totec had. Her face is familiar. It's like my mother's weathered, emaciated forty-five-year-old face. I stare at her. She *is* my mother, haunting me! Or is she guiding me to continue my climb to the top? To the highest realm of heaven. Of the cosmos. What does she want from me? What does she expect me to do? I did all I could. I took care of her, watched her die. *I've been a good daughter. Saw to your and dad's needs. Took care of my little sister. Cared for my step children. My spouse. How much more must I sacrifice?*

I rub my eyes. The face disappears. Tears stream down my cheeks. I look for a way out of the white river of people. Perhaps the red sashes represent sacrificial blood. We're bound by our mortality; we're particles connected by strings.

I stand frozen, unable to move. I see the faces of my stepchildren in the crowd and can't get them out of my mind. They're so young and lovely, so innocent and happy. Christmas will make you happy. I never wanted them to be sad. I don't want anyone to be sad.

What more do you expect from me, and why are you taunting me now?

The crowd begins chanting. I see Aztec warriors carrying a boy up the mountain among chanting priests. They're taking him to his place of sacrifice on the Pyramid of the Sun.

Like the sacrificial boy, I reach the place where **light moves. The realm where Steve lives with his head high in the clouds. Unaware of my presence. The realm of Moby Jack and his spring breakers, the motley crew. The Moby Crew. I look around and see nothing but white movement to the top.**

I'm where the Tzitzimime live. The tsunami spirits. I look for them in the flow of white movement of breaking dawn. They appear to me suddenly like butterfly stars popping from darkness around the eclipsed sun. The skeletal women bring evil to men and will end humanity one day, Lizard said. Will they? I ask myself. Does a butterfly kill? Or does it have a minute effect that the entire universe feels? I feel eclipsed by star butterflies surrounding me. By the Tzitzimime. I remember I'm about to witness the solar equinox. Not an eclipse. I continue my climb afraid I won't reach the top in time to watch the sunrise.

I didn't want to view my mother's dead body. This is why I had her cremated.

"Arizona," I hear from behind.

A hand gently grasps my elbow to steady me. "Steve?"

"Are you all right, darling?" Henry stands tall and gallant at my side. "Let me help you. We can take our time. No hurry. The sun won't be up for half an hour." He gently guides me through the crowd and up the steps, considering each step with me in mind, as if no one else exists. As if no one else matters except me. He puts me at ease but I'm unable to talk because I'm breathless and the chanting around me is deafening.

My only thought now is to reach the top, see the rising sun, and ask for a cure. And, like a priest who exorcises demons, vanquish my tormenting thoughts. Henry is an angel. *Angels are around me now, flowing effortlessly skyward. Guiding me to heaven.* I feel glorious all of a sudden. I have reached the abode of gods, I imagine. **The place ruled by the four Tezcatlipocas. All Aztec gods live in this realm and project themselves on Earth or in other dimensions of the cosmos. They put on masks and morph into different spirits who**

govern create undo and destroy. Reality, our perceptions, our spirit, continuously transforms and shapeshifts. We are not stagnant. We are a flowing river. I tell myself.

“Arizona,” a voice calls from the top of the pyramid. I see Martha waving her red rebozo. I pause to wave back and tell Henry, “I’m all right now. I can make it the rest of the way if you want to dash ahead.”

“Who, me?” Henry points to himself. “I’m in no hurry.” He stays with me until we reach the top platform and join Martha amid the crowd clad in white. People are chanting and waving flags, Milagro folk charms, crosses, votive paintings, pictures of ancestors, Jesus, Mary, and saints. They are burning incense and hoping for miracles like I am. Henry Martha and I talk a few moments, then we maneuver to the east edge until we find an empty place to sit and view the eastern mountains.

Move over, I think to myself. Make room for me. I’m at the very top. In Omeyocan. Home to Ometeotl god of all aspects of being. Everything that exists is conceived in this realm. I am all I create. Like the Hindu god brahma. I remember that babies who die also live here and I think about the little inca boy frozen in the Andes and wonder if he lives here too.

The chanting turns to humming. The vibrations awaken me from my thoughts. It’s like I’m in an electromagnetic energy field when the distant mountains explode with morning light—a sight the Toltecs, the Aztecs, and the mysterious people of Teotihuacan witnessed long ago from these same steps.

“This is where the sun shows his face,” Henry says. “It’s the blue region of Huitzilopochtli.”

“But we’re on top and the sun is in the seventh heaven,” I say.

“Like quantum physics,” Henry says. “The Aztec gods live simultaneously in all realms and all dimensions.”

When the sun bursts from the horizon, the humming energy amplifies. The people around us raise their hands to catch the first rays of spring, the promise of a new year, the healing powers of this astronomical and spiritual union. The entire pyramid cheers. Conch shells deeply resonate. Men wildly beat drums.

“What’s everyone chanting?” I look at Martha. Her hands form a triangle to frame the rising sun.

“Fire, universal and cosmic, mysterious energy, I and you join,” Martha says. “Come give me power to heal the Earth.”

Following Martha’s lead, I outstretch my arms and feel a part of the movement. The energy is curing me, completely. Mentally, spiritually, and physically. I can feel it in my veins. My heart. My every corpuscle. I’m charged, like an electron!

The cheering persists.

“Huitzilopochtli appears full, round, and brilliant,” Henry says.

“Or is it Tonatiuh, the fifth Aztec Sun?” I look at Martha waiting for her to remind me Aztec gods are like particles of light. But she isn’t paying attention to me. She’s focused on the equinox sunrise. Her face is absorbing the light; an orange glow surrounds her, as if she’s an apparition of the Madonna.

“Do you feel it?” Martha says as the sun climbs above the distant mountain.

“I feel the sun’s warmth on my face,” I say. “His force penetrates. I’m connected with space, time, and Earth. Heal me, Inti. Heal me, Huitzilopochtli. Heal my condition . . .”

“And reign in my heart.” Martha laughs with joy. “Allow me to flourish so I can heal the Earth!”

I close my eyes and listen to the chants, conch shells and drums. I smell the copal incense and deeply inhale. Energy invigorates my body like a rush of adrenaline. Like a drug. My thoughts are focused on nothing but my physical sensations. I feel healed. I will live forever!

“Let’s head down and watch the Aztec dances on the plaza below,” Henry suggests.

We maneuver around to the steps leading down. People are still climbing to the top and filling every available spot.

Halfway down, I suggest I meet Henry and Martha at the bottom of the pyramid by the Aztec dances. “The energy is so intense and powerful, I need to sit a while and contemplate it all.”

My friends graciously understand, as I knew they would. I sit beside the stairwell and watch them disappear into the descending throng, which isn’t nearly as massive as the flood of humanity climbing to the top. I think about my life and the euphoria seeps away. I feel empty inside. Like I’m an aimlessly wandering neutrino pinging around Earth, barely detectable.

I scan the area to see if Henry is hanging around to help me safely down the pyramid. But he’s keeping up with Martha, helping her down the steps until they’re nowhere in sight. It’s not so difficult to climb down. I take several deep, relaxing breaths in the energizing sunrise and start my descent.

When I reach the second tier, I encounter a crowd gathered around a Mexican in his thirties. He’s burning a clay bowl of smudge sticks and sanctifying people by circling his smudge bowl around them. I stop to watch.

“Señorita.” He looks at me. “*Quiere bendición?* Can I give you a blessing?”

“How much?”

“*Como quiere. No importa.* Your eyes tell me you want a blessing for your future, for your travels, for your health.”

I accept his offer and stand before him as he circles the smoking pot around my front then behind me. I sneeze from the strong smell of sage.

“*Este bendición,*” he says, as people around watch. “Will take you forward from this day, will protect you until you die.”

“I could die anytime,” I can’t help but say. “In a moment from now. Your protection’s ambiguous. I wanted something mystical to happen to me and your blessing seems like a cliché.”

“Cliché?” the man asks.

“Yes. You should have said *Your blessing will give you a long life.*” He makes no reply and I hand him a few pesos. He looks satisfied and glances around for someone else to bless.

I continue down the steps and notice Martha and Henry off to one side of the pyramid, near a Red Cross van by the Aztec dancers. They’re waiting for me to catch up.

In an instant, I decide to slip away, something I can easily do because nearly everyone is dressed alike. I don’t feel bad about leaving Henry and Martha. I relish their company but can’t grow attached to anyone in my new life. I wish I could but I’ll never make it to Temple University for a visit. They’re resourceful. They’ll catch a taxi back to the city and continue on their journey by bus to Oaxaca. Besides, it’s easier, once again, to leave without bothering to explain anything or having to say goodbye.



A month after Muriel disappears, Steve drives to Gilbert and checks if Muriel is staying with her dad on an extended visit. He's telephoned Russell Prichard several times but the old man rarely answers. The one time her he did, the call didn't go well. He hung up as soon as Steve mentioned he was Muriel's husband.

Muriel's father is senile, Steve knows. He lives reclusively in Desertrama Mobile Home Park in Gilbert. He's never liked Steve, never accepted him, and didn't come to the wedding. Ironically, Steve's taking care of Mr. Prichard, making sure his trailer lot fee is paid year to year and paying a nurse to check on him four days a week. Steve even cashed out Intel stock options to set up a trust fund and fiduciary to manage the old man's expenses.

Muriel insisted on the trust fund in Prichard's name. Maybe she suspected she'd one day leave and she wanted to make sure her dad was taken care of, Steve's been thinking of late.

Prichard, as Steve calls his father-in-law, doesn't know this or if he does, he refuses to acknowledge it. He believes Muriel is taking care of him financially. In a sense she is through Steve.

Steve agreed to the arrangement when Muriel accepted his marriage proposal and agreed to be a mother to his children. He needed her and she needed him. Muriel's dad was losing the home he had shared with his wife who recently died when Steve came along. Muriel was almost desperate. Her meager salary as a bookkeeper for Blockbuster Videos couldn't sustain her and her father. And she refused to move in with the old man and nurse him. *I was my mother's caregiver until she died* Steve vividly recalls Muriel's words shortly after they started dating.

Prichard never goes anywhere. Before she disappeared, Muriel checked on him every week but spent holidays with Steve and the kids at his parents' house because Steve never liked being around the old, cantankerous man.

For thirty-five years, Daddy read electric meters for the Salt River Project Muriel told Steve when they were negotiating the arrangement for their marriage. *He was a hardworking man and never made much money for our family. Mom had to waitress to keep the bills paid. Until she got sick.*

Your dad is a company man to be admired Steve told Muriel to flatter her. *Even a janitor has pride in his job.*

Muriel had scolded Steve for saying this. She claimed he was a presumptuous elitist and understood why her father didn't like him. After that, Steve kept his remarks about Prichard or Muriel's sister Shirley to himself. He's always found it odd, however, that he's never even met Shirley. He doubts Muriel's in Portland staying with her. They never talk on the phone, write each other, or even exchange birthday or Christmas cards. He's always assumed they weren't close because of family issues. Besides, Muriel's background hardly matters to Steve because she fit right into his life as his beautiful wife and the mother of his children. Now, as he stands on a concrete stoop at the bottom of the metal steps to Prichard's trailer, he fears she may be gone for good.

The old man opens the narrow door. It creaks with a clank. He's wearing a muscle shirt, pajama bottoms, and slippers and seems much thinner since Steve last saw him a few years back. In fact, this is only the second time Steve's been to Desertrama. The first time was when he closed the deal on the trailer and Prichard wasn't even present.

Without saying a word, Prichard glares at Steve like his mother's kachina doll. And the smell of a nursing home wafts from the door. It's unnerving.

"Mr. Prichard." Steve gets right to the point before Prichard can even ask why he's here. "Is Muriel staying with you?"

The old man grunts. "My daughter hasn't been around since last month. What do you want? Why are you here? Where's my daughter?"

"May I come inside and look around?" Steve has never been inside. Never needed or wanted to. He had signed the papers outside the trailer at the little picnic table on the patio under the ramada. Muriel always comes alone when visiting her father, never bringing the kids. The small trailer has no room for kids. Steve's children don't even know Muriel's dad. He's not their grandfather.

"No, sir." Prichard wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "I said she ain't here!" He spits beside the stoop. Steve notices it's yellow with blood. The old man smokes and is sick. Steve doubts he'll be around much longer. *Then my beautiful wife will have one less burden to worry about* Steve thinks to himself. *I doubt she'll miss him. She just feels obligated to see to his welfare like she had her mother's.*

"Okay, Mr. Prichard," Steve says as nicely as he can. "Do you happen to know where she might be? Have you received any mail addressed to her?"

"What?!" Prichard yells. "Step aside, Mr. Kennedy! I don't know where my daughter goes. She tells me nothing when she drops by for a quick minute. I just lost my wife of 25 years then my daughter marries you. No ceremony. No one from her family invited. Why? I've always asked myself."

"Sir, you're mistaken. We invited you to our wedding but you weren't well at the time and couldn't attend. Muriel also invited your younger daughter, Shirley, but she couldn't fly down. Mr. Prichard, please let me look around inside. I might find a clue."

"What did you do to my daughter? Did you hijack her with your high jinks?"

Steve steps away from the stoop as the old man rants about things that make no sense—things from his distant past. Things that are jumbled together.

Steve patiently waits, wondering if Prichard is suffering a spasm or if he's drunk. It's probably both. "Mr. Prichard. I don't think you understand. You and I aren't enemies. To be candid, it's my hard work that provides you with your home. I helped you back on your feet. And this is how you treat me?"

"No, you corporate fat fuck! Muriel's the only one who helps her poor old daddy. You took my daughter from me! I wanted her to nurse me like she did her mother, my wife of twenty-five years."

"Of course, I took Muriel from you. This Is life. I'm your son-in-law and I pay your bills. Listen, old man. We need to join together and find your daughter, my wife. Muriel. My kids need her and so do I. So do you."

"What kids? What did you do to my daughter? She takes care of me."

"No, sir, I do."

"Baloney! My daughter takes care of me!"

Steve steps away from the metal steps. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Prichard. I'll let you know what I learn. Call me if you hear from her." He walks down the driveway toward the Taurus, feeling helpless over the loss of his second wife. *Thank God for Muriel's best friend*, he thinks to himself. He recently hired Betsy away from her job at Lakewood Hair Harbor to manage the kids fulltime until he solves the mystery of Muriel's disappearance. Betsy's organized. She arrives before Steve heads to Intel, feeds his kids breakfast, and takes them to school and to their extracurricular activities. And she waits for him when he tells her he's bringing dinner home for everyone.

Steve suddenly hears the old man clamber down the metal steps. He turns to see what he's doing. At the bottom of the steps, Prichard picks up a handful of decorative rocks. Steve hurries inside his car just as Prichard throws the stones at the Taurus.

“Coward! Negligent cur!” Steve hears the old man yell as he pulls away from Desertrama Trailer Park.



Chapter 8: Camino Real

I grab my belongings from the New York Hotel and rush out the door. It would be awkward if Martha and Henry suddenly showed up as I'm on my way out. How obvious. I'm ditching them. But somehow, I tell myself, they'd graciously respect my decision.

I decide to spend a few weeks in Mexico City. I need to take care of matters. And I want to pamper myself, have a “spa day for the girls,” as Betsy likes to say when coaxing me to the Biltmore in Scottsdale. Steve spoiled me with a life so unlike the one I had during childhood and my early twenties. And indulgence is hard to give up.

I check into the Hotel Camino Real near Chapultepec Park. I came across this hotel and spa with Henry and Martha during a walk in the park when we first arrived in the city. We went to the restaurant inside for coffee and I kept thinking how much I'd rather stay here than at the New York budget hotel. Of course, I didn't say this to Martha and Henry.

What really stood out to me was the front fountain before the valet portico. It's a huge saucer dish that splashes water back and forth, like a god panning for gold. The fountain nearly

hypnotized me as I watched it for several minutes while thinking about the mirror Tezcatlipoca in the milky way so humanity can take a good look at itself. At pur true natures.

I end up spending a month at Camino Real, relaxing at the spa, reading my cache of books and New Yorkers, and studying my AAA guides. Why not? I'm certain the mystical equinox vibes cured me. I think Smoking Mirror is showing me this when I watch the splashing saucer fountain. I take daily walks in the park and visit the anthropology museum and Frida Kahlo's Blue House several times. At the American Embassy, I apply for a passport using a birth certificate and driver's license. Steve was unaware I had these duplicates. At a Joyas de Oro, I pawn my wedding and engagement rings but I simply can't part with my jadeite necklace.

On the first of May, I leave Mexico City. Navigating with AAA maps, I head for the city of Puebla on 150D which turns out to be a hefty toll road. My first stop is Cholula, the site of the largest and oldest pyramid in Mexico, built in 300 BC around the time of Teotihuacan and at the end of the Olmec civilizations. The ancients dedicated their Grand Pyramid to the feathered serpent and called it Tlachihualtepetl, the manmade mountain. It now stands in the pueblo like a green mountain. The sixteenth-century neoclassic Catholic church perched on its top is called Our Lady of Remedies. I figure this is a fitting place to ask for reassurance that my cure is permanent. A little extra divine padding never hurts.

My next stop is Oaxaca. Martha and Henry raved about the city's art, culture and history. And they suggested there are lots of health spas. I must have mentioned my interested in a health resort because I'm sure I never said anything about my condition and that I was looking for a natural cure.

I visit the Monte Alban ruins on a flattened mountaintop where the Zapotec "Cloud People" reigned for 1,500 years. They were one of Mesoamerica's earliest cultures along with

the Olmecs, the Classic Mayas, the people of Teotihuacan, and those who built the mountain pyramid near Puebla. The Cloud People developed their own writing system of glyphs and had their own gods as well as gods taken from the Olmecs. **I imagine that the Aztecs who reigned thousands of years after most of these first Mesoamerican cultures, inherited many of their gods and traditions. Rather like the Incas who were contemporaries of the Aztecs, adopted many cultural traits from the earlier civilizations of the Andes. For me, it just goes to show how interconnected we all are. Just by traveling here and seeing all the relics they left behind, I feel connected with these ancient people myself.**

For two weeks, I live with my first homestay family while studying Spanish at a language school. My tutor, a young man named Gato, gives me one-on-one instruction. After hours of intensive *gramatica* in the tropical heat, my mind easily wanders and sometimes I fall asleep during the lesson, with my eyes wide open like Moby Jack under the coconut palm at Mar Rosa. And I'm not even drunk or high on weed.

One day, as I wander through the herb market hoping I won't run into Martha and Henry, I encounter an elderly Zapotec curandero. I tell him I had a terrible condition that the spring equinox cured but I want to be sure I'm not merely in some kind of remission. He gives me a spiritual cleansing in the name of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the Saint of Oaxaca, Our Lady of Solitude. He advises I eat a vegetarian and fish diet based on the native foods of the Americas and gives me a list of herbs for teas and infusions.

During the session, the curandero talks about the Aztec medicine gods Mayahuel and her husband Patecatl. "They gave the Aztecs plants to heal," he tells me. "Especially the agave for the Aztecs to make a cure-all alcohol called pulque."

The curandero gives me a sample of pulque but recommends I stay away from other intoxicants, especially beer. “Mayahuel and Patecatl are your spirit guides on this dieta of good health,” he tells me at our parting.

After about a month, I leave Oaxaca and drive to Tabasco, Chiapas, Campeche, and the Yucatan Peninsula. Each time I arrive in a new city, I check into the nicest hotel then find a language school with a homestay. On weekends, I venture to the Maya ruins in the tropical jungle. It’s a good life. A nice routine. **And all the while, I drink herbal teas, eat vegetarian meals, and ask Mayahuel and Patecatl to keep me on the path of good health, of no remission, and no backtracking into any chronic disorder.**

From the ruins of Coba in Quintana Roo, I head to Belize where people speak English. Instead of intensive Spanish, I spend a month at a beach resort, boating, snorkeling in the reef, and thinking about what I want to do with my life now that I’m cured and well on my way to Tierra del Fuego. I decide the best thing for me now is to have a child and perpetuate my life. Steve deprived me of my own children and left me with very little time.

What I need is a man with good genes which makes me think about Moby Jack’s friend in Costa Rica, Arturo Barrantes. Jack described him as educated and with a rich heritage. He said Arturo went from SDSU to UCLA where he earned a Ph.D. in the astronomy of pre-Columbian civilizations. *Arturo has the blood of Columbus and conquistadors mixed with the king-priests of Mesoamerica* I distinctly recall Jack telling me. *He’s a hidalgo man.*

Hidalgo? I had to ask. It was an unfamiliar term.

Yes, Arturo comes from noble Spanish blood. The more I think about it, the more I want to travel to Costa Rica to meet Arturo and somehow persuade him to father my child.

On my drive to Costa Rica, I spend a month traveling through Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua while studying Spanish at language schools. I'm in no rush. I still have a good ten years of fertility.

From my host families, I learn firsthand about the political turmoil these countries have endured when the US meddled in their politics. The 1980–1992 civil war in El Salvador ended four years before my arrival. Both Carter and Reagan had supported a military government in El Salvador against a liberation front of leftist guerrillas. The conflict brought about mass disappearances, human rights violations, and bloodshed. Costa Rica seems to be the only Central American country spared from the political trauma the US inflicted.

At the end of September, I arrive in Liberia, Costa Rica, just south of Nicaragua. By now, I'm certain I'll find Arturo and he'll give me a baby. It's kismet, in the cards. Too many things have fallen into place--the equinox event, the Zapotec curandero's dieta, my prayer in Cholula to the Lady of Remedies, and my invocations to Mayahuel and Patecatl as I stick to my health dieta. And I'm certain the fountain at the camino real was Tezcatlipoca's mirror showing me the way to personal fulfillment now that I'm free of my chronic condition. How I'll go about establishing my proposal with the hidalgo man seems a delicate matter. I can't pop up in his classroom during a lecture and say *Here I am. Ready to have your child. Let's go about it.* No, I must first establish myself at a language school with a homestay. And ease into a situation that works for me and maybe for him.

At a supermercado I buy the English language paper *Tico Times* and look through ads for language schools. A school in San Juan de Flores catches my eye. The town is centered around a stone church built in the 1800s and isn't far from San Jose where Arturo is teaching at the most prestigious and oldest university in Costa Rica.

The language school turns out to be a large two-story concrete stucco house with wide porches in the front and back filled with desks and chairs. The backyard has a green lawn, a koi pond, mango trees, banana plants, and vegetable gardens. It's idyllic and so is the quaint little town.

When I arrive, the owner of the school, Señora Ana Rosa Herrera, greets me on the front porch. She gives me an exam to determine my Spanish language skills which aren't too shabby after several months of one-on-one lessons.

One of Mrs. Herrera's sons escorts me a few blocks from the school to my homestay with the Morales family. They live in a brick house painted blue with wrought iron bars on all the doors and windows. I safely park the Explorer in their backyard.

My hosts provide me with a private room and three vegetarian meals a day according to my dieta of no meat. Over the following days, Mrs. Morales feeds me rice and black beans, fried plantains, and pico de gallo for lunch and dinner, and scrambled eggs, sour cream, and coffee for breakfast.

After a week at the academy, I'm ready to meet Arturo Barrantes. I've been feeling so healthy and well fed that I'm positive I'm not simply in remission. My dieta of Mayahuel and Patecatl sustains my good health. I feel young vibrant and glowing, in fact.

Wearing my jadeite necklace and showing a little cleavage for my first encounter with Moby Jack's friend, I drive to the Universidad de Costa Rica in San Jose, a landlocked city surrounded by volcanoes Poas, Turrialba, and Irazu. As I wander around the park-like campus looking for the admissions building, I wonder if Moby Jack made it down here and is staying with his college chum. *Wouldn't that be funny?* I think to myself. *Oh, hi, old friend!* I'd say. *Sorry, but back in Mazatlán, I couldn't find you when I had to get going.* It would be a lame

excuse and I doubt Moby Jack is even here unless his beach bum son and Ms. Spicehead brought him down here. If so, oh well. And to think he had his crusty paws all over me. At least we had a great conversation about Aztec cosmology before bandits interrupted. I expect to have plenty more enlightening discussions with professor Barrantes. He's an expert on Mesoamerica after all. Maybe he'll suggest an Aztec name for my little bambino. God of thunder, if it's a boy. Goddess of fortune, if a girl. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

From the admissions office, a secretary escorts me across campus to Professor Barrantes' office in the *Escuela de Fisica* building. At his open door, she greets a man wearing a brown suit behind a large desk with an HP Pavilion, stacks of files, and issues of *Observer el Cielo -- Sky & Telescope* in Spanish. Professor Arturo Barrantes is clean-shaven with a light-tan complexion. There's nothing ruddy or crusty about him.

"Professor," the secretary says. "*Una amiga de America.*"

"What can I do for you, my friend from America?" The man gestures me into his large office. Everything's neatly arranged on the bookshelves and cabinets. One wall displays astronomy pictures, a stone Aztec calendar, pictures of Maya ruins, and the Sun Stone on Machu Pichu taken when no shadow is cast. I recognize the picture from the Hubble space telescope and say, to break the ice, "The Pillars of Creation." I'm somewhat nervous and feel like I'm on a first date. The professor has no idea what I'm up to, that I have a monumental request to make of him.

"*Por supuesto,*" he says. "The Pillars of Creation." He joins me by the wall and points out some of the other photographs. "This is a picture of Hale-Bopp that I took in May and that's my picture of the July 11, 1991 solar eclipse in Mexico."

As I look over the pictures on the wall I smell his wood and leather cologne and feel his gaze upon me. His eminence, like his cologne, fills the room and puts me at ease. It's a good sign, I think. A positive start.

"This September 27, I'm setting up my telescope at the planetarium for a public viewing of the night sky. You're welcome to join us, my friend from America."

"I'm from Arizona."

He smiles. "Please have a seat, *mi amiga de Arizona*." He holds the tip of my chair as I sit before his desk. "You know my name." He sits behind the desk. "But I don't know yours."

He has a deep voice like that of Vicente Fox and his accent speaks of his American education. It's Californian English, but he's nothing like Moby Jack. "My name's Mariella but people call me Arizona."

"I like that. It's a fitting name."

"How many solar eclipses have you seen?" I ask to keep the conversation going.

"First in Florida, 1970. Then I saw the 1979 eclipse in Portland. I'm planning to see the one over the Galapagos in two years."

"I've been to El Castillo." I indicate his photograph of the observatory in Chichen Itza.

He smiles. He likes me, I can tell, and he likes to talk about the pictures on his wall. "El Castillo is a sophisticated Maya calendar. Legend says that the Aztecs actually founded their city to coincide with a total solar eclipse."

"When the puma swallows the sun."

"Yes. You know your Mexican history."

“I’ve been reading about Mesoamerica during this trip. But I’m hardly an expert like you.” He smiles charmingly and I notice dimples in his cheeks and chin. Maybe from his noble lineage. Maybe he’s descended from Queen Isabella or King Ferdinand.

“Did you know the ancient Maya predicted eclipses but the Inca didn’t? For them, Inti became angry without warning when the moon eclipsed the sun. When the puma swallowed the sun as you so eloquently put it.”

“It’s interesting that the ancient Aztec and Inca civilizations existed at the same time.”

“That’s right my friend from Arizona. Cortes ended the Aztec civilization in 1521 and Pizarro took over Cusco twelve years later.” He pauses a moment to look at me and smile. I’m hoping he finds me as attractive as I find him. “And what brings you to Costa Rica?” he says.

“I’m a museum curator on a year’s sabbatical,” I think to say, out of the blue. I don’t want to tell him the real reason I’m sitting before him or why I’m on this journey, traveling south along the Pan-Am. I’m mad at myself for not anticipating questions before meeting Jack’s sophisticated friend. I guess my mind has been in the clouds with Cloud Serpent, Smoking Mirror and the Cloud People of Mt. Alban. “You see. Professor Barrantes,” I add to change the topic. “About six months ago, I ran into a friend of yours, Jack Senna, in Mazatlán. You may know him as Moby Jack. He said you were chums at SDSU and that you’re now an astronomer here in Costa Rica.”

“*Encantada*, Ms. Arizona!”

“Moby Jack was on his way to see you,” I say. Arturo’s smile, dimples, and intoxicating cologne, transfixes me and I lose my train of thought. For a moment. “Jack couldn’t make it, so I decided to meet you myself. Let you know about him.”

For the next twenty minutes, Arturo talks about bonfire beach parties, working at the yacht club with Moby Jack, and sailing with him to Dana Point, Catalina, and Mexico. “After Jack’s wife died, he took to drinking. I was best man at their wedding. Hadn’t seen them for ten years. Then Jack called. *Patricia’s dead* that’s how he said it. She died in a car accident. I flew up for the funeral and found Jack in bad shape. Her death was his undoing.” He stops. “I must catch myself. Dreadful gossip isn’t courteous. Tell me about your museum.”

“What?” I remember my made-up story.

“You said you’re a curator? For which museum?”

I almost say the Heard, the most famous museum in Arizona where I once viewed a Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera exhibit, but I stop myself before venturing into something I know so little about. I’m a Blockbuster bookkeeper, not a scientist and this man must know about the Heard Museum. He probably knows the curator. “I work at the SW Heritage Museum in Mesa.” Before he can comment, I add, “I’ve been driving through Mexico and Central America in an Explorer.”

“Are you wearing a Burmese jadeite?” I nod, glad he changes the subject for me. I think he can read people like a book, he’s so smart. Smarter than even my very smart husband, or ex-husband it now seems certain.

“You’re right, Professor. Burmese jadeite. You seem to know your gemstones.”

“We have lots of jade artifacts in Costa Rica and a famous jade museum in the city. But with your credentials, I’m sure you know that the ancient Mesoamericans valued jade as much as gold.” His watch suddenly beeps. “I have a lecture in quantum physics coming up. Allow me to escort you to the visitor’s parking lot on my way to the lecture hall.”

A few minutes later, while on our way to the parking area, we stop at a cupid and swan fountain before the library. “This is the main meeting point on campus,” Arturo says, then looks at his watch.

I know he’s in a hurry and must be a punctual man, but I want to prolong my time with him. I feel like I’ve made a good impression, like everything is under control and that it won’t be long before he asks me out on a date. As I’m thinking over the possibilities, I notice several Inca doves on the lawn around the fountain. They’re bobbing their heads with each step they take and making cooing noises that sound like *no hope*.

“We have Inca doves in Mesa.” I don’t want to mention Ahwatukee; it’s too close to my past. “I like to watch them from the breakfast nook window. They bask in the sun and stretch a wing skyward, like a sailboat. I’m amazed they’re this far south but I don’t know anything about the migration of Inca doves. Do they migrate from Arizona or stop over in Arizona?” I assume Arturo knows something about everything. He reminds me of Steve in this way, although Steve has nothing else in common with Arturo Barrantes.

“Inca doves are permanent residential birds. They live year-round in their place of parentage. Most don’t migrate. They dwell in urban areas from the SW US to Costa Rica.”

Arturo seems in no hurry to leave me. Another promising sign. I may have hooked him. I hope. “You mean inca doves stay where they’re born?” He smiles and nods. “This is so unlike me,” I continue. “I’ve always wanted to leave my hometown. That’s why I’m on this trip. It’s a lifelong dream come true.”

He grips my hand in a handshake and gazes at me for a moment. “You’ve spread you wings and took flight.” He winks and shows his dimples. “You’re so brave to travel on your own

so far from Arizona. You drove an Explorer, you said?" I nod. "And where are you staying, my brave Inca dove? If you don't mind my asking."

"At a homestay near my language school in San Juan de Flores."

"I know San Juan well. A charming town not far from the butterfly farm where I serve on the board of directors." He releases my hand and looks at his watch again. "I think you're a remarkable young woman, Ms. Arizona. And you know about the Pillars of Creation. I'm sorry I'm pressed for time. Please allow me to call on you at your language school. I'd like to show you the jade museum if you'll accept my invitation."

I'd love that, I say and picture him, this *hidalgo* gentleman, clicking his heels, slightly bowing and tipping his felt cavalier hat with an ostrich plume. Like, perhaps, Cervantes or conquistadors Hernan Cortes and Francisco Pizarro. Everything about Arturo Barrantes makes my heart flutter—his looks, mind, the clothes he wears, and his cologne. I nearly blurt out my intentions but pull myself back and watch him hurry off to teach physics as Inca doves call one another from the fountain's edge.

A week passes before Mrs. Herrera approaches my table on the school's back porch where I'm studying grammatica with a tutor named Rita. "You have a visitor," Mrs. Herrera says and I shut my book dizzy with excitement. I know who it is. It couldn't be anyone else. No one's looking for me. Not Steve. I'm long gone from his life and I can't imagine him hunting me down. Or Betsy. Certainly, she's figured out I left Steve and his kids and has given up on our ever being best friends again. My past is over and redundant.

In the school's office, Professor Arturo Barrantes, dressed in a suit, politely invites me to lunch in San Jose. "After lunch, I'll take you to the Jade Museum, my brave Inca dove."

“I love Costa Rican food, professor. But I’m on a vegetarian diet except for fish. A Zapotec curandero in Oaxaca recommended it. He said to let Mayahuel and Patecatl guide my dieta.”

“The Aztec medicine gods?”

“Yes. I’m not ill or anything. I just aim to keep fit,” I add so he won’t think I need a special cure. “I plan to hike the Inca Trail.”

“*Dios mia! Un viaje epico!* Please call me Arturo. I know the perfect place to take a vegetarian American. Remember, I lived in California for ten years.”

In a Mocha Ford Escort, Arturo takes me to Chelles, a quaint restaurant opened in 1909 near San Jose’s central park. He pulls out my chair at the table and we both order fish casado with rice, black beans, fried plantains, guacamole, and gallo pinto.

Arturo discusses his country and says, at one point, “We don’t have the monuments and pyramids of Mexico and Guatemala but we have rainforests, beaches, and gold and jade relics buried across the country. Unfortunately, most artifacts in our museums were looted. Not carefully excavated. As a consequence, we don’t know much about the early Chibchan people who came to Costa Rica from the north. When Columbus arrived, the natives were wearing gold and jade pendants and ear studs. This is why he named our country Costa Rica, the rich coast.”

“What happened to the Chibchan people? Did they migrate farther south? Or north?”

“Most died from European diseases.”

“Like the Aztecs and Incas.”

“Yes, Inca dove. Like most native peoples of the Americas. These days, the Chibchan make up only one percent of Costa Rica’s population.”

“Interesting,” I say and take a few bites of my salad while wondering if Arturo sees me as a friend because I’m a friend of Moby Jack’s, or if we’re on a first date.

“Tell me about your work at the SW Museum.” Arturo stirs me from my thoughts. “Indigenous cultures of the American Southwest? The Hopi, Zuni, Apache. Do you arrange exhibits of their pottery and artifacts at your museum?”

I sip my water and wonder what to say. I’m not used to contriving stories as I go along. It doesn’t suit me. Lies are meant to hide something done wrong. Otherwise, there’s nothing to hide. *What do I have to gain from such folly?* I ask myself. *To spare someone’s feelings? Tell Arturo the truth.* “Actually, I’m not a curator. I’m a bookkeeper traveling to Tierra del Fuego. But I did meet your friend along the way.” I’m stumbling with my words and remind myself that I’m an attractive woman, healthy, in the prime of my life, and want to have a baby with this hidalgo man.

“*Contador*,” Arturo says. “You should be proud of that, *cariño*. You put together business records for tax purposes. You help people and you obviously have an interest in astronomy and pre-Columbian cultures. That’s why you came to see me, *correcto*?”

“Yes. I’ve been interested in the Incas since sixth grade. All my life I’ve wanted to travel south of the border but it seemed I never could. Until now.”

“Tell me more about yourself, Inca dove. I want to know.”

I ponder Arturo’s request and think about Cliff Turner. “I graduated from Mesa High School, home to the purple gold jackrabbits,” I say. “And worked as a waitress while going to Scottsdale Community College for my associate’s degree in bookkeeping. I had parttime bookkeeping jobs and helped out my parents. I was ready to travel south but my mother fell ill.”

“I’m sorry about your mother. You truly are brave and stoic to give up your childhood dreams to care for your parents. Not everyone possesses such dignity and honor.”

Arturo puts more at ease. He seems to know the right thing to say. But I change the subject and ask about the jade museum. I don’t want to describe my mother’s death or how I left Steve and the kids and my poor dad. How my marriage wasn’t right for me and my condition merely propelled me into chasing my dream down the Pan Am.

After lunch, Arturo takes me to the jade and gold museums then to the university’s planetarium. He’s very proud of the building he helped establish. We watch a forty-minute presentation called “Stars over Costa Rica.”

When we’re leaving the planetarium I think of things to say to prolong our growing relationship. We need to reach a point where I’m comfortable telling him my true aim. “I’d love to see the real stars over Costa Rica.”

He smiles broadly and promises to arrange such an outing.

A few days later, while I’m one-on-one with Rita, Arturo shows up and invites me to his butterfly farm, Finca de Mariposas, in the neighboring town Alajuela. Within the hour, we’re strolling along the garden path inside an enormous butterfly terrarium. The warm humidity is thick with vanilla jasmine and honeysuckle aromas. A stream meanders through the screened-in habitat landscaped with boulders, ferns, passion flowers, banana trees, and bromeliads and orchids on palm trees.

Arturo points out Zebra, Dutchman's Pipe, and Owl butterflies. When a butterfly of iridescent metallic turquoise lands on a red ginger flower, he stops me in my pace with a slight grasp of my arm. "See the Morpho Pleiades? She's the prize of Costa Rica."

"Like the star sisters, the Pleiades?"

"Yes, Inca dove. Like those stars. See how the cosmos is interconnected. We live in one big bang biosphere."

I chuckle hoping he's being funny. Like Steve tried to amuse me with his knowledge of engineering and physics. But Steve's attempts often fell flat with me. So unlike Arturo. I find everything he says charming and wise and humorous. He makes me shiver and chuckle inside and out as my heart races like a Ferrari.

Farther along the path Arturo points out a fluttering moth with black wings. "This is a Rothschildia moth," he whispers to not scare it away. "She's the Aztec goddess Itzpapalotl, the beautiful butterfly maiden. According to Aztec lore, her wings are as sharp as obsidian blades and during a solar eclipse, she threatens to devour people in the darkness."

"I know about her. Itzpapalotl. She's queen of the ninth Aztec heaven," I suggest with a grin. "Where the Tzitzimime spirits dwell when they become the butterfly stars around the eclipsed sun. It's an image as beautiful to me as the Pillars of Creation. At least in my mind."

"Yes, Inca dove." He touches my arm. "Just like that. A beautiful image of the solar eclipse."

Arturo makes me smile. I love talking to him because I know he takes me seriously and appreciates what I have to say. My voice. My ideas. My opinion. Like I'm someone who has something of value to contribute. Most of the time, it seems to me now, Steve failed to make me feel this way.

“People think the Aztecs were all about sacrificing captives,” I say as we continue along the path. “But they had a very vivid cosmology as I’m sure you know. I mean, your chum Moby Jack and his son described the journey through the nine places of hell as the journey of life. One filled with treachery difficulty and obstacles. You and Jack probably discussed this when you were sailing on yachts.”

Arturo laughs, “Me gusto mucho, carina. Not only are you brave. You’re as brilliant and enterprising as the Tzitzimime butterfly stars around the eclipsed sun.”

“You flatter me, professor.” I take a picture of another Aztec goddess on a tropical leaf. It remains still, as if posing for me, then flies away. I want to take Arturo’s picture but he’s not comfortable with the idea. I suspect he’s married and being with me is risky. I don’t want to ask him because I don’t want to know. I just want him to like me enough to father my baby. It’s as simple as that.

“At Finca de Mariposas we’re dedicated to the life cycle of butterflies,” Arturo tells me down the path. He speaks of everything in his country as his. He’s obviously proud of his nationality and heritage, as he should be. He’s a hidalgo Tico man with class and distinction. I’m falling in love but try not to show it and scare him off with my emotions before we even get anything started. “I’d love to hear about the butterfly cycle, professor,” I say as I feel my heart transform into a fluttering mariposa.

“They mate and lay eggs that transform to larvae and pupae. Then the butterfly emerges and flies in the sun with iridescent wings of many colors. According to most pre-Columbian cultures, butterflies are resurrected spirits on their way to heaven.”

“Like the hummingbird for the Incas,” I suggest.

He smiles. “Yes. Hummingbirds and butterflies. You’d think they were a related species.”

We sit on a bench by the stream near a bird of paradise plant. Fans overhead are cooling the habitat. After a moment of listening to the flowing stream, I place my hand on his arm and say, “Papillion, mariposa, and butterfly are such beautiful names.”

Arturo remains quiet. He seems to be enjoying the peaceful setting and is unmoved by my touch, which makes me wonder if he still sees me as a friend of a mutual friend rather than his date, his potential lover. I get the feeling I must make the first move because Arturo is too much of a gentleman.

I close my eyes and feel him touching my hand. *Or is it a breeze from the fans overhead?* He’s sitting very near me, enshrouding me with his essence. His wood and leather cologne penetrates the humid air and my butterfly heart.

“Butterflies are beautiful creatures,” he says. I open my eyes. He’s looking at me. “And so are you, my brave Inca dove.” A butterfly suddenly lands on my nose. “A butterfly kiss,” Arturo says with a chuckle. He takes my camera and snaps a photo of me. “And it’s a rare Memphis Ryphea, scarlet red with black trim.” When Arturo snaps the photo, the papillon flies off its biosphere.

Arturo sets aside my camera and firmly grips my hand. He’s making the first move, after all. He helps me rise from the bench and we continue along the path as he holds my hand by a few fingers. It’s quaint. Appropriate. But I’m not crystal clear about his intentions. We stop on a bridge over the artificial stream. His grip now feels friendly, like companionship, not anything sensual.

I think he's going to kiss my hand and tap his heels, and once and for all make it clear that we're more than friends. But before he can make his next move, I boldly ask, "Will you give me a baby?" I may have said it too loudly. There are a few other people in the biosphere and Arturo's on the board of directors.

"*Que dijiste?*" He asks.

"I want to have a child. And I like you. To me, you're the perfect man to give me what I want. Do you agree?" I can't believe how brazen I'm being. I guess when you've faced mortality, you have to get right to the point regarding what you want from life because life is fragile and temporary like that of the butterfly. It doesn't last forever.

Arturo looks astonished. But not abashed. Perhaps he's even intrigued. He thinks I'm very pretty and maybe making love to me has been on his mind since I first entered his office and reminded him of beach party days in San Diego, with Jack Senna. And he's a man who loves beautiful women. But I doubt he was expecting my request that he father my child.

"Lovely lady, *mi cariño*," he finally whispers so no one can hear. "I'm married. My second wife is as young as you. We have two children, three and five years old. I'm fifty-five. To have another child at my age isn't." He stutters. "It's inappropriate."

"Nonsense." I wink, still holding his hand on the bridge beside boulders and philodendrons. He takes my hand to his lips. My heart now is a flurry of butterflies in a snow storm. Like Itzpapalotl and her Tzitzimime butterfly stars popping up and sparkling around the eclipsed sun. "Only women and butterflies reach deadlines," I whisper. "And I'm nearing mine. I like you, Arturo, and want to have your baby."

"What about my young wife?" Arturo asks. "And my *niños*?" It seems he's looking for an excuse. But his eyes don't dismiss my provocative idea.

“I want a baby while I can.” I no longer care who’s listening.

“*Dios mia!* It’s time we go.” He firmly grasps my hand and leads me to the nearby exit.

When we’re seated in his Ford and the engine is purring with the air conditioner cooling us down, Arturo says, “*Cariño*, yes, I want to make love to you. I’ve wanted to since you came into my office and knew about the Pillars of Creation. But we can only be together with no past and no future. No talk about a baby. And no pictures of me, no writing about us. And if you want a baby, I cannot be present in its life. I already have a family. In fact, I have two. Do you understand? *Cariño?*”

“Yes,” I say, overwhelmed he’s agreed to my request and charmed by his organized thoughts on how we’ll proceed.

A few weeks later, during the rainy season on the Pacific Coast, Arturo takes me to Arenal Volcano National Park. He claims it’s his favorite place in Costa Rica. “Arenal is one of the most active volcanoes in the world,” he tells me. “THE ‘68 eruption killed many people and destroyed several villages.”

“I sure hope it doesn’t blow its top while were there.”

“Don’t worry. I trust our scientists and their instruments.”

We stay at the Arenal Observatory Lodge, a spa resort with open decks for stargazing. The deck of our suite faces the cone volcano. In the cool mountain air, we relax in the naturally heated pools, hike around lava beds, and enjoy the spa. Betsy and our spa days seem a hundred years ago in a different world. In fact, I can’t believe I had another life before I left Ahwatukee. Now I’m consumed with my hidalgo man. My thoughts focus on him; my spirit aligns with his

like two planets in the celestial biodome; and my body has never reached such heights of anticipation and energy. If I'm only in remission, I know just being with Arturo will cure me.

When we make love, my mind fills with Enrique singing *una experiencia religiosa*. *I'm revived when you touch me. I rise to heaven*. Arturo is an older man who knows the world, himself and how to please me well beyond the sexual passion of a young Casanova. He appeals to me in electromagnetic ways. He's quantum magic and I melt and meld into mush under his embrace.

I trust him so much that I admit to never having had an orgasm—something I've never told anyone before, not even Betsy and especially not Steve. He didn't care anyway because he didn't care about sex, or so it seemed to me.

"*Querida amiga*," Arturo says as I lie in his arms. "Don't worry about such things. Love is ambrosia from the gods, from the stars of heaven, an intoxicating drink Mayahuel and Patecutl give us called pulque. Don't place so much importance on what doesn't matter. You're smart, inquisitive, and curious. You're a keeper of books."

I rest on his shoulder and smell his scent while thinking how he makes me feel clever. I've always been attracted to smart men like my husband. I think Steve wooed me into marriage because he's smart and enterprising but he's not intriguing. He didn't know how to communicate with me, let alone make love or make me love him enough to put up with his inhibitions. *Why are you reflecting on the past?* Muriel! my mind screams. *It's an unending spiral into the nine Aztec hells*. Then I think of Arturo's words "without a past, without a future," and decide to make them my mantra as I fall asleep in his embrace.

At midnight, when the first quarter moon sets and the clouds have departed, Arturo shows me features of the night sky. On our hotel deck he sets up his Schmidt-Cassegrain telescope calibrated to the pole star.

Many constellations are new to me and the ones I know look backward or unrecognizable. It feels topsy-turvy. Or is it just love? He shows me the Hale-Bopp comet in Ophiuchus and tells me it's been visible to the naked eye since last May. When I look through the eyepiece, I describe the comet as a greenish gem with a plume of jadeite tresses.

He laughs. "*Me gusto mucho carina.*"

He points to the bright star in the southwest, above Sagittarius. "That's Jupiter," he says. We view the four moons, then Neptune, Uranus, and fuzzy globular clusters. High in the southeast, he points to Saturn.

I take Arturo's hand and **tell him about the Inca boy in my sixth-grade report. He listens with great interest. "I sometimes wonder if his last glimpse in his short life was of the stars above him. The stars the Incas named. Can you tell me about the Inca night sky?"**

He kisses my hands held together. "Yes. Carina. I love telling you about the ancient Astronomy of the Americas. The Sagittarius arm of our galaxy is especially bright in the southern hemisphere. It has light and dark patches. The Incas saw the dark patches as animals with spirits tied to those on Earth."

"String Theory?"

"Yes. Exacto. The Incas saw a toad, snake, fox, partridge. The llama and her baby are above Cusco now. Mama Llama's eye is Alpha Centauri, the third brightest star in the sky. It's only 4.37 light years away."

“The Aztecs saw the Milky Way as a snake with Smoking Mirror showing us who we are.”

“I like that,” he says and shows me the star in his telescope. “The Incas called the Southern Cross Chakana and viewed it as the rainbow jaguar bridge across the Milky Way at the center of their universe. It has four corners, with a center hole directly connected to Cusco.”

I peer through the telescope while thinking how I never imagined life could be so magnificent. With such magic. I have no doubt Arturo will give me a child. “I’ll remember your words when I’m in the Andes hiking the Inca Trail,” I tell him.

“I hope you aren’t in a hurry to leave me. It’s too soon. I will miss you deeply, *cariña*.” He kisses my neck and smells my hair. “So fragrant, your lavender shampoo. I hope I can give you your heart’s desire.”

“You already have. Your mere presence sends me over the jaguar rainbow bridge.”

He chuckles as he moves the scope to a dark patch in the milky way. “You’re on a great journey. Hiking the Inca Trail. Driving to Tierra del Fuego. I wish we could be together, that you could stay in Costa Rica and be my brave Inca dove. Sadly, you and I have each other only at this moment, when Mars and Venus are both morning stars. We’ll watch Mercury rise if the sky is clear just before sunrise. Then we’ll make love. Paloma Inca.”

On Sunday, our last day on the volcano, Arturo takes me on an early morning wildlife hike through the rainforest. We don’t need a guide because Arturo knows the terrain. The lodge provides us with olive green ponchos and rain hats and Arturo carries his Bushnell Navy binoculars for birding.

We stroll hand in hand through the mountain forest rich with giant Ceibo trees, orchids, and ferns. I take pictures with my Kodak, never of my lover, of course, but of butterflies, flowers, a sloth hanging from a cecropia branch, a little red-eye tree frog that Arturo points out, and a coati that crosses our path. “Arizona has coatis,” I tell Arturo.

“Like Inca doves,” he suggests, to amuse me.

At one point, a bird calls *whoop whoop whoop* with a soft monotone. “That’s a blue crowned motmot,” Arturo says. “There. Can you see him?” He points to a nearby tree. In the branches sits a bird with a long blue tail feather and a blue crown. “We have such beautiful birds in Costa Rica. The quetzal, toucan, scarlet macaw. The Aztecs had a goddess called Xochuquetzal, the maiden with quetzal feathers. She’s beautiful, youthful, and vibrant, like you, my clever paloma.”

“Arturo, Moby Jack called me Xochuquezal. Did he influence you or you him?”

He laughs and takes my hands. We don’t have to be discreet because no one’s around; we aren’t at the language school, at his university, or in public. He squeezes my hands as the motmot flies off with a *whoop whoop whoop*.

Farther up the trail, we stop at a plateau in view of the active cinder cone rising from the rainforest. Clouds are surrounding its peak. With my camera, Arturo takes my picture before the volcano.

“I hope it doesn’t blow,” I say.

“It won’t, Paloma. Those are clouds around its top, not volcanic steam.”

A moment later, he’s holding me in his arms as we watch the clouds sweep down the mountain toward us almost like a pyroclastic eruption. “We must hurry to the lodge before the cloudburst. We can sit in the hot springs one last time. It’s enchanting in the rain.”

Hand in hand, we head down the trail but soon the rainstorm catches us. In a clearing on the sloping trail, Arturo stops for a moment and stands before me as the downpour drenches us. He takes off my rain hat. “I want to see your eyes, Paloma. And I want you to feel the rain on your beautiful skin.”

I gaze at Arturo’s handsome face under his hat then close my eyes. Thunder claps as he holds up my chin.

“I taste the elixir of Mayahuel and Patecutl,” I say. “It’s sweet sour and bitter all at once. Strong and toxic. Powerful. It tastes of everything I’ve ever tasted. It smells of jasmine and honey. Of all the fragrance I’ve ever known. And more.”

“How does the rain sound, Paloma?”

“Like a million butterfly wings ripping the edge of space and time into a new dimension.”

“This is love. Where we are now, you and I. The realm of forever. We are quantum particles both light and matter. We are the sound smell and taste of rain. Of a million butterfly kisses at the end of the world. My beautiful quetzal maiden.”

When he stops kissing me, he gazes at my face through the downpour. I hear him say, “I can’t tell if you have tears or if it’s just the rain.”

A bolt of lightning illuminates the turbulent skies and thunder claps. “We’d better go,” Arturo says. “Lightning has struck many people on Arenal, including American tourists.”

But we remain a moment longer in the rain. Conditions are too perfect. Too intense. I never thought it possible, yet here I am, deeply in love with a man. And he seems to be in love with me.



Chapter 9: Ciudad de Panama

On the Pan-American Highway, I drive straight from San Jose to Panama City. It's a twelve-hour drive with three hours at Paso Canoas for border exit stamps, entry fees, vehicle permits, fumigation of the Explorer, and a little grease money to smooth out complications.

In 1671, my AAA guidebook says, Captain Henry Morgan aimed to loot the New Spain colony on the narrow isthmus between the Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea. The governor of Panama was prepared for the invasion and burned down the city to prevent Morgan from pillaging the city's bounty. Colonial citizens rebuilt their city west of the ruins. These days Old Panama, Casco Viejo, is a barrio of Spanish colonial buildings within the modern metropolis of skyscrapers and condos.

Casco Viejo is where I decide to stay and think through my emotions about the man I just left without saying goodbye. I need to consider how I'm going to have this baby and raise it while traveling to the end of the world. Most likely, I won't be hiking the Inca Trail but I do plan to take a bus tour to Machu Picchu no matter how far along I may be or if I have a newborn in tow. I know I can do anything I set my mind to. Too many good things have fallen into place. It's kismet karma and fate bundled together and tied with a string.

I credit Arturo for instilling in me such confidence and hope. My feelings of being in love were intense but fleeting like the life cycle of a mariposa. I'll never see him again, even with the

baby. He has a wife and children, two families, really. I won't be his third and will never be a second mommy again. Besides, and mostly, I'm on an unstoppable journey to the end of the world, propelled by my condition. Or what once was a condition. My action is reaction.

At Casa Viejo Hotel, I park in a secure garage and check into a queen's suite. After a good night's sleep and complimentary breakfast, I walk along the cobblestone streets to Plaza de la Independencia, a landmark dedicated to Panama's independence from Colombia in 1903. I take pictures of the cathedral and think about Arturo and the baby growing inside me. I haven't had a period in over a month and my time with Arturo in Arenal was during my ovulation according to my best guess.

After a few days of pampering myself at Casa Viejo Hotel, I call my friend Ivet Esquedero. When I was fleeing Night Hawk Way nine months ago, I grabbed her address. At the time, I thought about visiting her during my journey south. *Come to Panama* Ivet had often told me. She described her country as a blend of Caribbean natives, descendants of African slaves, and colonial Spaniards of New Spain.

I met Ivet when taking a class in American literature at ASU while the kids were at school. I wanted something to do other than bookkeeping. Steve suggested I take classes and literature was a topic that interested me. I enjoy reading British and American novels and the classic works by Sophocles, Dante, and Shakespeare. During this time, I also signed up for the university's International Student Services program, which matched international students with American hosts to help the students with their English and their navigation through American culture. The program assigned me to Ivet, a stunning Panamanian woman with wavy black hair and a smooth olive complexion. She could play the role of Nefertiti, I always thought. Ivet was

working on a two-year degree in system sciences for her job at the Panamanian Department of Transportation. *That's about as interesting as bookkeeping* I used to joke with her.

For two years, Ivet and I met at the Memorial Union. A few times, I invited her over for dinner with Steve and the kids. Whenever she returned to Panama for the holidays, she came back with a gift that represented her country—frog and eagle replicas of pre-Columbian gold pendants and colorful Kuna mola panels of a turtle, a parrot, and a fish. I considered her a good friend. She even joined Betsy and me on a few of our spa day extravaganzas at the Biltmore.

Now I'm glad I grabbed her address because I could really use a friend. Sometimes I miss Betsy more than I do the kids. I need someone to talk to about what's going on in my life. At least some of it. Talking to a gal pal like Betsy or Ivet is a form of self-pampering, I suppose. I mean, Betsy understood me far more than Steve ever could. We simply related to each other. I think it's what men like to call "bonding."

The following morning, I meet my exotic friend in the hotel lobby. She gives me a hug and graciously says, holding both of my hands, "*Vamos, mi querida amiga!* I want to show you the best sites of my city."

In a red Honda Civic, Ivet takes me to Calzada de Amador at the Pacific entrance to the canal. "The Calzada boardwalk extends four kilometers into the bay," Ivet tells me as we walk along the path in warm 70-degree weather. Seagulls are cawing and joggers and bicyclists are passing us by to and from the end of the pier. "It links the outlying islands Naos, Culebra, Perico, and Flamenco."

Halfway along, we sit on a park bench and take in the spectacular view of skyscrapers edging the shoreline of Panama Bay. In the bay, sailboats and international freighters are

awaiting their turn to transit the Panama Canal. Behind us, on the other side of the causeway, is the Bridge of Americas spanning the Pacific entry to the canal. I crossed this bridge when driving into the city. It's part of the Pan-Am Highway.

"Noriega had a party bunker on Culebra Isla," Ivet remarks. "When the Americans invaded, they looted and destroyed Noriega's island."

"I remember. Under Bush One in the '80s. He was after your military dictator."

"Noriega was on the CIA's payroll," Ivet says. "When Reagan turned against him, he went to the Soviets for support."

"Sounds as bad as Reagan's meddling in Central America," I suggest.

Ivet nods in agreement. "In 1671, Henry Morgan destroyed Panama. Bush was the second pirate who sacked our city. American bombs killed many Panamanians."

"It's no wonder Clinton won," I say but quickly change the subject and ask about her job. I don't want to get embroiled in American politics. It's highly offensive to a lot of people in Central America and Panama as I've been learning first hand during my travels in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. People in those countries, like Ivet, probably knew someone US actions and policies killed. I've never been much of a political person anyway. Never really expressed political views with Steve; not even with Betsy. It always seemed a private matter or at least one to avoid. I think I learned this through my parents.

"I'm now supervisor of construction and maintenance of infrastructure at the Ministerio de Obras Publicas." She touches my necklace in a friendly gesture. "You're wearing the jadeite beads Steve gave you. I remember you always wore them."

I smile, proud of owning such expensive beads even though they came from Steve. For a moment, I sit back and enjoy the fresh sea breeze.

Ivet suddenly interrupts my tranquility and begins asking endless questions. Like she can't figure me out. "What are you doing, Muriel? How's Steve? Your kids? Are you still a Blockbuster bookkeeper? How long are you staying in Panama?"

Her questions practically jolt me from my seat. I wonder if I've crossed some cultural boundary. Or riled her up because of our discussion of American political missteps in her country. "I'm on an extended vacation," I say.

"What about Steve? Kevin and Kristi? Where are they?"

I touch her hand for reassurance. I hate to see her so concerned about me. And her concern doesn't seem to be in a good way. It's as if she thinks I'm up to no good or I've done something wrong. I take a breath like I'm enjoying the sea air but know I need to allay her concerns and be honest. I can't make up a story like I tried to with Arturo. Lies don't get me anywhere and I respect Ivet too much to mislead her. Besides, she's too smart to fall for any fabricated story I might concoct. "Look Ivet. The truth is, I left Steve."

Ivet doesn't reply. Instead, she stares off into the shimmering bay. I'm worried my unannounced visit is causing her some kind of turmoil. I take hold of her hand, squeeze it, and say, "Ivet, I thought I was dying. But now I'm cured and blessed with a baby."

"*Que dijiste?* Dying? Baby? You're having Steve's baby and you leave him?"

Nearby joggers seem to overhear Ivet's words. They're looking at me as they pass by.

"No. I left Steve nine months ago. This baby isn't his."

"What are you saying? You needed a vacation in Panama? Do you need to go to a Panama hospital? We have high-quality, low-cost care. Lots of medical tourists use our clinics. Or, you can go to the San Blas Islands and find a Kuna curandero." She pauses, as if to catch her breath in the causeway breeze. "What are you going to do, Muriel? Drive back to Arizona?"

Maybe you should sell your car and fly back. Are you planning to have a baby here? In Panama? My dear friend.” Ivet now squeezes my hand. “You need to decide what you’re going to do. This is a serious matter. Do you want me to take you to a doctor?”

“No. I don’t want to see a doctor. Not yet. I don’t want to jinx my prognosis.” I’m stunned by my friend’s reaction. I can’t tell her I’m heading south to Tierra del Fuego because I suddenly feel like I’ve already told her enough. Then I question myself. Have I lost sight of what I’m doing? Has my being cured and having a baby changed everything? For Ivet’s benefit and my own I say, “I’m at least in remission and pray that I’m pregnant by a wonderful man I met in Costa Rica. Steve was sterile. I had to leave him.”

As we continue along the boardwalk to the end of the pier on Isla Flamenco, Ivet invites me to stay at her home. “My daughter can sleep at her grandmother’s. You’ll take her bed. Nathanael is living at home while attending the Technological University of Panama. He can help you email Steve and let him know you’re all right, if you want.”

“Sure,” I say as we start walking back although I never will. I feel like I really don’t know her. She never told me anything about the father of children, for one thing. She never mentioned being divorced or if she had ever been married. She spoke only about her children like I spoke about my step kids, especially Kristi. It made me feel good we had something in common: a young daughter. I just didn’t feel comfortable asking her personal questions. After all, I was Ivet’s American host. Perhaps our friendship had a tinge of formality to it. And I’m not going to ask about the father of her children now, mostly because I don’t want her to ask me anything more about my leaving Steve. She wasn’t very receptive when I tried to explain what’s going on with me. I guess no one can take Betsy’s

place. Or, more likely, it *is* better to make up a story as I travel along. I just need to get better at doing it.

We return to my hotel to grab my things and I follow Ivet in the Explorer. Her single-story, yellow block residential home is in Marbella, a subdivision with houses, high-rise condos, and a view of Panama City's skyscrapers and bay. The quaint house has a red tile roof and a wrought-iron front gate. I park the Explorer in a backyard carport.

During my first few days as Ivet's guest, while she's away at her job and Nathaniel is at school, I mostly walk to the neighborhood malls. One day, I drive to Miraflores Locks, the first of three locks on the 50-mile Panama Canal, which the U.S. will return control to Panama in 1999, ten years after the calamitous Bush invasion.

There are lots of Spanish schools in the city and Ivet suggests I attend one. But since leaving San Joaquín de Flores, I no longer want to study Spanish. I speak mostly English to Ivet and her son. It's less cumbersome. I didn't become fluent overnight.

Every morning, before Ivet heads to work, she and I drink coffee, eat tortillas and eggs, and talk about the places I might visit during the day. In the evenings, we usually dine with her son at the nearby vegetarian buffet, El Trapiche, which offers yucca fritters, plantains, coconut rice with red beans, and empanadas stuffed with potatoes. Ivet is as gracious a host as Arturo Barrantes but after a week, I sense her enthusiasm for my company wanes. After I told her about my situation, I get the feeling she thinks I'm a bit off. In any event, a shift occurred between us and I feel terribly formal with her, afraid I might say something that makes her uncomfortable even though she wouldn't tell me. I guess it's the feeling people describe as walking on egg

shells. **We don't talk about my situation, maybe Ivet's avoiding personal topics until I declare to her some kind of decision. It seems we're just idling along.**

One afternoon, on my way home from a local mall, the Explorer has a flat. I make it back to Ivet's where Nathanael explains that my tires are bald after driving in a hot climate for several months. Ivet offers to drop me at Panama Viejo Park in the morning, a site I was planning to see, and over her lunch hour take me to buy a new set of tires.

The next morning, Ivet drops me off at the site overlooking skyscrapers across the bay. I walk among the ruins and read from the park's brochure that when England's war with Spain erupted, the British Crown commissioned Henry Morgan and his buccaneers to destroy Panama Viejo, the oldest Spanish settlement in the Americas. The city then moved to Casco Viejo where I first stayed.

I take pictures of the Cathedral Tower Lookout then decide to leave the park and walk into the barrios for a snack. I want something sweet or salty, some kind of junk food. I'm having a pregnancy craving.

As I walk down Avenida Cincuentenario looking for a supermercado, my craving intensifies. But I can't find anything except textile shops, hardware stores, and neighborhood houses. A few Panamanian teenage boys honk at me as they drive by in Japanese cars.

When I come across a phone office, I head inside on a whim and place a call to Steve. I sit in a booth, wait for the call to go through, and think about my marriage. Sometimes things were good between Steve and me. I often told Betsy that Steve was a good husband. But that was all I ever said about him and I usually said it when Betsy was carrying on about how rotten her ex-husband had been compared to Steve.

Yes, Muriel, Steve's a good man I think to myself while waiting for the call to go through. He encouraged me to get a B.A. in whatever major I like. I considered continuing my education once the kids started high school but I'm not as ambitious as Steve who's too progressive at times. He has three master's degrees, dutifully works at Intel, and he's launching his own web-based business.

I hadn't minded dedicating myself to the kids and even to Steve, I try to convince myself. Then I remember that during my last months in Ahwatukee, I felt a need to escape the routine. This was before the diagnosis that crashed down on me like Thor's hammer. Maybe I acted rashly and made the wrong choice.

Now, in the small phonebooth, the routine I had doesn't seem so bad. I had a good thing going. I loved my stepchildren. Will Steve take me back with a baby? *Yes, Muriel. He'll take you back.*

When the phone rings, I start feeling empty and incapable like I've fallen into a deep, cavern of sadness. Maybe it's fear or apathy. What's there to look forward to but death? *But you're cured, with a child, and on your way to Tierra del Fuego.*

I pick up the phone and hear Steve's voice. "Hello. Who's this? Muriel?" I place the phone on the table without hanging up, leave the building, and continue looking for something to eat. If Betsy were with me she'd probably say, "All these moods and emotions, are merely your hormones reacting. I feel like I'm at the center of an atom with all these protons neutrinos electrons and quantum particles spinning around my core. The pit of my stomach. Which way is up? Down? Am I fully charged or some kind of free-floating empty space.

I finally encounter a supermercado and buy cookies, chips, and KitKat bars to munch on and quell the pang in my gut before I return to the ruins to meet Ivet and get my new tires.

The next morning, after Ivet leaves for work, I pack up a few things and call for a taxi to take me to a hotel.

I leave a note of apology. *Mi amiga amable, gracias por su hospitalidad. Pero, necesito irme. Es una emergencia. Lo sciento.* I say nothing about the Explorer parked in the backyard with four new Firestone tires and lots of books and New Yorkers. Perhaps Nathanael can read the books and sell the tires. Maybe even the car. I have no time to sell it anyway. Besides, I don't have the title. When I left Ahwatukee, the car hadn't been paid off. I wonder if Steve is still making payments. I doubt it. He must know by now that I've left him. He's a smart man. Certainly, he's figured it out.



Chapter 10: A Body in Tucson

Nine months have passed since Muriel went missing. Day by day, Steve waits for a call from her, the police, or anyone who knows something about the matter. A text, e-mail, or even a letter. He often searches through the house and Muriel's electronics, hoping to find a clue.

By the end of the first week after she went missing, he began to suspect, along with the police, that Muriel had left him. *But where did she go? And why?* he kept asking himself. What more could she want from life? That they have sex more often than they do? Did.

He goes on with his life but vows to never stop trying to resolve the mystery of his missing wife. He keeps a low profile, however, and doesn't call news channels and newspapers to tell her story. He hasn't put up posters like Muriel did when one of her cats ran away. And he doesn't establish a website for his missing wife. Why? Because whenever he asks the police about her case, they hint that maybe Steve had something to do with her disappearance. As if he's involved in some kind of wrongdoing or the he caused his wife to leave him. He also doesn't want to look like a pathetic victim if his hunch is right and Muriel left him hanging in midair. His mother suspects this. His dad never says anything about it.

Steve tells his kids that their mommy went on a working vacation, as Daddy sometimes does, and will be back as soon as she can. *If the worst happens, I'll deal with it when the time comes* he tells himself. If Muriel simply left, a notion he still resists, then Muriel can deal with what to tell her stepchildren if she tells them anything at all. Unfortunately for Steve, his kids keep asking, "Why doesn't Mommy Muriel call? Why couldn't we go with her?"

Steve doesn't tell Betsy he suspects Muriel left him. During their daily encounters, they avoid talking about Muriel. They discuss the kids and what Steve needs Betsy to do for the day. "Mainly," he tells her. "Keep Kevin and Kristi from becoming emotionally distressed."

Steve learns nothing about Muriel's case until the Friday after Thanksgiving. The kids are staying with his parents in Sun City West and Steve's alone in his home office working on website designs when a police officer calls.

"State troopers recovered a body in the desert outside Tucson," the officer says. "It's a woman who matches your wife's description."

Steve's crushed to the core but manages to recover enough to ask, "Is there a large mole by her left breast?" It's the only identifying mark that comes to mind.

“Sir,” the officer says. “The body’s not in good shape. It’s partially decomposed in the Tucson morgue. Could you come down and help us determine if it’s your wife? Maybe you can recognize something. The earrings. What remains of the clothing. Whoever she is, she’s been in the desert for nearly two weeks, the coroner’s determined.”

“Muriel’s been gone nine months, sir. It can’t be her.” Steve shakes with desperation that he’s right. He’s not prepared to see Muriel’s dead body. **Especially after losing Angeline like he did. He’ll never forget rushing his first wife to the hospital and leaving her there that night to make arrangements for the kids. The doctor called him on his drive home and said she didn’t make it. Angeline was gone. No. He doesn’t want to see Muriel dead body just like he didn’t want to see Angeline’s and had a closed casket service for the sake of Kevin and Kristi.**

“Mr. Tyler, we don’t know anything about her disappearance.” The officer wakens Steve from his dreadful thoughts. “Someone could have kidnapped your wife, held her hostage, and only recently killed her. I don’t mean to sound harsh but finding a body and having a loved one disappear are harsh realities. Please come down to the morgue as soon as you can and help us one way or the other. Most likely, you’ll find that the body isn’t your missing wife.”

As soon as he hangs up, Steve frantically calls Betsy. “Steve, what is it?” She sounds panicked herself.

“Betsy, the police just called.” He pauses a moment to clear the lump in his throat. “They found a woman’s body near Tucson. Said it fits Muriel’s description. I’m driving to the Pima County morgue. Please, can you come with me?”

“Of course, Steve. I’ll be right over.”



Chapter 11: San Blas Islands

At Kuna Eco-Travel near my hotel in Panama City, I tell the agent I want to catch a ferry to Colombia. She describes a sailboat cruise to Cartagena via the San Blas Islands. “The 365 islands are a hidden tropical paradise in the crystal-clear Caribbean,” she says. “They’re part of the Kuna Yala autonomous region of Panama. The Kuna people have controlled the islands since they migrated from Colombia in the 1600s.”

I’m sold on the idea because of what Ivet suggested about my seeing a Kuna curandero on the San Blas Islands. I need as much positive reinforcement as I can get. A person can never be too sure about anything, especially when it comes to health issues—to living and dying.

As part of the package deal, a 4x4 Jeep Grand Cherokee takes me to the coastal city of Carti, the gateway to San Blas. From Carti, a water taxi takes me to El Provenir, the capital of the islands. I get my travel visa and meet fellow passengers at the sailboat taking us to different islands on the way to Cartagena.

The captain is a gray-whiskered man dressed in white drawstring trousers, a gauze lanai shirt, and a Greek fisherman’s cap. He reminds me of Moby Jack. In fact, since leaving Jack in Mazatlán, I’ve come across many such retired old salts and beach bums, especially in Belize.

“People call me Captain Morgan Black because it’s my drink of choice,” the captain explains as he shows us around his 40-foot Irwin Cruiser christened *The Sir Henry Morgan*. “I named her after the whisky more than the famous Welsh buccaneer.”

The other passengers are Marcy and Brad, American backpackers. Marcy is about forty, from Venice Beach, she tells the captain, and is wearing a long-sleeved kimono jacket and a blue scrunch skirt. Her brown hair is short and she has an attractive face. The young man is about twenty, blond, bearded, tan and fit, and has a yin-yang tattoo on his bare chest. They seem quite attached to each other, with lots of whispered asides and inside jokes. I’m guessing they’re mother and son but don’t feel like engaging in conversation with them. Marcy’s too annoyingly spiritual for me, as if she’s birthing into a channel or vortex. It’s the way she talks, always softly as if she’s a kindergarten teacher telling kids to use their inside voice; and it’s the things she says to the captain and his mate, things like my inner child agrees or I feel your aura.

Captain Black has the floor for the most part and he likes to talk and make us all laugh. He introduces his mate and cook as Gustavo Ramirez Perez, a Colombian in his early twenties. “I usually take on four passengers,” the captain says. “But I’m in need of a run and settled for the three of you. Gratuity’s not included in the tour price. I’m a buccaneer from Port Royal, Jamaica! I was born in Pensacola and have captained vessels since leaving the Navy in 1960. For thirty-six years, I’ve sailed the Caribbean. The past five years, I’ve been sailing my Irwin between Panama and Colombia.” He raises a bottle of Captain Black. “Drunkenness is a way to salvation.” He takes a swig. “Hope no one minds. Just a shot, a vaccination. I can procure ganja if any of you want. Or cocaine. Colombia has the purest cocaine in the world.” He laughs with a swagger.

Truthfully, I’m a bit apprehensive about joining the tour after meeting this captain. I’m putting my life in his hands and depending on him to sail me and my unborn child over the rough

sea. But I have no choice. I paid for this ticket and doubt I'd get a refund. I also don't want to waste time running through a series of Moby Jack captains trying to find one who doesn't party and drink. Besides, the man appears to know his ship as much as he knows the sea.

Captain Black and his mate take our food orders and run to town to buy the supplies. By late afternoon, we set sail. Marcy and Brad are relaxing with me on the deck. I'm silently absorbing the breeze and the vast sea around us. At times, I even speak to my shipmates but they're mostly involved with each other, not me. I can't figure them out. Are they friends or are they related? I'm not curious enough to ask and don't want to risk lengthy chitchat about them or my background and purpose for traveling and so on. They don't interest me enough. And after my strange experience with Ivet, I kind of want to keep to myself. Marcy remarks that she admires my jadeite necklace but that's about all she says to me.

On our first night, the captain anchors in a cove and we take the dinghy back and forth to an uninhabited island. Everyone sleeps on the boat at night, except the captain. He likes to sleep ashore in a hammock between coconut palms. Gustavo sleeps on the open deck, I sleep in the stateroom at the bow, Brad sleeps on the converted dining table, and Marcy has quarters in the stern.

With such sleeping arrangements, I clarify in my mind that Marcy and Brad are indeed mother and son and not a couple. I'm glad they're more into each other than anything else. It keeps them from bothering me. However, after many hours alone together on a deserted island, I find myself growing more cordial.

During the day, the captain sails to nearby inhabited islands to buy coconuts and lobsters for dinner and wood for the night's fire. While he's gone, Gustavo takes us snorkeling in the warm surf and coral reefs where we explore sunken pirate ships.

In the afternoon, Brad roams the island collecting shells, wearing only his trunks and sandals, while Marcy and I lounge on hammocks and drink coconut rum water from coconut shells. Marcy is reading the *Celestine Prophecy* and I'm writing in a spiral notepad because there's no place to hook up my ThinkPad.

What a paradise this would be to have a baby" are the only words I jot down. The swaying hammock in the warm breeze, the fresh smell of the sea, and the sound clattering grackles in brushing coconut fronds lull me to sleep and my spiral notepad falls onto the sand beside my hammock. Thoughts about having Arturo's baby fade away and the magic of San Blas penetrates my spirit. I have no unpleasant dreams, no toiling memories. Just a peaceful, soothing afternoon nap in the tropics.

When the sun sets at 6:30, I take pictures of the horizon's orange and yellow hues hitting the aqua sea splashing ashore. The orange blaze from Gustavo's bonfire ignites the scene. Everyone's drinking *siagwa*, a native drink made of cocoa, sugar, and water. Captain Morgan and Gustavo serve us coconut rice, plantains, yucca, corn, lobster, and the grilled red snapper Gustavo caught in the afternoon's surf.

"I'm on a special dieta," I explain to the captain. "I can eat fish but I think I'll avoid the boiled crustaceans."

"All the more for me," Brad jokes like he's a growing Lord of the Flies island boy.

While the bonfire roars, the skipper and his mate hack off the tops of coconuts and fill them with Panamanian Rum. We make smores and the scent of marijuana wafts in the warm sea air along with the captain's pipe tobacco.

Marcy and Brad sit across from me. The orange blaze lights their faces. They're nestled together, whispering. I now believe she's a cougar with her prey, her boy toy, whom she picked

up during her travels. I'm not about to ask them what they're doing. It's not my business.

Besides, no one's saying much except the captain who's filling the evening with stories of pirates and his own adventures on the sea.

"Yes siree sir. These islands were once ruled by buccaneers," he says while drinking Captain Morgan and smoking his pipe. "That rascal Morgan infiltrated the Spanish Main, as do I. But this Captain Morgan don't loot, toot, or pillage the village. Eco-tourism's my thing. Bringing folks like you to these havens in the sea."

Our last port of call before heading to Cartagena, is a Kuna Village on the largest island. Our captain anchors his sailboat and we take the dinghy ashore to the village among leaning coconut palms where parrots are whistling, yellow birds tweeting, and warblers warbling. Bamboo huts and concrete structures with palm frond roofs line the tamped earth alleyways.

The Kuna are short, lively people whose colorful culture seems intact. The men wear American style clothes and hats. Most women wear more traditional costumes and are sitting on stools outside their bamboo huts stitching the molas they wear and sell to tourists. I buy a mola vest large enough to cover my chest. It's obviously made for tourists.

"The Kuna have a matrilineal culture," the captain tells us as we walk through the village. "In fact, the head chief is a woman."

"Do you know a Kuna curandera?" I ask.

"I'd like to see one," I say and emphasize, "For spiritual reasons." **Although I believe I'm cured and not in remission, I want to learn my baby's gender. I'm hoping to have a little daughter, like Kristi. But I don't want anyone to know I'm pregnant. I don't think the**

captain would've even let me on his boat, if he knew about my condition, for safety reasons, and if Marcy knew I'm sure she'd be all over me with reiki and crystal therapies and motherly advise.

"Yes ma'am. I know several," Morgan says. "Follow me." He leads us to a grass hut at the end of the main alley.

While Marcy and Brad wait outside for their turn at a private session with the Kuna healer, I follow the captain inside and meet an old woman named Kuna Nele. She sits on a small stool by a central hearth and wears a tattered ethnic dress, molas reflecting her culture, beaded anklets and bracelets, and a silver ring in her nose. She's smoking a pipe with a mixture of herbs. When I smell rum on her breath, I recall the captain saying, "Drunkenness is a way to salvation."

I sit cross-legged on the sod floor in front of Kuna Nele. She offers me a cup of her brew at the hearth. I'm concerned about gulping it down. "Is this a hallucinogenic tea? I don't want to lose my mind. I just want a diagnosis." **My real concern, of course, is that I'm worried about drinking something that might affect the health of my unborn child.**

"No worries," the captain tells me. He sits on a stool beside Kuna Nele to translate. "This is a simple tea for the diagnosis," he says. "It's not a remedy. That comes later, for an additional offering."

Kuna Nele raises a crudely carved wooden doll from a basket at her side. "This is a Nucha spirit doll," the captain relates. "It's as much a part of the Kuna culture as the molas. The Nucha will lead away any bad spirits harming your body and mind because Kuna Nele has placed her own healing spirit into the doll."

"Like a kachina doll," I suggest thinking of the one Steve bought his parents.

“Yes, like that I suppose.” The captain takes a drag of his pipe as Kuna Nele puffs on hers. She blows the fragrant smoke at me. It smells of rum, coconut and tobacco.

“Ask your question or tell her your concerns,” Morgan says.

The old woman stands from her stool and waves the spirit doll over me. She then urges me to drink more tea.

I’m growing more concerned that the brew is some kind of drug that might harm the baby and decide I must be honest about my condition. I doubt the captain will kick me off the Irwin now that we’re halfway to Columbia. “Look. I’m pregnant and want to know if I’m having a boy or a girl? And am I merely in remission or am I cured once and for all from a chronic condition?”

“Pregnant!” Morgan declares with concern. “Lady, you should’ve given me a heads up in El Proviner. I could’ve been better prepared.”

“Sorry,” I say, feeling guilty while not wanting my news to ruin my session. “I’m two months along and I feel fine. I haven’t been queasy or anything. Haven’t vomited off your boat. I’ll be fine and I just want to know the answers to my questions.”

“*No te preocupes*,” Kuna Nele says in Spanish, I think to both the captain and me. Then she speaks in her native tongue.

“She says you’re obsessed with having a baby,” the captain tells me. “You must stay calm or the harmful spirits won’t leave you.”

The old woman places her hand on my belly and touches my jadeite necklace.

“She admires it,” Morgan says. “I do too. A nice set of green pearls.”

“Thank-you, captain. They’re jadeite beads.”

Morgan grins and takes a hit from his pipe, obviously now feeling more relaxed about me and my condition.

The old Kuna woman suddenly sits back on her stool and looks at me then at the captain. “*No tienes bebe,*” she says to Morgan as if he’s the daddy. “*No estas curado. No tienes mucho tiempo.*”

I’m aghast and say, “No baby! Of course, there’s a baby! I feel it in my gut. I’ve missed my period twice!” **The captain stare at me as if he’s more shocked at Kuna Nele’s news than the news of my condition.**

“No baby. No cure. No have much time,” the old Kuna woman says in English. She holds out her hand and asks for my jadeite beads as an offering to the Nucha spirit doll if I want a better diagnosis.

I stand and say to Captain Morgan, “I’m ready to go. Marcy and Brad can have their turn. I don’t want another diagnosis. I don’t believe her first one and I’m not giving up my jadeite beads!”

As soon as I step outside the grass hut, Marcy asks empathetically, “How’d it go Arizona? Did you gain spiritual insights?”

“No,” I answer perhaps too abruptly from the look on my shipmate’s face.

“Hormones,” the captain says with a wink, as if to make apologies for me.

“I hope you don’t share my session with everyone,” I tell captain Morgan who’s standing at the threshold to Kuna Nele’s hut. “It’s my private business.” I then turn to my shipmate because I feel like I need to say something. Everything’s making me feel distraught and confused. “Marcy. God has let me down again. For the third forth maybe fifth time in my life. And that’s everything I have to say about my spiritual visit with Kuna Nele. But have at it, sister. Maybe you and Brad will have better luck with her nucha spirit doll.”

“Hormones,” the captain now whispers as he leads my shipmates into Kuna Nele’s hut.

By late afternoon we’re back on the Sir Henry Morgan. “It’ll us take a full day and night to sail along the Spanish Main to Cartagena,” Morgan says as we leave San Blas in the setting sun. Away from the stunning islands, there’s nothing but the vast Caribbean, a sea that *bears the souls of patron pirates*, the captain tells us.

Once we’re well on our way, the Morgan and Gustavo throw a party on deck with music, rum, ganja, and Morgan’s seafaring lore. “I speak creole, patois, French, and Spanish. I’ve lived through five hurricanes and had five wives, some at the same time. One’s a voodoo priestess in Jamaica. Got kids scattered across the Caribbean. Grandkids, too. My life has been nothing but rum and fun since my left the Navy.”

Halfway through the party, Marcy and Brad go below deck, probably to snort some pure Colombian cocaine or share a bed. I sit near the captain at the helm, lean back on the seat cushions, and gaze at the night sky overhead.

The large and small Magellanic Clouds adorn the edge of the Milky Way. I recall my romance with Arturo and him saying *the Milky Way consumes the gas of the Magellan Clouds*. I see the Southern Cross and the two pointer stars Alpha and Beta Centauri. I recall Arturo saying the Incas called the cross Chakana with the llama eyes. He taught me how to find true south by taking the long part of the cross and measuring from top to bottom and extending it four times.

I miss my Tico Castilian lover, the hidalgo man, especially now that I may have lost our child, if I was even pregnant. Since I left Kuna Nele’s hut, her words keep ringing in my ears. *No baby! No cure! No have much time*. Did Nele Kuna burst my bubble and expose my delusion? I

resist telling myself that the *feeling in my gut is not a child but the beginning of my end* and cling to the hope that Kuna Nele and her spirit doll were wrong.

“How did you navigate before GPS, Sir Morgan Black?” I ask to take my mind off my woes.

“Ah, GPS, my dear lady. A constellation of satellites in the sky. We used charts, a compass, and a wristwatch. The North Star Polaris or the Southern Cross depending on the latitude. *The compass seeks the truth* Columbus once said. For centuries, folks have navigated the seas without GPS or even maps for that matter. In double hulled canoes with triangle sails, Pacific islanders sailed the great ocean using many tricks of the trade. They call it wayfinding.”

“Wayfinding?”

“Yes, lovely miss. Vikings were wayfinders as well. **Got a wayfinder tattoo on my arm.**” He rolls up his sleeve to show me. **I think he knows I’m depressed and thankfully doesn’t mention what Nele said. Or anything about my being pregnant. He’s a gentleman trying to distract me from my troubling news.**

“It’s called a vegvisir,” he says about the circular tattoo above his right wrist. It looks like an elaborate compass, in a way. “It’s a symbol of the Icelandic wayfinders. The ocean was their map. Both the Vikings and the Pacific islanders read the currents, the wind, the star positions, the sunrise and sunset, the moon and even the planets at different times of year.”

“What about when it was cloudy or stormy?”

“Indeedy,” Morgan says as he mans the helm of his vessel with one hand and holds his pipe with the other. “Through a long history of oral traditions, Pacific islanders, for example, understood where wave patterns would take them.”

“Like quantum physics,” I joke, smelling the sweet fruity scent of his pipe. Maybe the aroma is intoxicating because I’m feeling a bit better just by engaging in an interesting discussion.

“You get the picture, little lady. They read cloud patterns as well. And piled debris on the water meant an island was near.”

“There’s a lot more sea debris these days. So, it must be easier now to navigate without GPS,” I joke.

He laughs with his swagger and takes a swig of Morgan Black and sets it back on deck. “Perhaps. But modern man is lazy. He’d rather rely on his devices.”

“I’m sure birds helped these ancient wayfinders navigate.”

“True. They knew the migration of perhaps all birds that flew over the seas. And when birds appeared carrying a fish. They knew it was headed to land.” He pauses to light his pipe. “And then there were the pirates and conquistadors and the seafaring Arabs and European explorers. They all used what we call dead reckoning.”

“What does it mean in nautical terms?” I deeply inhale the aroma of his pipe tobacco to feel even more relaxed.

“Dead reckoning is a way of navigating on the sea without landmarks or stars to help determine your position. When the captain is blinded by the weather, he makes a dead reckoning by determining the ship’s last known position and calculating where he is based on speed and the amount of time that’s passed since he made the last measurement.”

“Sounds like one of the places in the Aztec hell. Where there’s total smoke and darkness as we walk on shifting ground between two crushing mountains while monsters are ready to pounce on us.”

“That it’s dear. It’s probability. A game of dice. Maybe wishful thinking. But isn’t everything in life a dead reckoning?”

“I say nothing. I’m suddenly sinking back into despair. Maybe into a dead reckoning. I return to my stateroom and snuggle up in bed and let the rhythm of the sea rock me to sleep.

I rise late the next morning and stumble into the cabin where Marcy and Brad are playing dominos and smoking ganja. I grab a cup of coffee from the counter and join them at the table. I’m now truly confined with my shipmates. They talk about their travels. Even Brad shares stories about his adventures. “Where are you heading, by the way?” Marcy asks. Up close, I notice she looks more like 45 and wears lots of makeup with cracks.

“I plan to hike the Inca Trail,” I think to say although I’m no longer really sure what my plans are. I think the nucha spirit doll took them away along instead of all the bad spirits that possessed me.

“The spirit world is infused with natural remedies,” Marcy suggests. It’s as if she’s aware of my concerns. “Especially in Peru. Try ayahuasca. It’s a natural remedy, a spiritual journey of healing, and no different from Walmart prescription drugs. It’ll put you in touch with your past lives, open a portal to the spirit world, and heal any kind of ailment.” She pauses a moment and lays out her domino. “Although,” she looks at me in a motherly way. “Maybe you should wait until you’re sure you’re, you know, not with child.”

“I guess someone didn’t keep my confidence and blabbed all about my so called spiritual session with the kuna woman. I should be angry and disappointed but I’m not. What’s one more slap in the face when I’m already pummeled with bad news.”

“No worries, girlfriend,” Marcy says. “I have three adult kids and had a miscarriage myself.”

“Marcy, I really don’t want to talk about it. And you’re not making me feel better.” I lay out my own domino tile.

“Sorry, she says. But do try ayuhusca if you get the chance. It’ll be way more spiritually enlightening and uplifting than Kuna’s doll.”

“Right,” Brad speaks for the first time. “That old woman really didn’t have anything good to tell us either. Except we weren’t meant for each other.” He laugh.

“Wow,” I say to be nice. “That’s not very uplifting at all. But let’s not talk about the nucha doll. Tell me more about your travels instead.” I look at my domino tiles. It seems a shift has taken place within me. Now I’m craving Marcy and Brad’s company. I need them to be my friends. I need to talk to them and them to talk to me so I can get my mind off myself and all the things that are going wrong in my life.

By the end of our game, Marcy invites me to travel with her and Brad in Colombia on a quest for the purest cocaine in the world. “We’re tourists on the cocaine trail,” Brad says with pride.

I’m not the least bit interested in hunting down pure cocaine but I thank Marcy and tell her I’ll join them.

Later that morning, Captain Morgan steers into Cartagena Bay. “In the 1500s,” he tells us as we stand on deck to view the approaching port. “Cartagena was a walled city where Spaniards brought slaves from Africa and took stolen emeralds and gold back to Spain. English, Dutch, and French pirates, like Sir Francis Drake, plundered and pillaged Cartagena. Sir Henry Morgan

failed to sack the city. This happened when the Catholic Church was purging New Spain of its heresy. *Convert, leave, or die* was their motto.”

“Some motto,” Brad jokes and the captain and Gustavo ready to dock.

Once we’re tied at the pier, Captain Morgan takes everyone’s passport for the immigration to stamp. When he returns, he tells us that taxis at the gate will take us to hotels in the city. I give him a hundred-dollar bill. He tips his cap and winks probably to remind me he knows my little secret, which he obviously blabbed to Marci. But I don’t confront him about it. What’s the point. Besides, if I do, I’m just rehashing something I want to forget.

“Remember, lovely miss,” the captain says as if reading my thoughts and wanting to cheer me up. “Keep wayfinding with a dead reckoning.”

I smile at the captain and tell my boatmate friends that I’ll catch up with them at the port gate because I need to use the below deck head.

A few minutes later, in the heavy crowd and onslaught of taxis at the gate, I easily ditch Marcy and Brad and take a taxi to Rafael Núñez International Airport to catch the first Avianca flight to Quito, Ecuador, with a stop in Bogota. I’m not sure why I didn’t just tell Marcy that I decided not to follow the cocaine trail with her and Brad. It’s as if my ditching and leaving people and moving off on my own has become a routine, a habit. A way of life. My personal wayfinding. But I do plan to learn more about this healing journey drug, ayahwasca.



Chapter 12: Betsy Sanders

The body in Tucson isn't Muriel, Betsy knows, but she'll never admit to Steve that Muriel ran off to find herself.

I need a fling Betsy often reflects on what Muriel said shortly before she disappeared. They were having lunch at the newly opened Coffee Plantation off Warner and 48th Street, next to Reay's Gourmet Groceries. Muriel confided that her life with Steve wasn't that great. That it was, in fact, routine and empty. *No, vacuous. That's the word she used. A vacuous marriage.* It had been a shocking revelation. Betsy's always viewed "Steve and Muriel" as a happy couple destined to make it together in life, unlike Betsy and her lousy ex.

This is a midlife crisis, Betsy told Muriel at the Coffee Plantation. *Steve's a great husband. You've said so yourself, many times. Take another literature class. Take on more bookkeeping jobs. Don't let the kids or any routine bog you down. Take a trip. In fact, why don't we go to Hawaii! Just you and me? Have a major spa week.*

Betsy's words of advice have been haunting her since Muriel vanished. *Did I inspire her to take that trip? To flee from her family?* She often wonders. She felt strange offering Muriel advice in the first place. It was unusual between them. Muriel was the supportive one in Betsy's messed-up life, not the other way around.

Shortly before Muriel took off, or whatever happened to her, Betsy began actively dating through the newly launched website Match.com. Muriel was protective during this time, advising Betsy about the various prospects and warning that this guy sounded too self-absorbed or too unreliable or aggressive or too nice. "A man too nice has a flip side," Muriel suggested. "He could turn out to be abusive."

How Muriel knew so much about men with only Steve in her life, Betsy wasn't sure. Perhaps it's the trait of a sexy and beautiful woman. Perhaps Muriel knows a lot about human nature because she suffered much trauma and sadness when her mother got sick and died. Whatever it is, some people are better at figuring out life than others. Muriel is one of those people. Betsy isn't.

If this turns out to be Muriel's body, Betsy will be horrified for Steve's children. Who will tell them about their second mommy? Betsy will, of course, unless Steve feels the tragic news must come from him. It's logical that Muriel's best friend be the one to tell them. Betsy's the one who told her own children about her divorce. She's the one who pushed her daughter Juliette into college. It makes sense to tell Steve's children. Betsy owes it to Muriel.

A few years back, Muriel helped Betsy through a minor crisis. Her daughter was sixteen, quite popular in school, and increasingly snooty with Betsy. One morning, while Betsy was collecting laundry from the floor of Juliette's room, she found a marijuana joint in the desk. The drawer had been slightly ajar and Betsy wondered what a sixteen-year-old keeps these days. She was mostly curious if her daughter had a secret boyfriend.

Discovering the joint alarmed Betsy. After the divorce, she tried to communicate openly with her children about drugs, sex, and values like common courtesy and respect. She believed her kids would come to her first before experimenting with anything. But Juliette hadn't and Betsy felt incompetent, afraid she'd next discover her daughter was pregnant. She left the joint in the desk and confided in Muriel before confronting Juliette.

Muriel laughed, Betsy well remembers, and said *if I were you, I'd let this go. A young woman needs her privacy. She needs to find her own way. And marijuana isn't that terrible. I've*

smoked it. You have, too. Juliette is experimenting a little. She's a good kid. You're a great mom. Have faith in that. Otherwise, she may never trust you to respect her privacy.

It's not so easy to sit back and watch them make wrong choices Betsy remembers her own words. Muriel was right. Juliette never got involved with a bad crowd and never used any hard drugs. She's now in college and communicates openly and frequently with her mom, usually over a glass of merlot. Had Betsy not followed Muriel's advice, she might have come down too harshly on Juliette and destroyed any trust they had developed as mother and daughter. *God, I pray my friend's body isn't lying stone cold in the Pima County morgue. But if it is, I'll deal with it just as I've dealt with a lot of painful blows in my life.*

Betsy walks into the living room where Juliette's sprawled out on the sofa watching an afternoon soap during her day off from Mesa Community College. With tears in her eyes, Betsy says, "They may have found Muriel's body."

"Are you all right, Mom?" Juliette clicks off the soap.

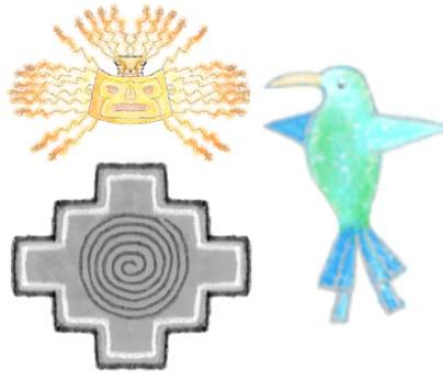
"I'll be fine. I hope," Betsy hastily searches through her purse for car keys. "Chances are, this isn't Muriel."

"Good god, Mom! A body! That's terrible! Are you going to see it?"

"I don't know. I'm going along with Steve to help him through this. To be supportive."

Betsy opens the front door to leave. "Let's pray it's not Muriel. I'll fall apart if it's her."

"No doubt," Juliette says as she turns the TV back on and sinks into the sofa. "Sometimes real-life is just as real as the soaps."



Chapter 13: La Mitad del Mundo

It's late afternoon when my plane lands in Quito, a high-altitude city on the equator that the Spanish built on top of Inca ruins. From the airport, I catch a taxi to Centro Historico Town Hostel. Along the way, my taxi passes lots of trees, parks, statues in plazas, and white colonial cathedrals and buildings. It seems like a quiet city, not as bustling and chaotic as Mexico City, the *massive offspring of the Aztecs and conquistadors*. Perhaps it's the Inca spirit verses that of the Aztecs.

After checking into a room, I return to the front desk and ask about a vegetarian restaurant within walking distance. The clerk recommends a Hare Krishna restaurant called Govinda Gopa and draws a map to help me get there. "It's only a ten-minute walk," he assures me. "And it's the best vegetarian food in the city. But be careful and stay away from parked cars or dark alleyways. Quito's a beautiful city but can be dangerous for tourists at night. Maybe I should call you a taxi."

"No, no. I'll be fine," I suggest. "I've been sitting all day and want to stretch my legs in the fresh Andean air."

"I see. Stay on the roads of my map and you should be safe. The restaurant's in a good part of town."

An hour later, after a hearty Indian meal that meets all the requirements of my dieta, I try to follow the map back to the hostel. But it's dark now and only streetlamps light my way.

Izquierda. Derecho I think as I walk in the middle of a nearly deserted street away from parked cars. I hide my purse inside my jacket and tuck my jadeite necklace under my collar. I keep thinking about the concierge's warning and feel vulnerable, like a bullseye for robbers prowling for tourist prey. I don't know why I put myself in this situation.

I turn a corner and head down a narrow street I don't recognize. In the darkness, nothing looks familiar. I probably veered off the route on my map. Panic surges through me as I look ahead and wonder whether to return to the restaurant and call a taxi, or keep going. I decide to continue feeling certain my hotel is just around the next corner.

Halfway down the block, a soldier suddenly emerges from the streetlight. He wears camouflage fatigues, a tactical vest, and helmet, and carries a semi-automatic rifle. As he nears, other soldiers appear behind him, from a side street, one by one until about a dozen of them are walking my way. Their faces are smeared with green and black camo.

Since I've already started down the street, I continue toward the troops. If I turn around and run, they'll think I'm up to no good. They'll chase me and shoot. I'm in an unfamiliar country. On the flight to Quito, I read that Ecuadorians call their current president El Loco because under his rule Equator is suffering an economic crisis. *Has there been a coup?* I wonder. *Was the president impeached? Are there territorial disputes going on with Peru? Is the Peruvian Army invading Quito?*

These soldiers –whoever they are—must be friendly to tourists, I reassure myself. Maybe they'll help me with directions back to my hotel. I hardly look like a criminal or terrorist.

I casually walk in the middle of the street toward the soldiers. There must be twenty or thirty of them now. They keep materializing from side streets. They're not marching in any kind of formation. They're individually patrolling the barrio. No other pedestrian is in sight which makes me fear El Loco set some kind of curfew. Then I assure myself that the concierge would have warned me if this was the case.

When the first man passes, he says nothing. He doesn't look at me or smile. It's the same with all of them as they pass one by one. Their minds are on their mission. But they're aware of me. I'm not invisible. I'm no threat. I hope this isn't a dead-reckoning.

On my left and right, the camo soldiers pass. I stare straight ahead to avoid looking at them. Like one would avoid looking into the eyes of a king or a dictator. Like El Loco, I imagine.

I pick up my pace hoping to get behind the troops bringing up the rear. But they keep coming onto the street. There seems no end to their brigade. Or is it a garrison? A legion? Now I'm now surrounded by hundreds of camo soldiers carrying semi-automatics. My fingers twitch and my brow sweats even in the cool night air.

I look down the street as far as I can see in the dim light. Instead of camo troops, Inca warriors start emerging from darkness; each man wears a black-and-white checkered tunic. They all carry clubs and star-headed manaca spears and hold shields with the image of Inti. Colorful feathers adorn their copper helmets that reflect the streetlamps. As they near I notice red and black marks on their expressionless faces.

My mind tells me they're elite imperial soldiers on patrol in the Inca city buried beneath Quito. Huayna Capac, son of Tupac Inca, is their king. He's expanding his empire into this

region. His Troops are Inca nobles and conquered men who were trained to be warriors since early boyhood. Their lives are tributes to Huayna Capac's glory.

They walk with an eerie silence. Then conch shells suddenly sound, drums roll, and the commander of the troops shouts out, "Convert, leave, or die! In the name of Inti the king. We are conquering soldiers."

The Inca troops shout a battle cry. Each man is prepared to defeat all enemies of the king. All conquered people. Each soldier knows that his comrades will bury him with his weapons wherever he falls. He knows he's spirit will fly like a hummingbird to the realm of the sun, moon, planets, stars, and constellations. The Chakana will guide his way to a place of light and darkness called Hanan Pacha. The Milky Way. The brave Inca soldier knows he won't crawl through the nine Aztec hells. He already has.

The next morning, I awake in my hotel room thankful I found my way back the night before. It took some doing but after all the rear guards passed by, I recognized the buildings and located my position on the concierge's map. It *was* a dead reckoning.

After breakfast in the dining hall, I ask the hotel's travel agent about sightseeing options in Ecuador. "We have the Andes, beaches, Amazon rainforests, and the Galapagos Islands," the agent tells me as I sit before her desk.

I'd go to the Galapagos if I weren't dying! I want to say. But instead, I tell her, "I'm looking for a place where I can rest and collect my thoughts." What I don't say is that Nele Kuna's revelations shattered any optimism I once had. *Not pregnant! Not cured! Not much time!* constantly scream in my head. Even still. I must make new plans and pull myself together. My

dreams dissolved into reality when the real became unreal. I'm not what I convinced myself of being. Most importantly, if I'm not cured or pregnant then I no longer need to budget.

"I'm looking for something luxurious in the mountains," I tell the agent. "A retreat with a spa, perhaps."

"Then I suggest a mountain hacienda on 100,000 acres. The Bolivar Hacienda. The Spanish built it over 300 years ago on the site of an Inca palace. Simon Bolivar stayed there during his travels between Bogota and Quito."

"Simon Bolivar? Really?"

"Yes. When he was liberating Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia from Spain. The Inn has horses to ride and a sanctuary for rescued condors. The restaurant serves organic food grown in the hacienda's gardens."

"Sounds perfect," I say. "I'm on a special vegetarian diet."

"Then you'll love this place, senora. I'll reserve you a room viewing the mountains and grazing llamas. And be sure to visit the artisan market in Otavalo. I'll arrange for a taxi to take you there."

As it turns out, the hacienda is perfect. My suite has antique Spanish colonial furniture made of teak. On its large balcony I enjoy room service vegetarian meals while watching llamas graze on the green lawn before the towering Andes. The cool, thin air is clean and fresh. I have no books or magazines to read, except the *Celestine Prophecy* from Marcy, but I toss it because I'm not in the mood for New Age inspiration. At present, I don't know my own spirituality. It somehow got lost when I faced a dead reckoning.

For dinner one evening, I decide to be different and venture to the dining hall. Wooden bookcases with old Spanish and English books line one wall of the elegant room. There are several thick wooden tables and chairs and wall tapestries with Inca Quechua themes. Because I'm not too hungry, I order a palmetto salad and potato pancakes.

At a neighboring table, loud Americans are discussing their travels. I have no interest in *that's where I'm headed* chitchat, but I flash them a smile and nod. A polite word.

As I eat my salad, their conversation keeps grabbing my attention. It seems they're husband and wife with a man they met up with in Quito. The couple hiked the Inca Trail and now the three of them are on their way to the Galapagos. Under normal circumstances, I might ask about the Inca Trail and mention I'm heading there. But I'm too melancholy and keep to myself. Unfortunately, their loud conversation keeps bombarding me. At one point, the husband says to his friend, "*A puppy bit him in Cusco. Three weeks later, he started having chills and a fever and convulsions, but they couldn't get him to a hospital in time and he died of rabies on the Inca Trail.*"

The story catapults me into deeper despair. I leave my unfinished salad and return to my suite, woozy from the thin, dry, high altitude. I feel the symptoms of something going on.

I take a deep breath and plop down on the king poster bed. *Muriel*, I tell myself, *God is putting you through the nine Aztec hells in a ball game where no one has a chance. Winners, losers, and heroes alike are sacrificed in the end to appease the very gods who fuel the game in the first place.* It's cruel. What has God done to me? He bludgeoned my head with news of my condition. The prognosis. But I had hope. Belief. Maybe it was faith. And I set off on this journey to find a natural cure along the Pan-American Highway, to see the ruins and cities along the way, to hike the Inca Trail, and to reach Tierra del Fuego at the end of the road.

The Aztec gods are cruel. All gods are cruel. They're tricksters. Pranksters. Tormenters. They played me. I wasn't cured. There was never a baby. God thrust me into a confusing life without the promise of progeny, perpetuity, and posterity. I live through the nine hells and then God rewards me with certain death. Like dying of rabies on the Inca Trail.

I stare at the wrought-iron chandelier above. Who can I turn to? Everyone's out of the picture. Friends. Family. Even God? My parents failed me. Steve failed me. God failed me. I've failed myself. The ninth hell of Mictlan is a place where all the wrongs one experienced in life are experienced again and again forever. Like pins in a voodoo doll. This is where the forsaken live. There's no way out of the ninth realm, no possible escape except to extinguish the spirit.

I close my eyes and see panthers with bloody fangs stalking me. Mountains are collapsing all around while wind snakes are hurling obsidian blades at me. My head spins in this high-altitude hacienda homestead at the equator. My spirit doesn't soar into the realm of 13 heavens, like a hummingbird warrior. Like a woman who died in childbirth. Or a person who's drowned.

Have there not been angels along the way? A voice speaks in my head. Even those living through the nine Aztec hells have a dog to guide them. Xoloit is brother to the feathered serpent. He will guide you to the jaguar rainbow bridge across the Milky Way serpent.

The next morning, after a restless night's sleep, I decide to leave my room and quit feeling sorry for myself. A driver from the hacienda takes me to Otavalo. I'm hoping to buy coca leaves for the high-altitude sickness I'm experiencing. And I want to buy an alpaca sweater for my hike in the Andes. I'm more determined than ever now to hike the Inca Trail. It's like the

Tzitzimime butterfly spirits arise within me to fight off the demons that plague me. Maybe my own determination and self-preservation has returned. Maybe it's just a resurgence of hope.

Volcanoes surrounded Otavalo. The Otavaleño men wear rope sandals, white trousers, and ponchos and have long black braids to their waists. Their fedoras are the original Panama hat. Otavaleño women also sport fedoras. They dress in white embroidered blouses, shawls, and long black skirts. They wear golden bead necklaces and red coral bead bracelets.

The town has three separate markets, I quickly discover, one for animals, another for food, and a craft market. The animal market has llamas, guinea pigs, horses, and chickens and isn't meant for tourists. I first wander the food market where vendor stalls sell whole roasted pigs, herbs, and locro de papa—a cheese and potato soup. From one stall, I buy a bitter green drink called sabila. "It's good for health," the vendor tells me. "Made from aloe vera, flaxseed, and linseed."

I take a few swallows and say, "I feel invigorated and infused with nutrients, vitamins, and minerals." The vendor's grin gives me an extra boost of feeling well and hopeful. Like I'm back on track. Like I'm wayfinding again.

At the famed craft market are hundreds of white canvas stalls where Otavaleños sell colorful bags, knitted ponchos, and llama wool tapestries to Ecuadorians and international travelers. I roam the crowded alleys carrying my jadeite necklace in my pocket instead of wearing it, as I almost always do. My plan is to trade it for the things I'll need on the Inca Trail. I no longer want the necklace. It probably cursed me because I ran away from the man who gave it to me. And my luck turned bad after Nele Kuna touched it and revealed the truth about my condition.

I push through the crowded market, wondering what to trade for the necklace. I accidentally bump into a British woman. She says to her companion, “Watch out for her; she bumps into you and doesn’t even say excuse me.” I move on through the market, asking myself *Have you become rude, Muriel? Are you that out of touch?*

An Otavaleño woman in full costume bumps into me. She looks about 50, although perhaps she’s really young. A disease has eaten away most of her nose. It’s probably yaws, I’m thinking. It’s curable but evidently help never reached this poor woman. She has no face.

On impulse, I remove the necklace from my pocket and hand it to her, even though she may never fully realize its value. She has eyes to see it and doesn’t hesitate to take it and go on her way to show off her prize from the crazy American tourist in her village.

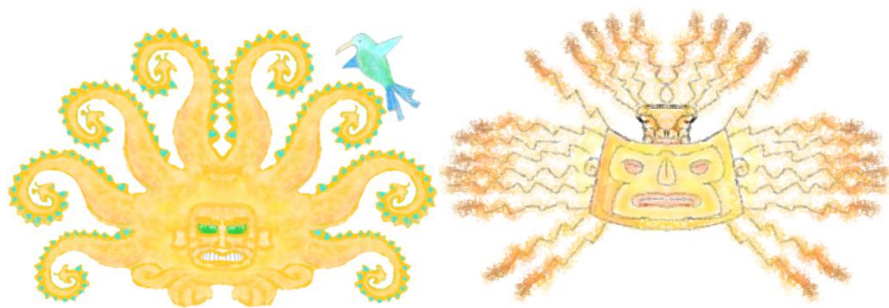
I make my purchases and return to the haven of my hacienda suite. I decide to travel to the heart of the Inca Empire, find another curandero and hike the Inca Trail while I still can.

During the two-hour Avianca flight from Quito to Lima, I read about Peru’s President of Japanese descent. Alberto Fujimori is another controversial South American leader. He survived a coup, an economic crisis, and a bitter divorce then won a second term. His biggest threat comes from Maoist insurgents called the Shining Path and the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement named after the Inca warrior Tupac Amaru II who led an uprising against the Spaniards. Ironically, his rapper namesake, Tupac Shakur, was killed in Las Vegas while I was in Costa Rica. Even more ironic, when I arrive at Jorge Chavez International Airport, a terrorist attack is occurring in Lima. Fourteen Maoists have entered the residence of the Japanese ambassador during a celebration for the Japanese emperor’s birthday. The terrorists are holding five-hundred people hostage, including US officials, diplomats, business CEOs, and military officers.

Because of this incident, I'm delayed at customs for several hours. Once I leave the terminal, touts swarm me like I'm a celebrity and they're the paparazzi. Each man wants to take me to his hotel where he receives a commission for every tourist he snares. The man I finally hire escorts me by taxi to the Gran Bolivar Hotel. "Your hotel is a palace built in 1924 for the centennial of Peru's independence from Spain," he tells me as the taxi bullets through the urban sprawl. Lima obviously has no emission tests. The public buses are old yellow school buses probably from the U.S., and among the crowds and honking cars, I see a homeless man on a city bench with his pants at his ankles, bearing himself to the city.

My room at the Gran Bolivar has a palatial balcony 100 feet long. It appears to be where royalty like Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand once stood before a cheering public. For three days, I relax in my room and leave only to eat vegetarian food at restaurants in Miraflores, a cleaner and more orderly section of Lima.

When I'm ready to head for the Inca Trail, I take a taxi to the Alejandro Velasco Astete International Airport, named after an early aviation hero of the Andes. A travel bureau at the airport arranges for an agent to meet me in Cusco, the heart of the Inca empire and its expansive system of roads.



Chapter 14: The Woman without a Face

Thankfully, Steve doesn't need to tell the kids or his parents about the gruesome body he saw in Tucson. He also thanks the gods, whomever they may be, that it wasn't Muriel. He was

glad Betsy came along on the trip to the Pima County morgue. Fortunately, she wasn't allowed to view the body with him. She was spared the grisly task.

Steve bravely went into that cold morgue examination chamber on his own. When the coroner uncovered the corpse, he immediately knew it wasn't Muriel. The chest was too small, the hands were too large, and he didn't recognize the clothes. He could tell it wasn't Muriel's face, despite the fact that something had gnawed at the corpse's nose and badly damaged its features.

It was dark and rainy on the way home from Tucson. Steve was focused on his driving when Betsy started asking him to describe the body. He's not certain why. He already told her it wasn't Muriel and that should have been enough. But Betsy was curious for some reason, so he told her point blank that he didn't want to talk about it. She didn't press the issue. Muriel probably would have. And they may even have argued about it. Who knows?

Of course, he was relieved it wasn't Muriel but felt terrible for who the corpse used to be and what had happened to her. How did she end up dead and decaying in the desert? The Tucson police wouldn't tell Steve anything, not even if she'd been murdered. Then again, it must have been a homicide unless the poor woman simply wandered away from her home, like Muriel, and got lost in the desert. Steve also felt bad for whomever she belonged to—her husband, parents, children or anyone else who loved her. What's even more tragic is that maybe no one will ever identify her.

Yes, he was relieved it wasn't Muriel, but felt guilty, as if he were doing penance for some kind of sin. Maybe for being a neglectful husband. Maybe for driving his wife away. Simply put, he had too many emotions wrapped up in that poor woman's corpse and couldn't

wait to get back home and have a beer. He wanted nothing else but to get the image of that missing face out of his head.



Chapter 15: Cusco, Heart of the Inca Empire

Cusco is even higher in elevation than Quito. When I arrive, temperatures are mild but the sun is intense. Outside the airport doors, a short, middle-aged Peruvian man in slacks and a dress shirt holds a sign that reads “Sra. Arizona.”

Salvador Filipe, my Cusco travel agent, escorts me via taxi to the Colonial Palace Hotel, an old hotel with a large central courtyard. Along the way, Quechua street vendors are sitting on curbs beneath umbrellas. Blankets before them display crafts, food, knockoff Cartier perfume, and Inca trinkets. Most of the men wear red woven ponchos and knitted chullos—caps with earflaps. The women have two long braids and wear bowler hats that they bake in the sun. They dress in colorful embroidered textiles with beads and tassels, and wear chumpi belts that hold up their skirts.

“Quechua women use the chumpi to carry their babies,” Salvador tells me from the front passenger seat. “The men use them to carry firewood. Women do the weaving but men knit their own chullo hats. Their culture is as ancient as the pyramids of Egypt. They are herders of llamas and alpacas and farmers of potatoes, quinoa, squash, beans, and maize. For one hundred years, Inca kings built Cusco and a network of roads stretching from Quito to Argentina. They called

their empire Tawantinsuya—the Four Sectioned Empire. Welcome to Tawantinsuya, Señora Arizona, capital of my ancestors.”

At the hotel, I check into my room then join Salvador in the lobby to discuss my plans. A hotel waiter serves complimentary coca tea to help me adjust to the high altitude.

“Coca leaves are a natural remedy for mountain sickness,” waiter says.

“Yes,” Salvador says and slurps his own cup of tea. “Andes people have used coca leaves for thousands of years. Inca runners chewed them so they could run along the mountain roads. You can buy them in our markets and on the streets.” He grins and takes another slurp of tea. “What would you like to see, Señora.”

“The Inti Raymi festival at Sexy Woman,” I say and sip the bitter but weak tasting brew. “I read about this winter solstice festival in my AAA travel literature and was hoping this time the astronomical event would actually cure me or at least bolster my spirits.

“Cure you? Señora, while in the Andes, I recommend must drink plenty of water and chew coca leaves. As for Inti Raymi, well, I’m sorry to disappoint you but this is the Southern Hemisphere. It’s our summer solstice now. Your winter solstice is summer solstice down here. June 24 is when you must come to Cusco for the Inti Raymi at Sacsayhuamán.”

I smile feeling a bit disappointed and a little silly. “I know about the different hemispheres. I guess it’s traveler’s fatigue. I practically flew straight here after sailing through the San Blas islands. I just forgot to make the adjustment. Anyway, it’s not my primary reason for coming to Cusco.”

“I’m at your service, Señora Arizona. What else can I do for you?” Salvador sits straight as he awaits my response. His face is round, his eyes are droopy, and he has a relaxed, casual disposition. I trust him, probably because he never raises his voice above a monotone—a

hummingbird hum—and he brought me to this clean and moderately priced hotel and he’s a travel agent, not a street hustling tout.

“I want to see a curandero and hike the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu. That’s what I really want to do. Since leaving the San Blas Islands, I’ve been feeling funny in my chest. My stomach is slightly acidic and at times I’m fatigued and my heart palpates. It could be psychological, though,” I say, with the power of Kuna Nele’s negative suggestions in mind.

“You must be careful, Señora,” Salvador replies. “There are plenty of *brujos malos* in Cusco. Black magic. Voodoo. I’ll take you to the best Quechua curandero I know. His name is Quenti Quespe. It means Bejeweled Hummingbird. He can cure any illness, bring you good fortune and balance your kawsay.”

“Kawsay?”

“Yes. Kawsay. It means your spirit. Or your life force. Bejeweled Hummingbird will align your kawsay with world forces to give you vitality.”

“That’s what I need.” I sip my coca tea and stretch out my legs, feeling like I’m making headway, that I’m back on track for finding a natural cure, if indeed the old Kuna woman was right about my condition. When I have a positive mindset, I tell myself Kuna Nele was wrong, that she was just a tourist quack, a *brujas malos*. Except for telling me there was no baby. She was right about that.

“Señora Arizona, I must warn you. It takes seven days for the cure to work. Give yourself time for your kawsay to revitalize and align with our mountains. We can go now if you like before the evening chill arrives.”

Salvador escorts me to the San Blas barrio of Cusco. I’m not really superstitious but I do find the name ironic and hope I’ll receive a better treatment remedy than Kuna Nele’s on the

other San Blas. We walk along narrow cobblestone steps and alleyways edged by whitewashed buildings with red tile roofs. At one, Salvador knocks on the door and we enter the house of the curandero.

Bejeweled Hummingbird is only 40 but looks old and weathered from the high-altitude sun. He's wearing slacks, a red handwoven poncho, tire sandals, and a knitted chullo. His one-room dwelling smells of herbs and the smoke from the central hearth below a smoke hole. There's a cot against one wall and stools and a table in the corner. "The table is the curandero's mesa where he keeps his *khuyas*—his healing tools," Salvador says. He points to a picture of a dark-complexioned man with a halo on the wall above the table. "This is St. Martin de Pores, Peru's saint. He will help the curandero work miracles."

I look over the mesa and see rosary beads, knives, stones, bones, coca leaves, and seashells. Beside the mesa are wicker cages with gibbering guinea pigs. "What are all the guinea pigs for," I ask.

"We call them cuy. They're also part of Quenti Quespe's *khuyas*."

"How so?" I ask. "I'm a strict vegetarian."

"That's a good start for you," Salvador tells me. "Now, please sit on the stool and Quenti Quespe can begin your session."

I sit on a stool beside his mesa while thinking that the cuy's gibbers will reveal my condition. I hope so. I'm anxious to **see how my kawsay will squeeze out what's harming me.**

Bejeweled Hummingbird lights candles on his mesa and begins chanting. "He opens the ceremony by honoring the four directions," Salvador explains.

"The Inca's empire Tawantinsuya," I suggest.

"Yes. Señora Arizona. Just like the Inca Empire."

I watch the curandero hold the candle over his khuyas. “He’s creating a sacred space,” Salvador says. “St. Martin de Pores is the center of his mesa, as Cusco is the center of the Inca world. To learn your ailment, he travels through the world above, Hanan Pacha, the world we live on, Kay Pacha, and the world of Ukhu Pacha where bad spirits go. Bejeweled Hummingbird will bring you the healing powers of these three worlds to mend your kawsay and heal you. You must focus on positive things.”

“Have you come to our mountains for a cure, señorita?” Bejeweled Hummingbird asks. It’s the first time he speaks in Spanish.

“Si, Señor. Estoy muriendo.”

“No, no,” Bejeweled Hummingbird says. “Be calm. The mountains have spiritual powers.”

With dry, leathery hands, he feels my pulse and forehead and looks deeply into my eyes then takes a cuy from its cage and resumes his chanting.

“His chants chase away bad spirits,” Salvador explains.

The curandero rubs the squirming animal on my arms, legs, stomach, chest, and head like Nele Kuna did with her Nucha spirit doll.

“Cuy absorbs the illness so the curandero can diagnose a remedy,” Salvador says.

The shaman stops chanting and suddenly chokes the cuy. I gasp as I watch him slit its belly over a pan and dissect the entrails to make his diagnosis. I wasn’t expecting this.

“You suffer from parasites and an imbalance of heat and cold in your organs because of childhood traumas,” Salvador translated. “He says you’re you’re suffering an emotional ailment.”

I say nothing as I watch the curandero spread out a sheet of brown paper on his mesa.

“He is making your *ayni despacho* offering for Mother Earth Pachamama and the Apu grandfathers of our mountains.”

With sugar, the curandero draws a cross in a circle and adds corn kernels, quinoa, coca leaves, and flower petals. Then he wraps it in cloth and ties it with a string. While chanting, he rubs the bundle on my head.

“Bejeweled Hummingbird will burn your ayni despacho on a mountain pass where the Apu gods absorb the smoke. It’s a ritual too powerful for you to watch. He will ask Pachamama to heal you. Now he give you a *dieta* for the next week. He says you must eat only Andean food on your vegetarian diet. No sugar, salt, alcohol, or caffeine. Our four Earth goddess provide for you. Mama Cocha gives you fish and lots of water, Mama Axo gives you purple potatoes, yams and squash, Mama Koka provides coca tea and herbal infusions, Mama Sara shares with you her corn and bread, and Mama Quinoa brings you amaranth, quinoa and chili peppers. You can’t drink llama milk or eat llama, frog, or cuy.

“Believe me. After this ceremony, I’ll never touch one.”

Salvador laughs and continues, “You can’t socialize, have sexual relations, or have negative thoughts. For seven days you must rest, take many showers and refrain from speaking as much as you can. Silence is a powerful remedy.”

“This is just another immersion program, like my one-on-one Spanish lessons.”

Bejeweled Hummingbird smiles and gives me the address of a vegetarian restaurant and market in Cusco and tells Salvador to bring me back to his house each day for my herbal infusions.

Over the following days, I mostly stay in my hotel room, resting and reading *Into Thin Air*—a book about a disastrous climbing season on Mount Everest—and a Nat Geo article by Johan Reinhard titled “Peru’s Ice Maiden.” I came across this book and Nat Geo at the Sheridan Bookstore in Lima. The pictures and stories keep me engrossed until Salvador arrives to escort me to **Bejeweled Hummingbird’s casa** for my infusions from Mama Koka.

Despite the instruction not to talk, I want to explore the heart of the Inca Empire and ask Salvador to show me the sites of Cusco. I need a distraction from my alone time because I’m starting to have negative thoughts that go against my dieta. **I’ve been concerned that Steve is angry with me and will take away my father’s financial support despite the trust fund under Daddy’s name. I worry that maybe he tricked me into marrying him. I hope not.**

I keep quiet as Salvador takes me to Plaza de Armas. I make no comments, which is difficult to do, and when I have questions, I write them down. It’s like I’m playing charades or Pictionary, but in truth, I feel the healing power of not speaking. If nothing else, it gives my larynx a vacation.

“Plaza de Armas has been a gathering place since King Pachacuti built Cusco 500 years ago,” Salvador remarks as he escorts me to the cathedral that fronts the plaza. “In the 1600s, the Spanish built this church. It’s called Our Lady of Assumption of the Virgin.”

In the plaza’s center stands a bronze statue of Pachacuti on a three-tiered fountain that sprays us with mist. Salvador gestures I stand in the statue’s shade as he speaks. “Nine Inca kings reigned before Pachacuti, but he was first to expand the empire beyond Cusco. That’s why his people called him Earth Shaker. He shook the earth and conquered the Andes. His son Tupac Inca and grandson Huayna Capac were also Inca kings. His great-grandson, Atahualpa, was the last king when Francisco Pizarro conquered the Incas and stole their gold. The Spanish killed

Atahualpa before St. Dominican Cathedral and destroyed the Inca Empire. Their diseases killed many Andean people and they forced those who survived to become Christian. We still pray to our ancient gods and have kept our traditions. These days we like to share the magic of our mountains with tourists like you, Señora Arizona.”

Salvador escorts me to the temple complex Coricancha, the focus of Cusco. “The Incas dedicated the temples inside to Lady Coyllur of the Plieades, Viracocha, Illapa, Lord of thunder, and **Cuichu, Lord of the rainbow bridge to hanan pacha. The Incas paneled Mamakilla’s Moon Temple with silver and Inti’s Sun Temple with gold. The Gold Temple was the most sacred huaca in the world.**”

Huaca? I write down.

“*Huacas* are centers of energy connected by invisible strings that extend into the three worlds”

I say nothing while thinking how similar this is to string theory, a topic Arturo Barrantes knows all about.

Salvador takes me to a wall that’s part of the complex. “This is the oldest wall in the city. It was once part of the Acllahuasi, the Inca king’s House of Chosen Maidens. Now the old stone wall is part of the Dominican cloister for nuns. They are like the Inca chosen maidens except they’re mostly old women who embroider instead of weave and pray for people’s salvation.”

Tell me about the chosen girls. Were they the children sacrificed in the mountains? **I write down.**

“Inca kings searched their empire for beautiful girls between eight and twelve to live in the Acllahuasi. They called these children *acllas*. They cooked the king’s food, made

his chicha beer, and wove his clothes. After an aclla menstruated, the king gave her a name and the choice to either return to her parents' home or remain in the cloister as a mamacuna. Some acllas married warriors or noblemen, or the king himself. When the king won a great victory or after a natural disaster, he chose the most beautiful aclla to sacrifice as an offering to the gods."

Inca boys were also sacrificed, I jot down.

"Yes. Senorita Arizona. Sometimes the king chose Inca boys for sacrifice. Parents felt honored to give their child, boy or girl, to the king for sacrifice. The child became a capacocha, a child of sacrifice, a huaca tied directly to the gods of hanan pacha."

I of course say nothing. But in my mind I feel like I'll become a capacocha unless my new dieta works its magic.

At noon on Christmas day, I meet Salvador in the hotel lobby to discuss my plans. After a week of following my dieta, I'm feeling a resurgence of strength. **I'm not a little wandering dove in my biosphere cooing "no hope," I tell myself. In fact, I have more hope now than ever before on this journey. Probably because positive thinking is part of my dieta and because I'm determined to hike the Inca Trail.** Cusco has blessed me. Maybe now I'm truly well. Maybe Kuna Nele was wrong, at least about my not being cured.

I sit on the lobby's velveteen sofa wearing my alpaca wool poncho from Otavalo. Salvador sits beside me in slacks and a neat wool sweater. He's holding a pad and pen to take notes. Across the lobby, beside the fireplace, is a nativity scene with dried mosses and cones that Quechua vendors brought to the market to sell specifically for such nativity scenes called *El*

Nacimiento. It has plastic angels, shepherds, Mary, Joseph, three wise men, and the baby Jesus in a straw manger. The fresh boughs of fir edging the display scent the lobby.

Salvador pours me a cup of coca tea. “Mama Koka’s remedy,” I say with confidence now that I can speak again. “She’s helped me acclimatize. Mamas Sara, Concha, Axo, Quinoa, and Bejeweled Hummingbird have cured me with their dieta. I’m ready to hike the Inca Trail if it’s the last thing I do on my way to the end of the world.”

“It’s the rainy season, Señora Arizona,” Salvador politely says. “The trail is muddy in places and the climb is long and tiresome.”

“Salvador, a little rain from Illapa won’t stop me. Besides, I can’t go away and come back in June. I’m here now and want to hike the Inca Trail then continue to Lake Titicaca. Please arrange this for me.”

Salvador chuckles. “When you make prayers to the mountains, Saint Martin de Pores himself will guide your walk. He will clad your spirit with magic like the tapestry of a Quechua woman. You’re a good weaver, Señora Arizona. You’re a good woman.”

“You’re very kind, Señor Salvador.” I sip Mama Koka’s tea.

“I’ll arrange for you to join an organized tour.”

“No,” I quickly reply. “I want to hike the trail alone, just me and a guide. Maybe you could guide me.”

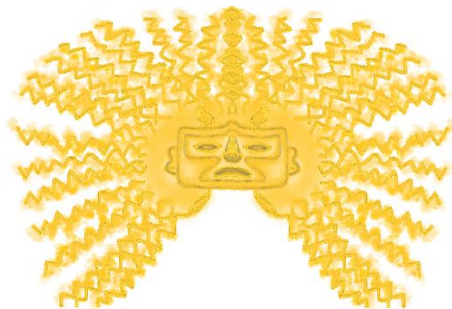
He laughs. “*No es posible*. I never go to Machu Picchu. But it’s no problem. I think you’re strong and I have a good guide for you. A young man named Raulito Torres from EcoTours Peru. It will cost much more than a tour group will.”

“I’ll pay whatever it takes,” I assure Salvador. “If I can’t make it to Machu Picchu, tell them to bury me where I die. Isn’t that an Inca proverb? Didn’t the Incas bury their warriors where they fell in battle on the Inca roads?”

Salvador gives me a puzzled look. “I must go now to arrange for your guide and book a ticket for a luxury sleeper on the train to Lake Titicaca.”

After Salvador leaves me in the lobby, I look across the room at *El Nacimiento*. The night before, on Christmas Eve, the hotel clerk assembled the nativity display. It’s so unlike back home where we start decorating for the holidays the day after Thanksgiving or even Halloween and leave it up well past New Years Day. It’s as if El Nacimiento is so sacred here, a huaca, that the people only want a short glimpse of it. Or maybe they find over commercialization distasteful.

I gaze at the baby Jesus with his arms stretched upward probably in adoration of God, his father. The image makes me wonder who I really am in the scheme of the universe and who’s really in charge of my destiny if it’s not me.



Chapter 16: Christmas in Sun City West

For Christmas day dinner at his parents, Steve brings along Betsy. She’s been taking care of his kids for ten months and Steve has grown quite attached to her. These days, she’s a good friend to him although they still don’t talk beyond casual concerns about his children’s needs.

Lately, Steve's been thinking about pushing their friendship up a notch. Maybe tonight, after they get home. Regardless of whether or not he makes a move on her, he thinks it's about time his mother gets used to the fact that Betsy's becoming part of his life. His mother should be grateful. She didn't have to move in with him like she had to when Angeline died. She gets to see her grandkids when she wants to—on weekends, rather than all the time.

His mother's Christmas dinner is catered by Creative Cuisine in Sun City West. She gave up preparing big holiday meals after she turned sixty. But they never really had big family fanfare dinners and when they did, it was with an uncle, an aunt, a few cousins, and Steve's late brother.

Steve and his dad drink Amstel beers, the kids drink grape juice, and Betsy drinks a wine cooler that Steve brought along because his parents would have only Amstel beer. When Betsy offers his mother a cooler, Bill tells his standard joke. "Mom's too young to drink." He started telling this joke when they moved to Sun City West soon after Steve landed his job at Intel. The fact is, Steve's mother has never drunk alcohol in her life.

Bill says grace before he carves the turkey and takes the first bite. Although Steve doesn't follow his parents' Protestant faith, he believes tradition is good for his kids. This is why they're here instead of at the Unitarian Church's Christmas day dinner.

After the meal gets going and the kids are enjoying their turkey wings, Bill asks, "What kind of computer should I buy, son?" He has an old Tandy and wants to upgrade to something more modern.

"Anything with an Intel Pentium chip," Steve tells him. "Had I known you wanted a new computer, Dad, I would have gotten you one for Christmas instead of a sweater." Everyone laughs.

Steve notices that his mother isn't saying much to Betsy, beyond a polite word or two. He knows his mother wants only what's best for him, but he can tell she doesn't like the fact that he's brought a hair stylist to her holiday table.

Steve tries to engage Betsy and his dad while his mother talks to her grandkids about their school activities and latest toys. The kids are excited about spending the weekend with Grandma and Grandpa Tyler and playing with their Nintendo, Mario Brothers, Sony PlayStation, and a cache of other toys. Whatever catches their grandchildren's interest on TV, Steve's parents rush out and buy it for their next visit.

At one point during the meal, Kevin makes a remark that seems to come from nowhere. "I wish Mommy Muriel were here."

Then Kristi chimes in, "When's Mommy coming home?"

Nobody says anything until Bill asks for the gravy. The kids already know the answer. Mommy Muriel has gone away and likely won't be returning home. At least, as Steve often tells his children, she didn't die like their first mommy. And fortunately, the kids really like auntie Betsy, as they call her. She has a talent for inspiring children to have fun, be happy, and not focus on sad things. When Betsy's with them, or with Steve for that matter, no one mentions Muriel or anything about her disappearing. It's better that way.



Chapter 17: Dead Woman's Pass

At 5 a.m. sharp, the phone on my nightstand rings. “*Llamada de despertador*. Wakeup call.”

It's raining and dark outside. I throw on my Kokopelli T-shirt, the one I wore when I left Ahwatukee last February, and my poncho. Then I grab my knapsack containing toiletries, sunscreen, my camera, a change of clothes, a wool blanket from Otavalo, and coca leaves and herbs for my dieta.

I put on a Cartier knock-off watch from a street vendor in Cusco. I want to tell the time on the Inca Trail, or at least see how long it takes me to get from sacred place to place. From huaca to huaca. I've already arranged with the hotel to leave my ThinkPad in their storage. I plan to retrieve it after the trek, before I catch the train to Bolivia.

In the lobby, while the bellboys are taking down *El Nacimiento*, Salvador introduces my tour guide Raulito Torres from EcoTours Peru. He looks about fifteen and is wearing polyester slacks, tennis shoes, and a red-and-gray alpaca sweater frayed at the elbows and neck. He has short black hair, bangs above neatly shaped eyebrows, and a clean boyish face with a honey-smooth complexion. His nose is slightly broad and he has Asian eyes. He's smaller than me, like most Quechua people.

“Raulito has worked with tourists since he was nine,” Salvador adds. “He’s a Q’ero Quechua, last of the Incas. Fourteen thousand years ago, at the end of the last Ice Age, his ancestors migrated from Asia and settled in the Andes. Before that, they came from the Pleiades.”

“I’m impressed,” I say. “I don’t even know where my people come from or where they now are.” I’m trying to be funny but what I’m saying is pretty much true.

The young man shakes my hand. “*Encandado*, Señora Arizona.” He repeats my name until he says it correctly. “It’s a beautiful name,” he adds. “One I’ve never heard before. A name that suits you quite well.”

“Thank-you.” I immediately like Raulito. His gleaming smile touches my heart. I agree to pay him twenty dollars a day, plus the cost of food and the porter, then I thank Salvador for showing me Cusco and taking me to Bejeweled Hummingbird. He shakes my hand. “My pleasure. I’ll miss you, Arizona. I’m sure your dieta has cured your ailment and the mountain apus will invigorate your spirit.”

“And mamas Sara Axo Quinoa and Koka,” I say, amusing both Salvador and my new guide.

“You’ll soar like the great condors of our mountains,” Salvador says as parting words.

Later in the morning, my guide and I board the train to Kilometer 88. Raulito carries my tent and sleeping bag, a pack with his cooking equipment, and some of my Andean vegetarian food. “We’ll buy bottled water and food from village stores along the trail,” he tells me.

From the train station in Kilometer 88, the trailhead to Machu Picchu lies beyond wooden shacks and across a steep, narrow ravine. The sky is clear with wispy clouds touching the snowcapped peaks. The sight is breathtaking.

“The Andes penetrate the blue skies of hanan pacha,” Raulito remarks as he sets our gear on the lawn near the trailhead. “We call the mountains our grandfathers at the top of the world.”

The trailhead is already crowded with Quechua porters in red ponchos and colorful chullos. “They’re waiting for tourists to hire them,” my guide says.

The other trekkers are mostly youthful Israelis and Europeans, Olympic types. They’re adjusting day packs and enjoying beer from a vendor awaiting the return of his bottles. They probably wonder what a woman old enough to be their mother, or nearly so, is attempting to do. I hardly care what anyone thinks about me. I’m not in a tour group. I’m on my own with the help of my personal Q’ero Quechua guide.

Raulito introduces me to a porter with a cold sore above his lip. He’s short and stout with dimples on his round face. “I know him and his family,” Raulito says. “He’s a good porter and will help me prepare your meals. His name’s Teddy.”

“Teddy?” I ask. “The name doesn’t seem to fit him.”

“Yes, Arizona. He was born when his father guided an American named Teddy on the trail.”

After most trekkers leave with their guides, the porters run up the trail as if for a pressing engagement. On their backs are enormous bundles covered with tarps and tied with ropes. They hold the pack bottoms with their hands and secure them with chest straps. Some carry their loads with woven straps across their foreheads called *mecapals*.

“They’ll set up camp an hour before the hikers arrive. Quechua porters are like *chaski* Inca runners,” Raulito informs me as we start up the wide trail side by side. He’s hauling my knapsack and his own while I carry a bottle of water. “Inca runners were fit young men and boys, like Teddy. They ran on the Inca roads and delivered quipus to the king.”

“I know,” I say as I huff along. “Quipus are strings tied in knots that record information. They’re the Inca bookkeeping notes.” He looks at me. “I’m a bookkeeper, too.”

“But you’re not a *chaski* runner, señorita. You must go slow, carry nothing but your water, not even a quipu. Take your time and let those in a hurry go first. Teddy will soon return with a horse in case you’re tired.”

“I never asked for a horse. Do you think I won’t make it to Machu Picchu? What did Salvador say about me?”

“We have several miles ahead before we reach Huayllabamba in the Sacred Valley of the Inca. It’s 2,750 meters in elevation at the fork of the Llullucha and Cusichaca Rivers. If you don’t want the horse, we can keep walking. *Pero*, you may change your mind. You need to save your energy whenever you can.”

“I’m fully recovered now and well acclimatized. My dieta worked wonders. I’m a bit out of shape, that’s all. I’ve never done anything like this before. Just day hikes with the kids.” I **suddenly realize** that I’ve slipped up mentioning my stepchildren, something I haven’t done since leaving Ahwatukee. But Raulito doesn’t notice, or if he does, he doesn’t ask who the “kids” might be. I’m relieved.

As I continue hiking, I carefully watch my step because of the many stones and potholes on the path and I begin thinking about Marcy’s suggestion that I try ayahuasca. **My topsy-turvy journey to the end of the world has been cursed, cured, blessed, and then cursed again, but**

I'm still hoping for a permanent cure for my condition. Or some kind of resolution. I'm generally opposed to drugs and medications but now I feel like taking drastic measures.

"Is there a curandero in this sacred valley?" I ask.

Raulito stops his pace and seems worried as he looks at me. "You need another curandero? Salvador told me you met Bejeweled Hummingbird because you've been sick with efermedad de alturo."

"I want to meet a curandero who can take me on a spiritual journey with ayahuasca. A friend mentioned I should try this hallucinogenic drug while in the Andes."

"Yes, Arizona. I know a curandero who treats tourists with ayahuasca. I recommend you wait until after the hike to Machu Picchu. Ayahuasca is a strong therapy. It may take you many days to recover. Longer than your dieta with Bejeweled Hummingbird."

The first part of the Inca Trail consists of tropped earth and stones. It gradually creeps uphill beside the Cusichaca River loudly gushing down the valley. The wildflowers, prickly pear, and scrub brush along the trail are similar to the terrain in Arizona. As we trek along, Raulito points out jays, grosbeaks, and condors soaring in the thermals. On the grassy hillside, between large, mossy stones, he shows me an emerald hummingbird hovering over red trumpet flowers.

"It's as beautiful as a butterfly, a Morpho Pleiades."

"Yes. Sinorita. As beautiful as you. You are an emerald pillpintu. That means butterfly in my language."

Mariposa, papillon, pillpintu, the butterfly has such beautiful names. She's an Aztec goddess you know? Itzpaplotl. She's the queen of the Tzitzimime, the butterfly stars that appear around the eclipsed sun."

No, I didn't know this but I like it very much. It's a name that suits you as well. May I call you pillpintu? It's easier for me."

Of course," I say thinking of Arturo and his butterfly biodome. It all seems so far away now. So distant in time. Like Steve, the kids, and Betsy. It's like my memory of them is a past life, a short butterfly life--quickly lived then fluttered away.

During the trek, I stop repeatedly to catch my breath and notice Raulito struggling to keep pace with me. At one point I tell him, "You can go ahead a while, if you like. I want to contemplate these spectacular mountains. Take mental pictures of the apu gods. You said there won't be any ruins until after the first pass. You don't have to explain anything until then."

"I can't leave you, Señorita Arizona. I mean Pillpintu," Raulito protests. "In the mountains live awki spirits. Some are good but many are bad. I know the signs of their mischief and can protect you from their harm. To stay with you is my job. It's no problem to go slowly. We stop whenever you like."

Farther along the trail, we pass stone and sod-brick houses with thatched roofs, potato and quinoa fields on terraced mountain slopes, and llamas and sheep grazing in pastures edged by ancient stone walls. Raulito talks about his experiences as a guide and the Pope's visit to Peru several years before. Occasionally, he asks about me but I avoid discussing my background, even a made-up one. It detracts from the sense of living in the ever-present on the Inca Trail. The way I lived with Arturo Barrantes. No future, no past.

"I'm living in the Kay Pacha of the Incas, the world we presently inhabit on our passage through time." My remark makes Raulito laugh. He likes to make jokes and loves it when I do the same.

At the first mountain pass, we arrive at a pile of rocks under the shade of a polylepis tree. “We rest,” my young guide suggests, knowing I need to catch my breath. “Look at the snowcapped mountains. At our backs, in front of us, to our left, and to our right. The apu gods guide our way from pass to pass.”

I look around me and deeply inhale the thin mountain air. “Are these stones huaca markers? They’re like the markers we have on trails back home. We call them cairns.”

“This is an apacheta shrine to mark this mountain pass. Travelers passing by leave rocks, coca leaves, shells, or clay figurines to honor the gods. Yes. This is an ancient huaca on a line pointing to a star. It’s a good place to pray to Pachamama and the Apu grandfathers.”

I loosen the neck of my Kokopelli T-shirt under my poncho. The hike makes me sweat, although the cool and dry air causes sweat to evaporate quickly. “My only prayer is to see Machu Picchu. Nothing else matters,” I say in short breaths.

“The horse will be here soon. Don’t worry, señorita.” Raulito looks at me sympathetically. Or maybe he’s awed by me. He did say I was beautiful like a pillpintu.

“You’re lucky to be from these mountains,” I say, awed myself by the surroundings. “High in the Andes, each step I take feels like a moment of clarity. I was born and bred in Arizona. But really, where’s my place on Earth? I’m nothing like you and your ancestors from the Pleiades. You have a proud, distinguished heritage. My people are originally from somewhere in Europe. Makes me feel deprived of any quadrant of a kingdom along sacred intersecting lines and huacas.” Raulito laughs and places a few coca leaves on the shrine with a rock to hold them down.

“My ancestors are a migratory people,” I continue. “Like your people 14,000 years ago. When you get right down to it, we’re all migratory people originally from Africa, Java, or

someplace like that. Maybe even the Pleiades. The Andes have drawn me here. I feel like I belong even though I'm not Q'ero Quechua. Or even South American. Where should I claim I'm from if not these Andes mountains?"

Raulito gives me a puzzled look like he's trying to understand but can't. "*Entonces*, señorita, you're here all right. We wait for the horse. I think you need more time to acclimatize. These mountains are very high." He hands me more coca leaves to chew, just as we hear a whistle.

"That's teddy," Raulito says and whistles back. In a moment the porter appears on a scrawny brown mare. Not the kind of horse at a riding ranch in Arizona.

"In two hours, we'll arrive at the village of Huayllabamba the Place of Good Pastures," Raulito says as he and Teddy help me on the mare. I'm fatigued but want to appear strong, invincible, like someone bound to reach the royal fortress retreat hidden in the Andes.

With the bridle rope, Raulito leads my horse as its hoofs tromp along the stone road. I'm feeling comfortable on its back. It's much easier than hiking. "You know, Raulito?"

"Si, señorita." He looks back at me and pats the mare's slouching neck.

"I can't believe middle-age happened to me. It was always something that would happen in the distant future like it must be for you now. I woke up one morning and noticed I had permanent wrinkles on my face, not to mention a few strands of gray hair. And I'm only 36."

Raulito chuckles until he burst out laughing. "You're very funny, señorita. I like you very much."

An hour before sunset, we arrive at the Llullucha River in the Sacred Valley of the Incas. Tugging the bridle rope, Raulito pulls the stubborn mare across a log bridge near Huayllabamba

Village. We then pass corn fields and stone houses where dogs are dozing and pigs, chickens, and goats are foraging for feed in the muddy yards.

“Maize is grown in the Sacred Valley because it’s low enough in elevation,” Raulito says.

“Mama Sara’s gift to the Quechua. To all the people of the Americas. The Aztecs had two corn goddesses. Did you know?”

“No. Senorita. Tell me their names. I only know about the gods of the Quechuas.”

“Chicomecoatl was the fully grown corn. She taught people to make tortillas. Xilonen was goddess of the corn shoots. She taught people to keep calm and hopeful. She’s also part of my dieta of Mayahual and Patecatl, the healing gods of the Aztecs. I added her myself.”

“I like that, Arizona. Pillpinu. From Mama Sara’s maize, my people make *chicha de jora*. Tonight, we will drink this traditional Inca maize beer.”

“My dieta doesn’t allow alcohol,” I remind him.

“You can make an exception tonight. Chicha is a natural remedy made of sprouted corn. Like your Aztec goddess of corn shoots.”

“Xilonen.”

“Yes. Her drink. Chicha de jora will make you calm and hopeful. It isn’t like pisco sour, the national drink of Peru.” Raulito tugs the horse uphill.

As we near the village, most gringos on the trail are heading to the nearby ruins where their porters have already pitched tents. Villagers are in their front yards preparing the evening’s meal at pachamanca ovens and fire pits; others are working in their potato, maize, quinoa, and melon gardens.

The hut of the family who own my mare is made of stone and mudbrick with a thatched roof. Beyond it are terraced hillsides and stone corrals for five horses and perhaps one hundred

llamas. A low stone wall surrounds the front yard and borders the Inca Trail. In the yard, chickens are wandering among evergreen trees with gnarly trunks. Some hens are jumping over the stone wall to forage on the trail.

Raulito guides the mare into the yard and helps me off the horse. The Quechua horseman holds the bridle and greets me with a grin. He's in his thirties and his face is weathered by the high-altitude sun like his red poncho and chullo.

The horseman's handsome wife stands at her pachamanca roasting cuy, corn, and potato fritters that smell of chilies and garlic. She's wearing a flaring skirt, leggings, a lama wool sweater, a lliclla shawl held by a tupu straight pin, and a chumpi belt. Two boys, about seven and ten, are playing with a ball by the front door near wicker crates of guinea pigs.

"He's Pidru Yupanqui," Raulito refers to the horseman. "It means he honors his fathers. His wife is Pillpintu. She is a lovely butterfly, like you Arizona Pillpintu." The Quechua woman smiles at me and returns to her task at the pachamanca.

The hut inside has an earthen floor, a corner hearth on a raised platform, and a cot against one wall that Pidru rents to foreign trekkers like me. "There's no electricity or running water," Raulito tells me. "The family uses kerosene lanterns and candles at night. Their water comes from the rain and mountain streams."

When night falls, Teddy sleeps under a rain shelter with other porters. My hosts, the Yupanqui family, and Raulito sleep in the center of the room, under heavy wool blankets on thick llama skin rugs. The hearth is opposite my cot and during the night, I grow increasingly cold and uncomfortable. Along with pesky gnats, a slight pain in my legs keeps me awake most of the night. When I rise in the morning, Raulito serves me mate de coca to ease my discomfort

and advises we stay with our hosts a few days so I can rest before setting out on a long, difficult hike. “We’ve only started our trek to Machu Picchu,” he admits.

Later in the afternoon, I’m feeling better and ask Raulito to show me around the village. “I want to hike every day and stretch out my legs no matter how I feel,” I tell him. “I need to keep up my stamina.”

“Your kawsay you mean,” Raulito suggests.

With Pidru along to tell me about his village, we walk to a cemetery across from a field where porters are pitching tents for their trekking groups. The quiet cemetery has many insignificant wooden crosses. Stones circle some of the crosses but many stones are scattered in disarray as if no one tends to the graves. We stop at a neatly marked grave with a pile of stones holding up a cross.

“Who’s buried here?” I ask the horseman. He seems to enjoy telling me about his village. I must be a rare extravagance to him.

“My grandmother is buried here,” Pidru says.

“Is this cemetery only for villagers?” I ask.

“Yes,” Raulito says. “*Pero*, it’s full now and the government is encouraging cremation. But we prefer to bury our people in the mountain and give them small crosses, sometimes nothing at all, not even a stone.”

“People are buried in the mountains?”

“Yes, señorita Pillpintu, where nobody knows. Except for the family. It’s a pity, but many tourists use this cemetery as their toilet.”

“Your government should provide facilities. When you got to go, you got to go.” My remark doesn’t draw a laugh. I don’t think my guide and host understand what I mean.

“On a mountainside, I buried the child of a cousin,” the horseman says. “It died three days old; it came to this world without a spirit.”

I stare at the grave, pondering his remark. Born with or without a spirit. Does it really matter? I hope it does and that there’s more meaning to life than just life itself. A here-beyond after we die and leave our accomplishments or disasters in Kay Pacha. But life is unpredictable and unfair. And sometimes a god intervenes. Chooses a sacrifice. Some of us die before we can finish what we’ve set out to do.

“Why do you think the baby didn’t have a spirit?” I ask, hoping to learn some kind of Quechua wisdom.

“No one named it, *por supuesto*,” Raulito says, as if I ought to know that if you don’t have a name, you can’t have a spirit.

“Oh, I see. It’s all about being named.”

Two gringas suddenly amble into the cemetery. They greet us with “*holas*” and Raulito motions we go to the trail leading to the river.

On my second night in the village, it rains until sunrise. “It’s *chiri chiri* cold,” Raulito says when he wakes me from a deep sleep. “I have pancakes for you. Then we go. If you’re ready.”

I stretch on the cot, feeling less exhausted and more capable of trekking today. Yesterday’s pain was brief, like a passing menstrual cramp.

I throw on my poncho and sit on the edge of my wooden bed. It creaks with my every move. While pulling on wool socks, I think about my mother who died halfway through her life. Lately, I've been thinking more about her than about Steve and my stepchildren or my dad. More about a dead woman who left me than the living people I deserted.

Steve always stood by me, saw to my needs and security, and he would stand by me now, I know. *Why are you thinking about Steve?* I ask myself, *when you've fought long and hard not to dwell on him? Don't forget you left him for a reason. Especially not now.*

"I'm glad you feel better." Raulito's smile and words instantly clear my head of troubling thoughts. "We're lucky today. The clouds are gone. The climb is long and difficult but the horse will make it easy for you. We should reach the highest pass today."

Within the hour, I'm back on the mare, riding along the trail with the horseman, his youngest son, two dogs, and Raulito. Pillpintu and her eldest son are farther up the trail, escorting a pair of attorneys from Washington State.

Earlier this morning, in the damp, frosty chill outside the horseman's hut, the couple exchanged a few jovial comments with me. Mostly about the rain and their fear of not making it all the way to Machu Picchu. They had camped with their tour group the night before, in the rain, and eagerly hired two horses after learning that horses were available.

From the river, we climb a sheer ravine lush with mosses, grasses, ferns, lichens, and shrubs. In places, a sharp cliff rims the stoney trail, worrying me because of my precarious position high on a scrawny mare. I concentrate on each step the horse takes, listen to its hoofs clomp on the ground, and convince myself that the animal's more surefooted than I could ever be.

From various vantage points, Raulito stops so I can view the vast valley and Huayllabamba Village. He tells me the names of the ruins we pass and the name of each towering snowcap.

In places, the trail runs beside the Llullucha River. We pass a few French and German trekkers carrying their own packs while huffing and puffing uphill. Occasionally, trekkers sit on rocks at the side of the trail, with faces red from exhaustion. I merely nod as I ride by, feeling like a vaquero. It's a nice feeling, a moment of clarity.

We pass through a cloud forest of moss-covered trees dotted with bromeliads and orchids. It's like being in a fantasy forest leading to a Wizard's castle, to an impelling game of thrones.

At one point, the climb becomes too steep for my "non-Arizonan" horse and Raulito helps me dismount to allow the poor animal to maneuver up the wet, rocky path on its own. Raulito then takes my hand and helps me climb over boulders and scree. Sometimes, after a few steps, I become breathless, with a tight sensation in my chest, as if the elevation is squeezing air from my lungs. I can't imagine climbing this pass without the horse and my young exuberant guide.

We stop at a plateau with an exquisite view of glacial peaks above Huayllabamba Village and eat a lunch of corn and potato fritters that the horseman's wife prepared for us. No cuy for me! In the other direction looms Warmiwañusca—Dead Woman's Pass. At 4,298 meters in elevation, it's the highest pass on the Inca Trail.

"Why's it called Dead Woman's Pass?" I ask my guide when we're back on the trail and I'm riding the mare. "Did some poor woman die of exhaustion after reaching it?"

Raulito laughs and tells the joke to Pidru who's walking beside him holding the horse's reins. "Some people think the rock looks like a dead woman lying on her back," Raulito says. "But I don't think it looks like that."

As we near Warmiwañusca, clouds begin to veil the mountains. When we reach the top of the pass, the clouds part and sunlight shines onto a flat area of slate gravel and rock. A dozen other gringo trekkers are sitting on boulders admiring the panorama.

Near a marker that reads "Peru's National Park," the horseman greets his wife Pillpintu. She's with her horses and the attorney couple.

Raulito helps me dismount. "Now we must trek on foot. The path ahead is unsuitable for Pidru's horses. This is the beginning of the trail the Incas paved with stones all the way to Machu Picchu. And they didn't have horses."

I give Pidru a generous tip. He firmly shakes my hand, smiles broadly, and says, "Good luck and goodbye." Then he and his family lead their horses back down the mountain to their village.

I sit on a boulder away from conversations in French, English, Israeli, and German. A swift breeze brushes my face and causes my hair to fall from my braid. I gaze at the distant Runkuraqay Ruins above the river valleys. For some reason, I'm feeling distressed rather than peaceful, probably because all the chattering disturbs the mountain's serenity. There are too many people. "Are the apu gods as disturbed as I am by so many trekkers?" I ask Raulito. He sits on the grassy ground beside me. He's looking across the valley, toward the ruins.

"Here, you can find your spirit like no other place."

"But how do you know?" I tease. "You haven't been any place else. Not to Ahwatukee."

Raulito smiles but says nothing. His presence warms my heart. Like a mother proud of her son, I imagine. He gives me that kind of feeling.

On a nearby boulder, I notice a young trekker with a neatly trimmed beard. He appears stout and sturdy. Quite attractive. His huge backpack is sitting on the ground beside him. I remember him on the trail before lunch. All of a sudden I want to engage with a fellow traveler on the road to Machu Picchu, “Are you traveling alone?” I ask.

“Totally alone,” the youth replies after seeing who’s speaking.

“That’s great!” says a nearby French woman in her twenties. She’s with a small group of trekkers. Amazingly, she’s smoking as she stands and catches her breath.

“Said there’d only be twelve in our group,” remarks a German man beside the French woman. He’s also smoking and sounds disgusted. “My tour group ended up with thirty-five people. I don’t even recognize most of them. In fact, I got mixed up this morning and left with another group.”

“You’re hiking alone?” the French woman asks me, flicking her cigarette ashes.

I nod, not wanting to explain anything. After all, I was interested only in the young man with a beard but it seems I opened the door to conversation with all the trekkers on the mountain pass.

The young, bearded trekker heaves on his huge pack and head out, probably to get away from the crowd. A fellow loner.

“You’re brave to go alone,” the woman adds.

“Why didn’t you trek alone?” I ask. “I mean, tour groups sound like a disastrous scam.”

“Convenience. Cost. We have only a few weeks in Peru.”

Another trekker overhears and adds, “I heard the Shining Path is regrouping and that Tupac Amaru seized the Japanese Embassy. I also heard about robberies along the trail. Have you had any trouble? I mean, thugs along this trail kidnap people like us!”

“I hope you’re carried away with what you’re saying,” I tell the trekker. “For two nights, I stayed at one of the houses in the village and there wasn’t a hint of trouble. But there sure are a lot of people on this trail.”

“Kein Zweifel,” the German says, crushing his cigarette on a boulder. He slings on his pack and heads down the trail.

“Come on, señorita. Let’s go. It will soon rain.” Raulito senses my desire to free myself from the chitchat. I’ve already told him I’m not interested in talking to anyone but him, which flatters Raulito. “We have a short descent to Rio Pacasmayo,” he continues. “Teddy’s already pitching your tent and preparing the evening meal. Tonight, we eat potato cheese soup, giant corn, fava beans, and chili salad.”

“*The diet is the cure*,” I chant as we begin following the road the Incas built 600 years before.

Down the trail, it starts to rain. I put on my poncho from Raulito’s pack. It makes me sweaty as I walk. By the time we reach the campsite, it’s raining steadily. My tent is on a flattened bank near the vigorous Pacasmayo River. The site is a muddy mess.

Nearby, porters are shouting as they set up tents for their tourists. Some foreigners are chatting inside the tents already pitched. Downstream, guides and porters are cooking everyone’s dinner and preparing their own beds on the rough ground under a wooden ramada. It’s the kind of shelter chaskis must have used when running up and down the Inca roads.

The rain ignites the thin air with scents that remind me of creosote in Arizona after it rains. I drink a bottle of water and wash my face and hands in the stream. A nearby waterfall roars down distant craggy peaks. Some trekkers come to the stream where I'm sitting. Like me, they disregard the rain. What can any of us do anyway except sit in tents until the guides call us to dinner? Tomorrow at noon, if and when the sun appears, the porters will spread out the wet gear and the high-altitude sun will quickly make everything dry.

Clad in a cheap plastic poncho, Raulito approaches me at the stream. He never leaves me alone for very long. "The rest of the trail is easy now," he assures me. His face is dripping wet but his smile is a burst of sunshine. "We can take our time. We have plenty of food until the lodge. Most tourists hike the trail in three nights, some in four. But we can take as long as you need."

"I appreciate you, Little Raulito," I say.

He crouches beside me at the stream. For an instant, I see a gleam in his eyes for me, the exotic woman. And for a moment, I think about him in that way, too, sexually. Such an innocent boy, I smile to myself. How shameful. Am I becoming a cougar like Marcy?

"You're like my mother," Raulito says, as if catching my thoughts.

"Don't say that," I tease. "It makes me feel old when these mountains make me feel young and alive. Immortal. The Andes possess eternity. They possess me. I feel happy. Do you feel happy, Raulito?" I look into his dark eyes and at his boyish face dripping from the rain.

"When you're happy, I'm happy." He takes my hand to help me up from the stream bank. I rub his hand affectionately. In truth, I do feel motherly toward him—that is, I care for him and respect him a great deal. At the same time, I'm feeling a different kind of affection for him. One that lends zest to my adventure in the Andes.

That night, as I'm trying to fall asleep inside my two-man tent, I listen to the pattering rain and voices from neighboring tents. Soon, pain starts gnawing at my side. Then my stomach ties into a bulbous knot. Fear overtakes the pain and overwhelms me. I'm afraid I won't make it to the heavenly ruins. Let alone to the end of the world. The faces of Kevin and Kristi appear in my thoughts. I'm tormented I'll never see them again. I spent six years as their mommy and now I'm missing them.

After I finally fall asleep, I dream. *I lose myself in the misty mountains looking for my lost children. Banditos are laughing at me. Pointing guns at me. Then the Shining Path and Tupac guerrillas taunt my stepchildren with long blades. The guerrillas become Inca warriors on the road, like the soldiers on the streets of Quito at night. My mother appears above me on the mountain like the woman at the Sun Pyramid in Teotihuacan. "You're dead!" I yell in my dream. She peers at me with tired, dark eyes that fade into hollow orbs with flesh hanging from the bone like a mask from Dia de los Muertos. I can't wake up from the dream. The face will not leave. The terrorists are coming for me, shouting my name.*

"Arizona Pillpintu!"

I hear the rain against my tent. The morning dimly lights the soiled canvas walls. "If we leave now," Raulito says. "We can reach the lodge tonight. But first, we have a long climb. I'm hoping to go soon."

"Yes, yes," I exclaim. Fear still possesses me, making me shiver breathlessly in the cold dampness.

"Are you all right? Can I come inside and see you?" Raulito asks with concern. Before I can answer, he opens the tent zipper and peeks inside. He's soaked in his rain poncho; his hair is drenched and his face is moist.

“Please, Raulito, come in.”

“You look pale. I think you’re sick. My heart worries.” Raulito takes off his shoes and poncho and crawls inside the small tent.

“My heart worries too, sometimes,” I say, trying to find courage.

“No, you’re really sick. I can go back for the horses. They can slowly take you back to the trailhead at Kilometer 88 and then we go back to Cusco. Or you can hire a helicopter.”

“I had a nightmare. That’s all.” I rise from my sleeping bag as Raulito sits beside me. I draw him into my arms. “I just need to hold you for a while. I’m not well. It’s true. Raulito, I had a family back in Arizona. I left them behind. My husband, stepchildren. Even my elderly father. Sometimes they haunt me. But I shouldn’t feel guilty because I was sparing them from watching me fall ill. Like I had to watch my mother die.”

Raulito rests his wet head on my shoulder without saying a word. In a moment, I release him. “I’m sorry. I had a difficult night.”

“I’m afraid for you.” Raulito sits back. In the dim light, his young face appears filled with concern.

“I’m okay now, Little Raulito,” I say. “You’re helping me. Let’s get started with our day. There’s no way I’m *not* going to Machu Picchu.”

I kiss Raulito on his lips, probably embarrassing him. Yet somehow, I sense he knows the kiss is not sexual but personal and even spiritual—the kiss of a caring mother warming her son from the rain.

“Thank you,” he says. “I’ll go prepare breakfast, then we go.”

“No breakfast,” I tell Raulito as he opens the tent door. “Only water and an apple. We can eat after the climb.” I put on my poncho over my alpaca sweater. “I’m feeling much better now.

No fear and no pain. The time is right to start trekking despite the downpour. Or maybe because of it.”

“Gracias, Arizona Pillpintu. I’ll bring you coca tea and tell Teddy we’re ready to go.”

My eyes remain on the tent door after Raulito zips it closed. Fear is trying to ambush me and possess my spirit. But I won’t let it, I swear to myself. Never again. If it takes all my strength, I’ll bravely continue the trek and keep to my dieta. I have too much to gain or lose to succumb to fear, disappointment, and regret. Depressing matters. I’m in the Andes where condors ride the thermals of Apu gods and soar the furrows and eddies because their wings are too large to lift them in flight.

Chapter 18: Betsy Sanders

The evening is turning dark when Steve and Betsy finally leave Sun City West. The holiday dinner had been a terrible experience for Betsy. All through Christmas dinner, she sensed Steve’s mother evaluating her. Betsy tried to be polite, to engage the old woman like she did her clientele at the hair salon, before she began working full-time as a nanny for Steve. She even commented on Betty’s hair and perfume. “Very stylish,” she said. “Very fragrant.” But the old woman remained unfriendly during the entire dreadful meal.

Now Betsy’s in the passenger seat of Steve’s brand-new silver Explorer. At her suggestion, Steve donated the Taurus to Muriel’s favorite charity—the Flow from the Heart Foundation which delivers food boxes to the valley’s poorest communities. While Steve is driving east on Bell Road, Betsy decides to say, “I hate to admit it, but your mom made me feel uncomfortable.”

“She’ll get used to you after she sees how good you are with her grandkids. And Betsy.” Steve takes his eyes off the road for a moment to look at her and smile. “You’ve been my

lifeline. My rock. I can't tell you how much I appreciate your helping out with the kids. Forget about my mother. She is who she is. Who she's always been and always will be. I think you're a wonderful compassionate woman. As good a friend to me now as you ever were to Muriel."

Steve's words flatter Betsy and she thinks he may have certain intentions for later in the evening. He's a bit short and chunky, Betsy's always thought, but he's a productive, stable man with a good, solid income and career. Unlike any of her Match.com dates.

Even though she's gone, Betsy sometimes feels like Muriel's preventing Steve and her from getting too close to each other. And she'd like to push things further, but she's never crossed the line. *I do have scruples* she likes telling herself. Until tonight. She's hoping for something more than being Steve's nanny and helper. She wants him to see her as a potential new wife. She won't mind at all becoming the third.

"Muriel wanted a fling," Betsy blurts out as she watches the traffic zoom around the Explorer.

"Fling?" Steve responds. "No, never! Muriel was devoted to me and the kids." He hesitates a moment, his eyes firmly on the freeway ahead. "Did she tell you something?"

Betsy looks at him, her hands folded on her lap, and describes her conversation with Muriel at the Coffee Plantation.

"Betsy!" Steve nearly yells. "You withheld pertinent information! Why would you do that?"

They're both quiet for a moment as Steve drives south on I-17.

"I did it for you," Betsy finally admits. "You're such a good man, with so much sadness piled on top of you. I'm sorry. I only wanted to spare you more grief."

“Never mind.” Steve merges onto I-10 toward Tucson. Maybe to avoid an argument, he changes the subject and asks Betsy what she knows about the Inca sacrifices in the Andes. He tells her about the article in the Nat Geo that he retrieved from his parents not long after Muriel left him. “I’ve read it several times. What could it mean? Why did it interest my wife? You’re her best friend. Did she say something to you about this?”

Betsy’s beside herself now because Steve’s thinking about Muriel and not her. *Why?* she asks herself. *Muriel left him and I’ve stepped in.* And Betsy knows how to take care of matters. She’s very maternal—more so than Muriel ever was—because Betsy’s raised her own kids. But the truth is, Betsy knows very little about anything other than the beauty industry. She’s not like Muriel. Betsy reads People Magazine and watches Oprah and soaps, while Muriel reads *The New Yorker*. But Betsy likes Steve and he needs her nurturing comfort. It’s a two-way proposition, as it had been for Muriel.

After a moment to collect her thoughts, Betsy says, “Muriel never really talked to me about scientific things and foreign cultures. We talked about kids, husbands, parents, jobs, and the celebrities in *People Magazine*—Michael Jackson and Liza Marie, Anna Nicole Smith’s marriage to a ninety-year-old tycoon. Steve, did she say something to you about the Incas?”

“No. I simply can’t think of any reason for Muriel’s interest in the story. She’s never talked about South America or pre-Columbian cultures. She’s a bookkeeper, not an archaeologist. In fact, I can’t remember her showing any interest in the native cultures of Arizona except for a few items of clothing with the flute player or some other Native American motif. It gives me a headache trying to understand. It’s too obscure, unless Muriel was planning to travel to Peru. But she’s only been to Mexico once before. I find it impossible that she’d drive to Peru in the Explorer. Alone. She can’t possibly do something that crazy.”

“I’m sure you’re right, Steve,” Betsy meekly admits. She’s glad he’s doing the talking and not pressing her about Muriel wanting a fling.

“Besides, Muriel wouldn’t leave without a hint or a reason. I’ve always been good to her, gave her gifts and flowers for her birthday, Valentine’s Day, Mother’s Day, or even when there’s no special occasion. I’d tell her how much I love her, although I can’t remember the last time I did.”

Steve stops talking and focuses on his driving.

“I wish I could come up with something remarkable and telling. But I can’t,” Betsy says. “Muriel never even said much to me about your trip to San Carlos,” Betsy says. But she remembers Muriel telling her about an incident in Hermoso that ruined the trip. She won’t remind Steve of the Mexican man chasing him through town even though now it seems kind of funny.

“I didn’t know she even went to my parents’ house shortly before she left.” Steve breaks his silence.

Betsy has nothing more to say. She’s already blown it, she thinks. But then Steve drives straight to Night Hawk Way and invites her inside to watch a movie and have a drink. Her spirits are lifted. She knows what’s ahead. Why else would he invite her inside to watch a video when the kids are at their grandparents?

“Braveheart or Bridges of Madison County,” he asks as Betsy comfortably sits on his sofa. “Your choice. Would you like another wine cooler or an O’Doul’s non-alcoholic beer?”

“Another cooler would be great,” Betsy says, feeling quite happy with how the evening’s turning out after all. Maybe with another cooler or two, she’ll start losing her inhibitions. That’s what she needs to do after a stiff, formal, and unpleasant night at Bill and Betty Tyler’s.

Steve makes microwave popcorn then sits in his recliner instead of next to Betsy. *He's still being formal* she thinks. *Like his dreadful mom.* But after ten minutes into Braveheart, Steve leaves the room for another beer and cooler and when he returns he sits beside Betsy, puts an arm around her, and begins kissing her.

"Steve," Betsy says, eager to consummate a relationship.

Steve's mood suddenly shifts. He pulls back and seems melancholy. "You know, Betsy, I drove her to leave me. I knew that body in Tucson wasn't Muriel's before I even saw it. I know she's not dead. She took her Explorer and left me and my kids."

Steve seems on the verge of crying which isn't very appealing in a man. Betsy does her best to comfort him then confesses what Muriel said about having a vacuous marriage. "She wanted to take a trip."

Steve pulls his arm off Betsy's shoulder and scoots away. "Betsy. Why are you telling me this now? It's another betrayal of our confidence. I trusted you. Implicitly. I was even going to ask you to move in and let me take care of you while you manage my children. But now I'm not so sure what I'm going to do. You should've told me this vital information from the get-go." Steve swallows some beer. "If you had told the police what Muriel said. Then guess what? Mystery solved. Muriel left me to raise my own kids. The cops would have gotten off my back with all their suspicious talk. Gee thanks."

Betsy feels like a fool for not being forthright until now. She truly cares for this man and his children, and doesn't know what to say. She remains quiet, disappointed. Yet again, Muriel is coming between Steve and her.

"I accept that Muriel's abandoned me," Steve finally admits, putting his hand on Betsy's knee. It seems he's returning to his amorous mood. It's what he wants to focus on, Betsy can tell.

“The year’s coming to a close and I want a relationship with you, Betsy. Help me be a better man and help me with my kids. Will you spend the night with me?”

Betsy places her hand on his. “I’d be more than happy to,” she says while trying to keep her emotions at bay. She isn’t talking to her gal pal Muriel. Rather, this is a prospective man who entails everything she could hope for. It’s as if good fortune has finally come to her life and at the right time. **All but one of her kids have moved out. She’d love to quit paying rent on the house and let a stable man take care of her needs as she takes care of his. Since her philandering and no good ex-husband left her ten years before, she’s been struggling to make ends meet and raise three kids on a hairdresser’s salary. *I did all right* she tells herself like Muriel sometimes did. *I have Muriel to thank for everything. It’s almost like she left Steve for my benefit, for the well-being of her best friend.* She’ll never say this to Steve. Not after his reaction tonight when she confessed what Muriel had said in confidence. *In fact, she vows to herself, I’ll never again mention my best friend whether it’s positive or not.***



Chapter 19: Munay-Ki, the Power of Love

From the stream, the trail steeply ascends the mountain then passes the oval-shaped Runkuraqay Ruins where trekkers have pitched camp. Raulito and I hike through tundra and

beside two misty lakes as still as glass. Along the way, emerald hummingbirds and sapphire iridescent butterflies appear from nowhere, as if from alpine vapors. In fleeting images, I recall the Finca de Mariposas with Arturo, the hidalgo Tico man who failed to give me a baby. But that was a long time ago.

After we hike for three hours, the sky clears and we reach the second pass at 3,998 meters. We rest and relish views of the glacial Cordillera Vilcabamba, a vast mountain chain of the Andes. It's about 60 degrees.

Farther along, we encounter a promontory with a steep staircase leading to Sayacmarca or Dominant Town. Twenty minutes later, we reach Chaquicocha, Dry Lake, where Teddy has already set up camp and is now preparing dinner. Tonight, he serves a salty stew of purple potatoes, lupin beans, oca yam, and giant corn kernels. Mamas Axo and Sara are treating me like a queen tonight.

Raulito helps Teddy serve dinner as I sit on a bench at the cooking pit feeling the warmth of glowing embers. When the sun sets, the thin air dramatically cools. Distant voices murmur and crickets reverberate their fiddles. A mama llama hums to her baby like the harp music of an Irish spirit. In the darkness, the Milky Way stars and constellations spread across the hemisphere. Teddy brings out his panpipe and plays Andean music. I'm enchanted and never want to be any place else. I don't want to age, travel, or ruminate. I just want to enjoy my life now. As it is. I am soaring and feeling at peace.

"You can see the Southern Cross as far north as Costa Rica," I say, remembering Arturo.

"Chakana is sacred to the Quechua," Raulito says. He sits beside me, almost holding my hand. We both seem to have strong feelings for each other, although I'm not quite sure what they are or where they'll lead. These feelings aren't as defined as the ones I had for Arturo. I only

know that I'm happy when Raulito's near me. If nothing else, I praise the Apu gods that they've delivered him as my guide to their mountains.

"Tell me more about the Chakana," I say.

"Inca priests from Machu Picchu announced the rainy season when Chakana rose high above Salcantay Peak, the highest mountain seen from Machu Picchu. Salcantay is the greatest Apu god of the Incas. These days, many people climb Salcantay to look for the remains of Inca sacrifices."

I'm feeling light and airy, perhaps starved of oxygen, as my guide's story sparks my imagination. "Seeing Chakana over the most holy mountain in the world, your world, must be like seeing the face of God," I suggest.

"Yes, Arizona. For the Incas, God is the sun Inti and his wife Mamakilla is the moon."

"The Aztecs believed in 22 realms of heaven and hell and hundreds, maybe thousands of gods. I don't think the Incas believed in so many gods. And they kept their realms to three, right? Like the Christian heaven earth and hell."

Yes, Pillpintu. Ukhu pacha, kay pacha and hanan pacha. Hell earth and heaven. But we also believe there are many other unknown dimensions."

"Like quantum physics," I suggest. "Everything's all so connected. Ancient and modern theories about our existence, our world. Tell me more about your philosophy," I say to Raulito, as Teddy's panpipe music continues to enchant the night and anchor me to the moment and place.

Raulito gently squeezes my hand. By the light of the cooking fire, I see his young, round face. I know he's very proud of his heritage, content to be a guide in these mountains, and rightly so. He's where he belongs and so am I.

“We’re a people who live in the clouds,” Raulito says. “We come from the Pleiades, as you know. But these days, I believe a great change is coming. A reckoning will happen when the American eagle flies with the Andean condor.”

“Reckoning?” I ask. “What kind of reckoning?”

“When the world will fill with love and compassion. And chaos and confusion will end. We call this transformation *muany-kia*.” He gazes at the fire. “*Kuyaykim*. I love you, Arizona Pillapintu.”

I squeeze his hand. “I love you too. It’s not a romantic thing,” I quickly add, not wanting to confuse my young guide. “What we’re feeling is spiritual because the mountains are magical. And you’re so young yet wise. You’re an excellent ecotourism guide, Raulito.”

“We believe in the harmony of two. You can’t be alone. That’s why I’m with you. I show you our mountains so you can see what I see and not be alone and afraid. *Mauny-ki*. *Kuyaykim*. I love you. Always remember this, even when you leave our mountains.”

“Raulito,” I say, still holding his hand as we both gaze into the cooking fire. “I don’t think I’ll ever leave these mountains. At least they’ll never leave me.”

“The Quechua live by the principle of helping others to help ourselves. We call it *ayni*. In the spirit of *ayni*, you and I help each other. I give you the power of my love and you give it back to me. You’re beautiful, Pillpintu. *Munay ki*.”

“You keep saying *munay ki*. Is this also a Quechua phrase for I love you?”

Raulito and teddy both laugh, as if I’ve somehow struck a chord on Teddy’s panpipe. “Yes. you could say that. *Munay-ki* also means I love you to all the world. We are *munay-ki* because we are each *huacas* with lines connecting us to all the worlds and dimensions and all the *huacas*. past present and future. When you see an *ayahuasca curandero* he will help you know

your energy and power. You will know your spirit and heal yourself. You'll align with the Pleiades with the sun with everything. This is munay-ki. The wisdom of love. This is how we endure survive and thrive, Arizona Pillpintu. This is why I love you."

The next morning, we trek from Dominant Town on the winding trail. It passes through narrow Inca tunnels cut into granite cliffs and continues down to Rio Aobamba then uphill 3,700 meters. A cairn of stones, an apacheta, marks the third pass with views of the brown Urubamba River surging through the valley and providing power to the Quechua and mystique to trekkers like me.

"The river embodies munay ki," I tell Raulito. "It's an awakening of power and connection. It's as if one of these mystical lines draws me into the river's rushing into its huaca. A simple, unimposing huaca, me, connects to a powerhouse huaca, the river. My mind swirls with the possibilities of muany ki."

"Yes. Pillpintu. Your words are true. Like those star butterflies you tell me about that circle the eclipsed sun."

"The Aztec Tzitzimime spirits from the ninth heaven. I like that. It seems I like everything now. Maybe this is muany ki. Or a moment of reckoning and clarity."

Raulito laughs and takes my hand to lead me down from the pass.

From the ruins of Phuyupatamarca, we descend hundreds of steep stone steps. In places, the trail is too narrow for others to pass and I stand to the side glad I'm not riding that poor scrawny mare. After an hour, we reach switchbacks to the hostel lodge high on the hillside, near power lines from the Urubamba River.

"Another huaca drawing me near," I say to Raulito.

He laughs and advises I revert to my dieta of not speaking. “Save your breath for the hike up the switchbacks. The hostel appears closer than it really is.”

“I don’t know about that. The trail ahead looks even longer than the day’s entire hike.” Raulito grins and gestures i keep quiet.

He’s right, I think to myself. I’m gasping for a breath, now and then, like a choked coy. And my legs are cramping. I push onward. I really have no choice and Raulito often takes my hand to help me along. We don’t speak, except for his words of encouragement. At each corner of the zigzag, I spot the hostel. It appears to grow more distant the farther along we hike. Like an illusion. A mirage or like an MC Escher illusion. My only thought is to rest there for at least a day, eat in its restaurant, and use its facilities to clean up.

When we finally arrive, tourists, porters, and guides are flocking inside. There are no bunk beds available and only one sit-down flush toilet exists. A long line of trekkers are waiting to use it.

In the main hall of the lodge, we sit at one end of a long cafeteria table that reminds me of my grade school’s dining hall. The room smells of fried foods. the one toilet, cigarette smoke, and no one seems to be using deodorant or foot powder.

I buy Teddy and Raulito fries, roasted guinea pig, and beer. For myself, I order nutritious green rice, fried plantains, yucas, and beans. On the table is an assortment of special salsas—yellow chili and oil, aji criollo, hot pepper, and coriander sauce. I use each sauce generously but don’t have much of an appetite. I give what remains of my meal to a porter hovering near me like a vulture awaiting his turn at the carrion.

The neighboring gringos at the table are talking about sleeping on the floor of the lodge. Some trekkers have already spread out their sleeping bags on the dirty concrete, claiming their space.

It's raining outside and like everyone else, I dread the thought of heading up the muddy embankment to my tent. "I'll sleep here on the floor," I tell my young guide and porter. "The tent is still wet and here, at least I'm dry."

"But you don't like crowds," Raulito reminds me, finishing his fries with special salsas.

"I feel well enough to leave early tomorrow morning, whether it's raining or not. I'm just tired now. I'll bundle up in the corner over there, near those women. In truth, after my nightmare last night, I don't want to be alone. I want to be with someone, anyone, even among a crowd of strangers." I ask Teddy to fetch my blanket then turn to Raulito. "You can sleep beside me, if you like, and wake me before dawn. I want to see Machu Picchu more than anything. I want to stay at the Hotel Machu Picchu for a few nights. Rest, relax, and absorb this major huaca of the world. How much longer will it take us to get there?"

"Only a few hours to the gate." Raulito smiles. "You look better now. The food was good?"

"*Delicioso*," I say. "And so was the toilet." He laughs. I'm glad to see him smile. I know my bouts of pain and episodes of fear distress him, although he tries not to show it.

"I'm glad for you," he says. "These mountains make you well."

That night, I sleep soundly despite the chill and the snores and chatter of surrounding trekkers. Most of them go to bed by ten. Everyone wants an early start. Raulito sleeps beside me with his arm across my shoulders as I fall asleep.

At 5 a.m., Raulito wakes me from a dream. He has an innate sense of time.

“Is it morning already?” I groan, looking over at my young guide sitting on the blanket where he slept. “I was having such a wonderful dream.”

“Lo siento, señorita. We go in half an hour, si te gusta.”

“Can I tell you about my dream?” I reach over and touch his knee. He’s my best friend at the moment. Betsy Sanders is long gone and far away.

“Not now, Arizona. First, I order you bread and jam, and eggs. And you drink coca tea to make you strong. Then we go.”

I slip on my poncho and tie back my tangled hair. Not every trekker has stirred although all their porters and tour guides are preparing for the final leg of the trek.

In a cold drizzle, we leave the hostel. Dim light appears across the snowcaps. I follow my guide and walk down the trail through a forest. Several trekkers catch up and quickly pass us.

“You can tell me about your dream now,” Raulito reminds me.

“I was at a window, maybe at home, when an Inca dove landed on the sill. I didn’t want to scare it away but I accidentally flinched and the dove just sat there, looking at me. Then another dove landed on the window sill. And it wasn’t afraid of me either. I reached for them and one dove flew onto my hand. I was amazed at how fearless they were.”

“What do you think it means?” Raulito asks, not pausing from his pace but looking back a moment.

“That I don’t need to be afraid of dying.”

“Que dijiste?” Raulito asks.

“We’re all going to die, aren’t we?”

“Not for a long time from now, I hope.” Raulito stops for a moment. “Not you. Not me.”

“I know, I hope, too. But we shouldn’t be afraid. The doves represent inner peace. The condor to the Quechuas. Yesterday, while I was hiking to Dead Woman’s Pass, I felt this incredible connection to everything around me. I guess it was one of those moments of *munay ki*, or of high-altitude lightheadedness. Everything seemed right. I’m a migratory bird in the Andes. I felt like an Andean condor.”

“The condor is from the Inca trinity, along with the puma and snake. But the condor is lord of the three realms . . .”

“Hanan pacha, kay pacha, and ukhu pacha, the sky, Earth, and hell.”

“Yes, Arizona Pillpintu. The condor flies with messages for God. He’s the *chaski* Inca runner of the sky.”

“My dream was about two Inca doves. I mentioned the condor because of where we are. If I’m not afraid of dying, I’m not afraid of anything. Like an Incan warrior, I suppose.” I tell my young guide about the robbers at the beach in Mazatlán and how wonderful it felt not to fear them. To accept fate and yet stand firm against harm. “What do you think the dream means, Raulito?”

“Maybe the birds are bringing you a message from your home. We receive many messages through dreams. Maybe someone wants to find you. You must remember your dreams for the next several weeks to find out what the message is. This is your new *dieta*.”

Raulito’s words distress me. If his interpretation is right, Steve is probably looking for me after nearly a year. Could he possibly still be waiting for me to come home? I had hoped Steve and the kids would get on with their lives, that they would realize I had left them for good. Did I hurt them? Did I do them wrong? No, I tell myself again and again. I was being selfless, sparing

them from what I had gone through with my mother's lengthy and agonizing illness. I couldn't spare my stepchildren from losing another mother, or my dad from losing me like he lost his wife, but I could spare them from watching me die. I'm no longer sure I'll ever find a natural cure.

As we continue the hike, I start thinking that perhaps it's my mother who's trying to reach me in a message delivered by Inca doves. Not the condor, puma, or snake. Or a hummingbird, spider, or monkey of the Nazca lines. I don't want the dream to be about my dead mother haunting me or hunting me down. It's bad enough being haunted by the living. I want the message to be from the mountains, from the Incas, not from the family I left behind or the mother who left me. Suddenly, I feel fragile.

"What kind of message would a dead person send?" I ask. "I want to learn the wisdom of the Andean people."

"*No es bueno, señorita,*" Raulito says. "You said your mama died. Maybe she wants to reach you. Be careful. Sometimes the dead are selfish and want their family to come to them because they cannot go home."

"No, I don't think so." I say, not wanting to talk about my mother.

"Then I think someone from your home wants to reach you. You mentioned your kids. Maybe you should call them when we get to Aguas Calientes."

"No no," I say. "I was speaking about a friend's kids. But maybe you're right. I should call my friend."

Raulito agrees and we both fall silent as we continue along the trail. I'm a bit rattled he remembers my remark about hiking with my kids. That seems so long ago now and I really haven't told him much about myself or that I'm on my way to Tierra del Fuego. Mostly, we've

talked about Raulito and his culture and the mountains and the Incas. Besides, I'm not sure anymore if the end of the world is where I'm headed. All along, maybe my destination has been to reach the top of the world *la Cima del Mundo*.



Chapter 20: Sun Gate on Old Mountain

After six days on the trail, we finally reach Inti Punku, the Sun Gate on Old Mountain, the main entrance to Machu Picchu. Teddy has already left for Aguas Calientes, the small village edging the Urubamba River at the bottom of the mountain on the other side of the gate. He'll meet with his porter friends and wait for us before heading back to Kilometer 88 for more work as a porter.

Raulito and I rest on the stone steps to the gatehouse beside walled terraces. Several trekkers pass by eager to reach the ruins. I take a picture of a nearby brown llama kneeling and chewing a mouthful of grass. It gazes at me with large dark eyes and long lashes. Beyond the llama stands the mist-enshrouded ruins of the Heavenly City between Huayna Picchu and Putucusi—two green mountain peaks piercing the clouds. Raulito points out Salcantay and I picture Chakana rising over the holy mountain. The image gives me chills.

“Machu Picchu was a sacred retreat for King Pachacuti. Earth Shaker was father of Tupac Inca.” Raulito says. “What do you want to know? Arizona Pillpintu. You love a mystery, don’t you?”

“I’m interested in what the ancients did and what they had to say. But I have doubts about the supernatural. The equinox rapture at Teotihuacan didn’t cure me. And it was a highly charged spiritual and astronomical alignment, a *huaca* on a *huaca*. Life, death, and perpetuity are mysteries to me. All I know is that I made a choice and stuck to it, and it led me to the Andes with the most pleasant guide imaginable. And yes, I do love a mystery. It gives life a bit of zest.”

Raulito looks at me. His bright smile is a channel into his spirit of ayni. Of helping others, of reciprocity. The golden rule of the Andes. “Let’s go to Machu Picchu, Pillpintu,” he says. “It’s only half an hour away. We want to buy our tickets before the tour buses arrive and tourists crowd the site.” He takes my hand and helps me up. “When we get to Aguas Calientes, I’ll take you to a curandero who specializes in ayahuasca and mauny ki transformation. I know you’re not well but I believe you have time to fulfill your dreams.”

Raulito’s charm touches me like the mountains themselves. I decide to call him Tupac Inca. It seems a fitting name.

It’s no longer raining when we reach the Temple of the Sun but I’m still wearing my long, green rain poncho. “The Incas buried their mummies in this cave.” Raulito indicates the rounded stone tower that extends from a natural outcrop above a cavern.

A chilling breeze blows from the ruins, tossing my hair against my face. It carries the scent of the cloud forest lichens, ferns, and mosses, perhaps medicinal flora once used by the Incas. Although achy from the long hike, I’m recharged from having reached my destination.

“The Incas believed that caves connected kay pacha to ukhu pacha, the world below ruled by Supay, the devil,” Raulito says.

“That’s what the ancient Maya believed as well. They called their hell Xibalba and it was ruled by several Death Lords.”

“That’s interesting Pillpintu. Perhaps we all come from the Pleiades.”

“I chuckle and breath in the magic before me. It’s surreal to realize I’m actually here, on top of such a sacred huaca. No wonder the Incas called Machu Pichu the Heavenly City. It feels like I’ve died and am now in heaven.”

“That’s right. We’re on top of kay pacha with our heads in hanan pacha.”

I smile at my young guide and survey the stone ruins around me on the grassy lawn. “I wonder how Hiram Bingham felt when he first discovered this lost Inca fortress. it wasn’t like the ruins Stephens and Catherwood uncovered. These ruins aren’t in a thick rainforest of creeping vines and giant roots.”

“From this tower, ” Raulito says. “Inca priests watched the sun move along the mountains and Chakana rise over Salcantay. The south window is aligned to the rising of the Pleiades.”

“Home of your ancestors.” I smile.

“That’s right Arizona. And yours.” He takes my hand and helps me off the stone wall. “Pillpintu. I’m anxious about tonight. We need to check if a room is available at Hotel Machu Picchu, the only hotel on the site. Salvador tried to book you a room ahead of time but the hotel was filled for months in advance.”

“I’m anxious too. I want to watch Inti rise over the mountains tomorrow morning.” I hand Raulito money for a meal at the hotel. “Go see if they can squeeze me in and wait for me in

the cafe. I appreciate all your knowledge about the ruins, but I want to wander the site and absorb its serenity. Just for a short while.”

“I understand. You need to follow your dieta for silent time. No talking. No listening to another human voice.”

“Munay-ki,” I say and my little Tupac Inca kisses me on the lips then heads for the hotel.

I walk to the central plaza where a few tourists are also wandering around the park. They’re either trekkers from the Inca Trail or guests already staying at Hotel Machu Picchu. The tour buses haven’t arrived.

Six white llamas are grazing on the green lawn. Pillaring green peaks shrouded in mist surround me, a dove coos, a llama hums, and a motmot softly twitters *whoop whoop whoop*. I spot the blue crowned bird in a grove of bamboo and think about Arturo and our time at Arenal Volcano National Park. I wonder if he ever misses me. If anyone does any more. I stopped missing him as quickly as my journey picked up pace and I moved on. Maybe that’s what happens when you become a world traveler, a migratory bird. There are too many new things, constant distractions, when you’re wayfinding or making a dead reckoning.

I walk past a beefy German man, obviously a guest at the hotel. He’s posing with one of the llamas, pretending to jump on its back while a woman, maybe his wife, takes a picture. The llamas continue to graze, ignoring his idiocy.

Beyond the man and his lama, I catch sight of a tall, dark-complexioned young woman sitting on a stone wall edging the plaza. She’s not a disheveled trekker from the trail. She must also be a hotel guest. I walk toward her as nonchalantly as I can. I’m not sure why but I want a closer look at her. It’s as if she’s drawing me to her. Like she’s a sacred huaca with a line directly to me.

She kicks off her shoes and stretches her long legs on the stone wall. Her toes are elegant, like her fingers. Her nails are painted purple and she's wearing silver thumb rings and toe rings on each foot.

As I near her, acting like I'm merely passing by, I glance at her through my side vision. She doesn't seem to notice me or care about my presence. She's preoccupied with smoothing out her shoulder-length black hair that hangs in tiny braids. Her ear lobes have silver studs and a silver ring pierces her nose. She's wearing a turquoise sweater over black leggings and a Quechua lliclla shawl held at her nape by a llama headpin. The woman is stunning. All-consuming. Is she someone famous? I ask myself. She sits poised like a queen.

The magic of Machu Picchu wisps me away. Maybe awki spirits are teasing me. I look directly at the woman again and see an Inca princess. A mamacuna priestess. The incarnation of an Inca queen. Mama Coya herself. My imagination soars like a condor. I look back at the German tourist because I don't want to stare at her, at the coya queen dressed in fine vicuña wool and wearing gold ear studs, necklaces, bangles--gold, the sweat of Inti the sun.

I pass near her and smell jasmine or honeysuckle. Something intoxicating. Then my mind begins to focus. She's too tall for an Inca queen, I tell myself.

The woman glances at me without and proudly smiles. Winks? A beautiful woman who, at the very least, knows her own beauty.

I continue to the stone masonry at the end of the plaza and take pictures of the grazing llamas, stone buildings, and terraced slopes, capturing the coya queen in each photo. I inhale deeply; my chest pains slightly. But I can ignore it. *You're still viable, Muriel* I tell myself. *And this is your reward, this calm and beautiful sanctuary in the Vilcabamba Mountain Range above*

the Urubamba River. I'm a spirit on top of clouds. Maybe an awki spirit. Or a Tzimtzimine in the ninth realm of heaven.

I meander to the highest point of Machu Picchu, the Intihuatana Stone. I don't want to linger around the beautiful coya queen. I need to break from her spell, from my obsession over her essence.

The Incas aligned Intihuatana with the equinoxes I remember Raulito telling me. *On the December solstice the stone's pillar casts no shadow and ties the sun to the stone like the spirit of a sacrificed child is tied to Inti in hanan pacha.*

I sit on a boulder and ponder my situation. *Am I a capacocha?* A child of sacrifice? *No. I'm not a child nor a virgin. Does having no children count? Maybe because I'm childless, I've been chosen for sacrifice?*

I inhale and hear songbirds in the nearby forests. I take coca leaves from my pocket to chew. The mild effect eases the pain and stimulates my pensive mood. I feel intensely connected to Earth, not just to one region, not just the Andes, Ahwatukee, Mesa, or anywhere else. I'm the hub for all life and geology wherever I am. I'm the starting point of all the lines from *huaca* to *huaca*. I'm the ending point. I myself am the Golden Temple huaca. No matter what I do or where I go, I'm part of the pillars of creation. This truth, my reality, is the only truth. It doesn't even matter where I die, because I'm a migratory bird flying here then there, beginning where parents hatched me, ending where I die. I find comfort in these thoughts and my pain disappears into the cool mountain mist. Into the sun stone of Inti. Once again, I feel healed as I breathe deeply. Mauny ki. I feel transformed.

"Lasso my spirit, like the frozen Inca boy," I say aloud to the Sun Stone and close my eyes, absorb the sun rays, and picture the exotic woman in a procession among priests, warriors,

and Apu generals. She's Mama Ocllo, the first Inca Coya, the sister-wife of Mano Capac, the first Inca king of legend. Mama Ocllo has no equal, no limits. She's the Daughter of the Creator and mother to the chosen maidens who weave the king a new set of clothes each day.

"Amazing, isn't it?" I hear a woman's voice and open my eyes. I see her, the beautiful coya woman standing at the Sun Stone. Her long, slender fingers are touching the stone's smooth surface. Light from parting clouds strikes her face and a portion of the stone. I gaze at her, this mountain awki spirit, the coya, but can't think of anything to say. She confounds me. I feel like the shy little girl I once was before I became endowed in high school.

"This place was built for virgin girls, you know?" Her British accent is as elegant as her illuminated face. Her hand seems to assess the stone's quality. Perhaps she's absorbing energy from the *huaca*.

I nod and remark, "You seem to know a lot."

"It's reincarnation," the woman declares. "I've been here before. Oh, not in this life. In another one, when I was an Inca brave."

"Or Queen Mama Ocllo?" I suggest.

"You sense it too? This is a sacred place for women. About eighty percent of the skeletons Hiram Bingham uncovered were female."

"I've been feeling some kind of energy," I admit. "It comes and goes. Like hope and despair. I see heaven and hell as I sit on top of the world. Hanan Pacha and Ukhu Pacha.."

"I know what you mean. This place is a spiritual vortex."

"A *huaca* at intersecting lines in the world's web," I say, showing off my own knowledge.

The woman smiles and sits on the nearby stones, gracefully crossing her long legs and leaning back on her hands. "You alone, luv?" she asks.

"Kind of," I say. I like talking to her. She electrifies the ruins with anticipation. And I'm feeling no pain. Funny how that works. "I hiked the Inca Trail with just a guide and a porter."

"Bloody hell!" Her eyes light up with surprise. Her lips are full and deep red from freshly applied lipstick. I can smell her fragrance again. She's obviously a world traveler, although she could be a model from anywhere in the world.

"It took me nearly a week. I rode a horse for the first two days."

"Very impressive." From her llama wool tote bag, the woman removes a pack of Dunhill, lights one, then raises her head and exhales a long stream of smoke that blends with the mountain mist beyond her. *Is this woman real?* I wonder. Why did she suddenly appear? Could she be one of those alien beings people claim live in the Andes? Like Shirley MacLaine, more than ten years before. This woman is too beautiful, too mysterious to be a mere human. "Are you with a tour group?" I ask, although I doubt she is. She's too independent for that.

She stamps out her cigarette on the Inca stone. "No. I arrived early this morning in Aguas Calientes. By train from Cusco. Unfortunately, the road washed out a few days ago. Buses and tourists are stranded in Aguas Calientes. Imagine making the journey of a lifetime, spending your long-saved earnings, then not being able to see the ruins! I had to climb straight up the muddy slopes. Took me two hours." She pauses and puts the cigarette butt in her bag. "So, luv, we have the ruins to ourselves with the llamas and a few hikers and hotel guests."

"I wanted to spend the night at the hotel and watch tonight's sunset and tomorrow's sunrise," I remark. "I sent my guide to see if any rooms are available and from the looks of it, there are. Good luck for me. Bad luck for those poor tourists."

“Got that right, luv. Plenty of cancellations today. By the way, I’m Whitney.” She approaches me and extends her slender hand. It’s soft and as cool as the surrounding air. She feels like how an akwi spirit must feel.

“I’m Muriel Tyler,” I say before realizing I’ve used my married name for the first time since leaving Ahwatukee. The woman throws me off guard but it no longer matters. It just doesn’t matter.

“Hey, Muriel Tyler, care for a tarot reading? No charge. Giving a reading in this sacred place is remuneration enough.” Whitney pulls her tote bag over her shoulder.

“Do you me rumination, like the lamas?” I jest. But she doesn’t seem to hear me. “I’d love a reading,” I add, eager **to be with Whitney, to have the company of a woman friend. After all, I left behind my best friend Betsy and all my other women friends from the Unitarian mother-daughter group. Since leaving Ahwatukee, I’ve mostly been around men, except for Martha in Mexico City and Ivet in Panama. But it’s more than missing female friendships. For some reason, this woman has powers. Maybe it’s charisma. I want to absorb her energy and get to know who she really is. Maybe she is an incarnation of an Inca warrior. But I think it’s more likely that she’s the spirit of an Inca queen.**

Whitney takes my hand and leads me to the middle of the central plaza. We sit on the lawn, she unpins her tupu and lays the shawl on the ground.

“That’s a beautiful lliclla,” I say.

“I bought it in Aguas Calientes.” Whitney pulls a deck of well used Rider cards from her bag. She shuffles, I cut the deck, then she lays out on the shawl a configuration she calls the Celtic Cross. “Ask a question.”

“Am I in good health? What else is there to ask?”

“Right,” Whitney says. “Let’s see what the cards have to say. Judgment is on top; the devil is descending into death. No swords, two cups, one wand, three stars, one king, one page. The Andes trek brings you to the next level. You will transform spiritually according to the overseeing Judgment Card. Another reading, Luv?”

“No, thanks. How about a cup of coffee or coca tea? I’d love to hear about your travels while I’m ruminating over your tarot message.” I don’t want to part from her company. Her very presence is like the spiritual ecstasy at Teotihuacan. At least, how the event made me feel. She sends chills down my spine and I can’t help but think her essence will cure me or at the very least, fill me with vitality.

At the hotel snack bar patio, Raulito sits at a table waiting for me. He smiles and rises as I approach. He looks puzzled when he realizes Whitney is with me. Without acknowledging Whitney’s presence, he excitedly says, “Arizona Pillpintu, there are several cancelations because of the landslide. I already booked you a room with patio chairs and a view of the mountains. Let’s go check in.”

I introduce my young guide to Whitney and invite her to wait at the table and have a beer on me. “I’ll treat you to lunch when I get back,” I say. “I could really use your company right about now. I need a woman’s point of view.”

At the front counter, while I’m waiting to check in, Raulito asks, “Why are you with her? I thought you wanted to be alone?” A Frenchman and his wife are checking in before us. It seems they’re among the few tourists fit enough to hike up the mountainside. Like Whitney.

“I’m sorry,” I reply, realizing I may have hurt Raulito’s feelings by not inviting him to stay with me. By wanting to be with someone else. “Are you jealous?” I tease and stroke his rough, reddened cheek with the back of my hand.

“No, but I don’t trust her. She’s too beautiful and shrewd in her walk. I see something in her eyes I don’t like.”

“Don’t be silly, Tupac Inca. She has *ojos bonitos* and is harmless. She’s traveling alone, like me. I just need a friend.”

“*Pero soy tu amigo*. You’re not alone.”

“No, I mean a woman friend. *Amiga*. Someone who’s like me. Someone who’s traveled a lot.”

Raulito backs off, trying to understand, it seems, but he’s not happy with the situation. He’s a travel agent of the Andes and has guided many gringos along the Inca Trail. He doesn’t trust the woman and *is* jealous of her because he’s told me he loves me more than any other traveler before. I think he fears Whitney will replace him.

“Don’t worry.” I reassure him. “Whitney will probably leave after lunch and I’ll explore the ruins while you teach me the Quechua wisdom of muany ki. You should be happy for me. I made it here, didn’t I? Thanks to you.” I gently kiss him on his lips. The French woman peers back at us.

Raulito perks up. “I’m glad to see you happy, *verdad*. *Pero, cuidado*. The hike was difficult and you had bad dreams. I want to stay near you in case you need me. In Aguas Calientes I will take you to a muany ki curandero of ayahuasca medicine.”

My young friend flatters me. I feel richly rewarded by so many nice people crossing my path. I hate sending him away because of our deep connection. And I do feel somewhat guilty

that I don't invite him to stay in my room. Perhaps that's what he was hoping for. But I doubt the hotel would allow it. Besides, I think Raulito knows I intend to ask Whitney if she'd like to share my room before she flutters away as mysteriously as she appeared like a **goddess of butterflies, birds, and flowers**. Like Itzpapltotl or Xochiquetzal.

I give Raulito money for his dinner and a hotel room in Aguas Calientes. He promises to return to fetch me at noon tomorrow and help me hike down the mountainside. Then I join Whitney at a table on the snack bar patio.

We order beverages and sweet rolls with raspberry and peach jams. For over an hour, we discuss our travels. It feels like we're quickly becoming good friends because we have so many adventures to share. I don't tell her my background and she doesn't ask about it. She asks only about my travels which endears her to me even more. Whitney loves to talk about herself without my asking questions. Not that she's bragging; she's just young and full of enthusiasm and confidence.

She mentions she's 25 and comes from Liverpool. "My father was a British diplomat. He met my Brazilian mother while stationed in Brazil.

"You have a lovely complexion," I can't help but say. "Your mother must be as beautiful as you."

She smiles. "For five years, I worked as a receptionist to save money to travel the globe," she says. "I started in Europe then went to Turkey and Syria. Saw the Palmyra ruins. Spent several months on a Kibbutz in Israel then went to Egypt, North Africa. Took a camel trek from Morocco to Timbuktu. Saw the Ivory Coast and Togo, then flew from Ethiopia to Johannesburg and toured Mandela's South Africa. Two years ago, I caught a flight from Malaysia to Sao Paulo

to see Rod Steward's Copacabana Concert, the largest concert ever held, they say. I have family in Rio and am going back there."

"You have quite a story. Far more impressive than mine." The waiter arrives with a pot of tea for Whitney and coffee for me. "You travel where the wind blows across the planet," I add after the waiter leaves. "I've been traveling down the Pan-Am Highway for nearly a year. My adventure has been day to day, by the curse or blessing of whichever god happens to be in the vicinity. A lot has happened as the weeks piled up. Now I'm heading to Lake Titicaca then to Tierra del Fuego at the end of the Pan-Am Highway."

Whitney sips her tea with grace. "Maybe we can travel together to Lake Titicaca," she suggests. "I plan to take the bus to Ascension, then I'm back to Copacabana where Christ the Redeemer awaits to watch me hit the beaches."

I dunk my pastry in the strong mixture of coffee and milk.

"Peruvians have a peculiar way of serving their coffee," Whitney says. "One small pitcher of strong, thick coffee, and another of hot milk." She pours me more coffee and says, "Now mix in the milk according to your liking."

I take a sip. "The coffee tastes all right," I say. "But it's nothing like the strong, fragrant, fresh-ground Costa Rican brew I shared with a hidalgo Tico man a few months ago."

"You're boyfriend?"

"You might say. I thought he gave me a baby. But it didn't work out that way."

"Baby? Bloody hell. Maybe next time around, luv." She sips her tea as gracefully as a geisha in a tea ceremony. Everything Whitney does rivets me. "I was with a woman for nearly a year," she admits. "But two months ago, we had a huge spat over some stupid thing. She took off. Since then, I've been on my own. But I've met lots of nice people along the way. Such as

yourself, Muriel Tyler.” She lights a Dunhill and offers me one. I refuse. Whitney smokes much more than I possibly could and I hardly want to take any of her expensive Dunhills. I sense she’s a budget traveler stretching her money as far as it will go.

Whitney sensuously exhales the smoke, transfixing me. Her face seems enshrouded by diaphanous awki spirits. “I expect to keep going for another year or so,” she says. “How about you? What sparked your travel bug?”

“I was looking for a cure for a condition,” I admit. “A natural remedy. I’ve seen curanderos in Cusco, San Blas, and Oaxaca. They put me on a dieta based on local vegetarian foods, teas, and fish. No cuy or llama meat.”

“Impressive.” Whitney smiles and before I can add my plan to try ayahuasca she cuts me off, as if in a rush. “What do you say, Muriel Tyler? Let’s get back to the ruins. I want to reach Huayna Picchu and return before sunset. Care to join me?”

“I don’t think I can hike anymore today. I need to catch my breath. But I’ll walk you to the trailhead.”

“That’s all right. You said you had some kind of ailment.”

“But I’m recovered,” I tell her. “This dieta has worked magic.” I don’t want her to think otherwise, that I’m not healthy and revived, that I have some kind of chronic illness. It’s kind of embarrassing or at least it’s not an uplifting topic for conversation with a new vibrant friend.

I pay the bill but before we leave, I invite Whitney to stay the night in my hotel room. I feel a bit awkward and shy, as if I’m asking her out on a first date. “Seems you’re in no hurry, like me. And don’t worry about the cost. I’ve got plenty of cash.”

Without hesitation, Whitney accepts.

The path to Huayna Picchu is on the other side of the ruins, beyond the Sacred Rock. The few tourists wandering the ruins are hotel guests or have hiked the Inca Trail or recently arrived after a long hike up the hillside from Aguas Calientes.

At the trailhead I sit to rest on the stone wall and watch my new wraithlike friend disappears down the trail. Alone again, I look at the sky and take a deep breath. The rain clouds have subsided and the high-altitude sun shines so intensely that I slather more sun lotion on my face. A few tourists approach from behind me and to the left and the ruins begin to feel crowded.

I return to the hotel for a long, hot shower and wait for Whitney. She said she'd be back in time to watch Inti set over the ruins. *Together we'll be virgins of the sun at the house of chosen women.* **Her words echo in my head and tantalize me. I feel like a child on the cusp of Christmas fairytale magic. I don't know why. All this anticipation could turn out to be another blow that sends me to the 9 Aztec hells. But I won't let that thought dampen my childlike spirit. I want to live in the ninth heaven with butterfly stars.**



Chapter 21: La Cima del Mundo

Outside Hotel Machu Picchu, Whitney sits cross-legged on a granite wall beside a sloped garden of stretching bamboo. Her tote bag rests beside her. Her Inca shawl lies over her slender shoulders to fend off the evening's chill. I'm beside her, bundled in my alpaca sweater. Songbirds announce themselves from neighboring cloud forests and a cool breeze rustles the

bamboo. The recently mowed grass at the hotel footpath scents the thin mountain air. I'm intoxicated with being alive.

Most trekkers from the inca trail left hours ago, eager to begin their difficult descent in daylight. The tourists around are all hotel guests. Tent camping isn't allowed on the site. Everyone's preparing to photograph the setting sun at Machu Picchu. A *huaca* in a *huaca*. Everyone's quiet and filled with expectation.

For a moment, cloud cover diminishes our hope for a vast display. But as the sun nears the horizon, the tall green peaks flanking the ancient site emerge from the haze. The Apu gods take a bow. Faint yellow sunlight brushes the mountains and stone ruins, casting long shadows. A hint of grayish orange highlights the most distant peaks. Time fades away.

"We must be up by six to watch the sunrise," Whitney says, breaking the silence.

With my digital Kodak, I take pictures of her in front of the sunset and ruins. Soft light creates a purplish hue in her dark, braided hair. It seems every angle of the day praises her. The surrounding mountains bless her with their towering presence. Inti especially sanctifies my new friend, at the cusp of night. She's illusory, someone I could never fully appreciate or understand.

"Inca Coya is goddess of the Full Moon," I utter, inspired by everything around me, especially Whitney. "She's Chaska, the Evening Star Queen."

Whitney takes pictures with a compact point-and-shoot camera. "This damn thing can't shoot pictures like your digital camera," she says. "May I see it?"

"Of course." I show her how to use my Kodak.

When she sets my camera aside, she touches my cheek. I shiver and flush. "Have you ever been with a woman, Muriel Tyler?" She runs her long fingers down my arm. Her dark-brown llama eyes are unbound with sensuality and freedom.

“I never have,” I admit. What I don’t say is that since we first met, I’ve been anticipating this moment. Now, I **feel** more naïve than I felt when facing Cliff Turner in high school many years before. First love. First time. But Whitney is a Coya queen and not a jackrabbit quarterback lusting over my *great set of tits*.

“I didn’t think so.” Whitney entwines her warm, soft fingers with mine. “I bet you were married for a long time. Kids, too, right?”

I nod under the spell of Mama Ocllo. She stares toward Machu Picchu then back at me. “I assumed you must be lonely. The last thing I want to do is embarrass you.” She calmly releases my hand.

“No, it’s all right,” I say. “I like you. I do. Hey, got a cigarette?” Whitney reaches into her bag. Her smile rekindles the sunset. She lights her one remaining Dunhill, offers it to me, and scoots closer, affectionately placing her arm across my shoulders in a warm gesture. We silently watch the mountains fade in the lagging legions of light.

As soon as we enter our hotel room, Whitney plops herself on the brown leather chair and searches through her bag for hand lotion. I sit on the double bed with iron baseboards, call room service, and order purple potato fries and salsa, fried plantains, and empanadas with sautéed mushrooms.

Whitney agrees to go veggie tonight. “I’m not a strict vegetarian,” she tells me. “What I eat depends on my mood and who I’m with.”

Because it’s such a special evening, a first sexual experience night, I break from my dieta of no alcohol and order pisco sours, Peru’s limey distilled drink made from grapes.

Whitney awaits room service while I take another long, hot shower. It's fantastic to suds up again and scrub off the dirt and mud from the Inca Trail. The shower spray is loud and forceful like rivers rushing through the Andes.

I close my eyes and imagine what Whitney plans to do. My mind vacillates. At times, the anticipation is nerve-racking. *What does she expect from me?* Then I'm weak, vulnerable, and completely out of charge. Why do I have such strong feelings for this stunning Inca goddess? Never before have I desired a woman. It seems uncanny that this is happening now, at the end of a long, exhausting hike. Maybe I'm going out of my mind. A symptom of my condition. I never discussed the symptoms and stages with Doctor Burhan at the Mayo Clinic. As soon as he uttered the prognosis and possible treatments, I fled to find my own natural cure or to die as a dignified human being.

Hot water rinses vanilla citrus shampoo from my hair, tantalizing my scalp. My skin tingles as I rub the washcloth up one arm and around my chin, imagining all the while what it'll be like to be with Whitney. Suddenly, a soft sensation crosses my belly and travels down my thighs. Her warm naked body draws near from behind. I feel her breasts, her chin resting on my shoulder. A peck at my ear under the pounding shower.

Whitney turns me around and holds my face. She gives me a light, velvety kiss. I keep my eyes closed, relishing a pleasure new to me. I want to learn the secrets of her slender, **bejeweled** form. Whitney must lead the way. I couldn't bear making a sudden clumsy move and tainting the moment. That would be dreadful, like it was with Cliff. Maybe even with Steve.

I open my eyes and glance at her girl-like figure with large dark nipples on small taut breasts. She has traveler's hairy armpits and a small trimmed patch of black pubic hair. And a silver ring, as I pictured she'd have.

After we shower, Whitney dabbles the towel over my body and hair. Her hands are like silk as she eases me to bed, pacifying my insecurities. We toast with our pisco sours. “Cheers, luv,” she says. The strong drink is sweet and bitter. I smell nothing but her fragrance and want nothing but to taste her embrace.

We lie together, caressing each other as if in an effort to heal. Off and on, Whitney asks, “Do you like your body, hon? Do you like the way you feel? You have a voluptuous figure. You’re a creature of beauty.”

Except maybe for Arturo, being with Whitney is nothing like being with a man who’s involved with my participation in his performance. Whitney really cares about my emotions. And I grow more confident in exploring her taut form which is so unlike my well-rounded curves. My large DD endowment.

Without warning, pain attacks my sides. It’s sharp, sudden, acerbic like an attacking Gila monster in my gut. A diamond back. Maybe a black widow. At first, I struggle to stop the conflict between pain and pleasure and hope pleasure wins out.

I nearly conquer the monster when images of my stepchildren and father grasp my mind, leaving me cold, raw, and exposed during a game of idle self-indulgence. I start to miss them more than ever before, especially seven-year-old Kristi. I had fallen in love with the little girl and was honored to be her mother at the Unitarian mother-daughter group. Steve’s children were a major reason I married him. How could I abandon them so cruelly? How could I **leave** my own father in the **lurch**? Like the forsaken Inca child abandoned in a glacier crevice to freeze to death. I can no longer hold back the pain.

Whitney turns on the nightlight beside the bed. She sips her pisco sour and orders two more.

I say nothing. Tears well in my eyes. I hope Whitney won't notice in the dim light. I don't want to upset my friend or cause her to pity me. I feel terribly sad, not for myself or even for my stepchildren or father but for the *capacocha* victims of so long ago. The little children chosen to die in the harsh and cruel wilderness as an offering to appease gods that don't even exist except in the collective mind. I wander into the nine Aztec hells.

"Doesn't matter anyway," Whitney remarks, setting aside her drink. "We can rest now, Muriel Tyler."

"They should have left him alone." I stare at the ceiling chandelier made of geometric pink, smoky glass.

"What are you on about, luv?" Whitney pulls on her sweater and hands me mine. It's somewhat chilly in the room. She smokes a Peruvian brand cigarette called Inca that I bought her in the hotel lobby. They didn't have any Dunhill.

"You're either nervous or a little lightheaded from the pisco sours," Whitney says. "I don't mind listening to what you have to say."

"That boy." I causally slip on my scratchy sweater.

"What boy?" Whitney asks. She's now sitting cross-legged on the bed with a clay ashtray before her.

"The Inca child." I lie back down and stare at the ceiling again feeling like scorpions are now attacking me with their tiny pincers and stingers.

"What Inca child, Muriel Tyler?"

I look at Whitney and take her cigarette for a drag. "The boy frozen in the mountains." I inhale the harsh smoke. "Sometimes, I think about his last moments. He didn't die right away." I shake my head. "As they expected him to, from the cold."

“Woman, what are you talking about?” Whitney looks annoyed.

“I sometimes wonder about his last thoughts. Poor boy. I’m sure he was scared. His own mother allowed him to die. But he didn’t die from the cold. Not right away. He missed his mother first. Didn’t understand his fate. Then he grew numb and cold and fell asleep. They drugged him with coca and maize beer.”

“We’re about to make love and you babble on about some stupid little kid frozen centuries ago. You’re crazy, woman.”

“I’m not crazy. Just dying.”

“Dying?” Whitney pauses from dragging on her cigarette. She looks stunned by my words.

“I sense it. More and more. Dying hurts.”

“The lumps?”

I gaze at Whitney, astonished. I hadn’t thought about the lumps under my armpits for a long while, not consciously, anyway. They’re just there, a part of my body—the part sending me on a death march. But here, this young vibrant woman in all her splendor noticed them, unlike any other lover I’ve ever had, including my husband.

Steve, I suddenly think, of all people should have noticed the lumps during those rare nights he craved me and awkwardly rambled over my body. But he hadn’t noticed. No one had, except for Whitney. I don’t even know her last name. Hadn’t thought to ask. “You noticed them?”

“I was going to mention it. By the way, if you’re dying, how in the bloody hell did you hike the Inca Trail? You’re joshing me. We don’t have to make out if you’re that uncomfortable.”

“No, I want you, but I feel the pain now.”

“Look, have you been to a doctor?” Whitney crushes her cigarette and lights another. She appears distraught over my news, so different from her confident self. I’ve burdened her with a depressing topic. Life is so gay and promising to someone like Whitney and I’ve just made it look unpleasant and grim.

I must take control and ease the woman back to some level of comfort. “I left Steve after having a biopsy. I knew as soon as I felt the lumps and went to the Mayo Clinic. No one suspected a thing. Not Steve, not his parents. I didn’t want anyone to know. I wanted to spare them the agony of watching me wither away.”

“Let me take you to a doctor, Muriel Tyler. Let’s get you back to Cusco. To your husband, Steve Tyler. This is a bloody hell of a place to die. You can barely breathe the air.”

“I choose to be here. I watched my mother grow old and die in a year’s time. She was only forty-five. It’s horrible—all those tests, the radiation, the chemotherapy. Morphine. I can smell the disinfectant and taste the reused cooking oil of hospital food.”

Whitney says nothing. She stares at me. Her silver nose ring is shimmering in the dim light.

“I’m like you, Whitney. I want to live before I die. Have one last fling with life on my journey to the end of the world.”

“How do you know for sure? What about your family? How could you leave them? I’m sure your disappearance troubled them more.”

“Have you ever watched someone die? Someone you love?”

“Never!” Whitney exclaims, as if I had asked *Do you have AIDS?!*

“I want to keep going until I fall off the end of the world or maybe from the top of the world. I want to be buried wherever I die. Like the Inca boy in the capacocha rite of sacrifice. They put him in a museum in Chili. They should have left him on the mountain where they found him. It doesn’t seem right to loot the mountains of their most sacred offerings.”

“What are you going to do, Muriel Tyler? You need to see a doctor. Are you going to stay here? In Aguas Calientes? I’ll stay with you, if you pay me. Just being honest.” Whitney sounds irritated and would probably leave if she could. But it’s dark outside.

“I want to stay in the mountains. Can you take me back to the place of green pastures, to the horseman’s village? Huayllabamba lies on the other side of Dead Woman’s Pass, in the Sacred Inca Valley, where the Urubamba River flows. I’ll pay you.”

“Should I call your husband—Steve Tyler?”

“No, please don’t! I settled that matter long ago. Please don’t ruin this for me. I’ll never go back to Ahwatukee. To Night Hawk Way. I’m doing exactly what I want to do. I’m exactly where I want to be.”

“Take it easy. I believe you. Get some rest now.” Whitney reaches over and affectionately gathers a strand of my hair. She seems calmer now about the sudden shift in my mood that ended our romantic night.

I gently kiss her hand to reassure her. “I’ll rest now. Make sure I’m up for the sunrise. I don’t want to miss it.”

Whitney kisses me on the lips then sits in the chair and begins reading a Ken Follett novel she found on a bookshelf in the hotel lobby. I turn on my side to sleep and start thinking about what happened to me nearly a year before.

I'm sitting on the exam table. A loose shroud covers my nakedness. *Come on, Doctor Burhan. Don't beat around the bush.* I assert what little dignity remains.

Calm down. I want to run another test. His thick, black-rimmed glasses rest low on his hawkish nose. He looks over the test results from the week before. He's stalling. Wasting my time. Why are doctors so patronizing? Oh, he's such a gallant man, ordained and obligated to lead me through tests, further treatments. Sure, go ahead, butcher my body. Have a lump or two while you're at it.

I stare at him and think *Why do I always have to take charge of the situation when things are troubling? As a child, it was with my younger sister. Then, with my dying mother. Then Dad. Then Steve and his two children. Why can't I just sit back and let someone else guide me through troubles and tell me honestly what to do; how to prepare for what lies ahead?*

The doctor reviews the chart a moment longer. Still stalling from the truth. Some patients become subdued at this point, I'll bet; others, like me, are defiant, feisty, angry that they'll die before their time.

Why do doctors try to hide everything?

We need to be certain. Burhan looks up from the chart.

I'm certain. I can feel it happening to me.

Please lie down a moment, Mrs. Tyler. I'll send in the nurse with phenobarbital. Dr. Burhan leaves the room.

Sure, just pop a few sedatives down my throat and I'll go away. Bastard! I fall back on the exam table and rest my head on the hard pillow in a sterile room with tubes and ointments, tapes and pills. In the hospital room of my dying mother. It smells like alcohol and reused cooking oil. I can taste it without even taking a bite.

*Calm yourself, Muriel! I look at Whitney. She's still reading *Pillars of Earth*.*

I picture the high mountains, a condor soaring in the rarefied air, rising on heat thermals between snowcapped peaks on a jet stream cold and clear. The image calms me. No need for that sedative now, I think, and begin drifting asleep.

The door rattles open, disturbing my moment of tranquility. "Mrs. Tyler?" comes the shaky voice of an old woman. Annoyed, I turn and see the back of a meager-looking nurse. She's wearing white pants and a short-sleeved pink scrub. From a stiff white cap, her long gray hair tumbles down her back. Old skeletal hands carefully close the door.

She's an Aztec spirit woman from the ninth realm of the cosmos, where light moves. A Tzitzimime has descended to earth to destroy me.

"What do you want?" I'm angry she's intruded.

Her rancid purification permeates the room. And tastes of Death. Of Carrion. I gag and cover my nose with my hospital shroud. I close my eyes and try to bring back the mountains and the fresh, rarified air.

The Tzitzimime approaches the exam table, scuffing the linoleum floor as she walks. Her boney hands hold a glass of juice and a cup of pills.

"Jesus." I gasp.

The Tzitzimime shakily clings to the cup. Her face is that of my mother--older, but with Mother's tired eyes. It's as if God allows her to age before she comes down to earth to haunt me, to make me unwell.

“Go away! Spirit woman. You’re dead!” I yell, knocking the glass from her hand. It shatters on the floor and splashes her blood. My blood.

“Take these.” Her wrinkled face is expressionless as she hands me the cup of pills.

I jump off the table and look for my clothes or a button to call security. The Tzitzimime’s cold and bony hand clenches my wrist, hurting me, hurting my sides and chest—paining my heart because the dead woman, the hideous Aztec spirit, really is my mother.

I wake with a start. My sides hurt. The room is light. Obviously, Inti has already appeared. I look at my knock-off watch hanging on the bedpost.

“Nine o’clock?” I say aloud. “I can’t believe we missed the sunrise. We’ll have to stay another night. Whitney?” The bed is empty and she’s not sitting in the chair reading her novel. Pillars of Earth lies opened and face down on the chair. “Whitney?” I look in the bathroom. Nobody’s there.

“Whitney?!” I yell, frightened from the dream and from being left alone in the hotel room. Alone with lingering tzitzimime and awki spirits who want to possess me. Take me down.

Whitney’s tote bag no longer hangs from the chair. Has she cleared out? Maybe she’s in the dining hall eating breakfast, I hope.

I start dressing, but sharp pangs are slowing me down. Go away awki spirits. Depart tzitzimime woman. How cruel to start in on me now. How cruel to make me miss the sunrise on Machu Picchu. How cruel my mother abandoned me.

In the dining room, a few tourists are helping themselves to the breakfast buffet of potatoes, maize, and quinoa. fruits of Mama Axo Mama Sara And Mama Quinoa. Whitney isn’t in sight. At the front counter, I ask the clerk, “Have you seen my friend? *Ve la mujer con migo?*”

In Spanish, the clerk explains that the tall woman with many braids left at sunrise. “She says you will check out later today because you’re not feeling well.”

I return to my room and notice my passport and wallet lying outside my daypack. *I didn’t leave them out* I’m thinking as I look through my wallet. My traveler’s checks, credit cards, and cash are missing. Everything’s gone, except for the \$150 I hid in my shoe. There isn’t even a note. My camera’s also missing. Stolen.

“How could she do this to me?” I say aloud. *How could she be so heartless? Raulito was right. He knew she was a bad awki spirit.*

I collapse on the bed and think about calling Steve. Begging for his forgiveness. What else can I do except die and let the hotel deal with my body? Or Raulito. My little Inca boy will help authorities pack me up and ship me back to Ahwatukee. The end of my journey is ruined. The children will see me dead or dying.

The emotional, physical, and mental anguish is unbearable. I inhale, exhale, and convince myself once again that disappearing was the best and easiest solution for me. For everyone involved. I curl up, snuggle with the pillow, and tighten my muscles to chase off the pain. As I drift asleep, I’m hoping to dream of a faraway place like hanan pacha, the Tlalocan, or heaven. I want to watch the Tzitzimime spirits become butterfly stars.



Chapter 22: Place of Good Pastures

A knock at the door wakes me from a restless sleep. “Señorita Arizona. Pillpintu. It’s Raulito, Tupac Inca. Are you all right?”

It’s 11 o’clock, I note as I grovel to the door. My discomfort has somewhat subsided.

Raulito enters. We hold each other and I cry.

“Señorita, we must leave the room now. I’ll take you back to Cusco. To a doctor.” He feels my face and the back of my neck.

I gaze at him long and hard. In the mirror behind him, my eyes have dark circles. I look gaunt. “Raulito,” I say. “Please take me back to the Sacred Valley. I want to see snow-covered mountains all around me. Take me to the horseman’s farm. I’ll give you everything I have. You, Pidru, and his family. You were right. Whitney is a bad awki spirit. She tricked me, robbed me and I don’t have much left. I’ll give you my ThinkPad in Cusco.”

Raulito looks at me in shock; his face is wet with tears. “The clerk told me the tall woman left. I felt strange about that. She’s not a good person. She doesn’t help others. She doesn’t follow *ayni*.” He searches my eyes for the truth about what’s happening to me.

“Understand, Tupac Inca. I want to die in Green Pastures in the Sacred Inca Valley. I want you to bury me on the mountainside in an unmarked grave.”

“What you’re saying to me is difficult to hear,” Raulito says. “I don’t want it to be true. I’ll take you to a curandero to destroy the bad spirits.”

“Will you take me back to Huayllabamba? Find me a munay ki curandero who can treat me with ayahuasca.”

“Of course, Pillpintu. *Te amo*.”

I take him in my arms and pat his back. He rests his chin on my shoulder. “I don’t know if I can hike now. The pain is sometimes hard to bear.”

“We must go back to Kilometer 88. Teddy can get the horses ready and wait for us. But we must climb down the mountain first. There’s no other way because the road is washed out. I’ll help you, maybe even carry you on my back.”

His good heartedness brings tears to my eyes. “I only have money for the train to Kilometer 88. If we take our time. And if I die, take me to the mountainside.”

“Por favor. Esta bien,” he protests.

“But if I do.”

“Come on. We go now. Teddy waits in Aguas Calientes. I’ll take you to the village. My duty is my honor. You come to our mountains for a special purpose. I don’t understand exactly what it is but I believe what you tell me.”

My little Tupac Inca carefully helps me down the mountain. It takes us three hours. In Aguas Calientes, we catch the train to Kilometer 88 where we wait for Teddy to retrieve a horse. It’s a three-hour horse ride to the farmhouse.

I make arrangements with Pidru and his family. They feel I’m a spiritual woman who’ll bring honor to their home while the mountains restore me. And, as Quechua people, they live by ayni, the principle of helping others in order to be helped when they’re in need. By others or by the mountain spirits and Apu gods.

Early the next morning, with my vicuña blanket over my shoulders, Raulito takes me across the village to the edge of a terraced hillside above a stonewall. “This is a sacred place,” he says. “A huaca at intersecting lines.”

The setting is quiet, except for the distant murmurs of llamas, voices of trekkers, and twitters of tanagers.

Inside the sod floor hut, I meet the head curandero of the village. “His name is Pakua Kuntur—Condor Shaman,” Raulito tells me. “He’s not a sorcerer. He’s not a trickster. He doesn’t cast evil spells. He helps tourists like you take a journey of healing with ayahuasca.”

The old Quechua man is wearing a red poncho and the typical earflap knitted cholla. Except for Catholic prayers in Spanish, he speaks his native language, Runasimi.

An open window and candles on the floor light the room. Herbs, vines, bark, and leaves from the Amazon and from the mountains are brewing in an aluminum pot on the central hearth. The steam fills the room with an acrid aroma. There’s nothing sweet about it. It’s not like the brew of green tea, mint, and honey I used to make back home in Ahwatukee.

With a long wooden spoon, the curandero stirs the ayahuasca tea. I sit cross-legged before his mesa near the hearth. His mesa’s **sacred objects** include a cross, feathers, shells, coca leaves, and a Mapacho cigar.

“During the day, Pakuq Kuntur wanders the mountains for sacred herbs and objects for his mesa,” Raulito explains. “He buys his healing objects in Cusco, the axis of all directions.”

Pakuq Kuntur starts singing.

“He *icaros* are magical Inca chants of healing,” Raulito explains. “.He calls on good awki spirits of the mountain to help with your diagnosis. He opens the account and lights a candle for Saint Martin de Pores to heal you with miracles. Saint Martin de Pores was the son of a Spanish nobleman and an African slave from Panama.”

The old man sips the hallucinogenic jungle brew and sprays it onto his mesa.

“Pachamama absorbs the ayahuasca tea and accepts his offering,” Raulito says.

The curandero holds up three coca leaves.

“These leaves represent hanan pacha kay pacha and ukhu pacha. Little by little, he will guide you through the dreamworld dimensions. You will explore your sickness so you can heal yourself and chase away bad awki spirits who torment you

Kuntur lights his Mapacho cigar and blows smoke on the boiling brew. To purify me, he waves his lit cigar in front of me, at my back and my sides. He fills a ceramic cup with the jungle brew and gives it to me. I take a sip and almost spit out the bitter unpleasant tea.

After I’ve drunk the cup of brew and am listening to Kuntu’s hypnotic icaros, I become queasy, as if suffering from acid indigestion. Then I’m dizzy and nauseated. Saliva fills my mouth and I vomit into a bucket placed beside me for this purpose.

Kuntur continues singing and Raulito helps me lie back on my soft vicuña blanket. I stare at the sooty rafters overhead.

“The smoke from the fire and the vapor from the tea rise through the smoke hole as an offering to the mountains.”

Kuntu’s chants intensify and fade. My mind flickers into and out of a dream state, Like the candle of Saint Martin de Porres. It feels as though I’m traveling through the many realms of the Aztec cosmos. I arrive in the ninth heaven and am nearly blinded by the moving light. I see dancing Tzitzimime skeletal spirits. Are they welcoming me or chasing me back to earth? To kay pacha. I can’t tell.

Then I feel myself falling to earth. Then flying with hummingbirds, butterflies, on the back of an enormous condor. My heart palpitates, skips a beat, and my breathing is heavy. My peripheral vision sees the curandero move objects around his mesa as if he’s playing some kind of ancient board game. My mind wavers and escapes to Tawantinsuyu, the empire of four

directions far away in time and place. I don't know where I am. It's like I'm lost in a dream that's all too real and I can't wake myself up.

I am my own huaca, I start thinking. **Quantum mechanics and string theory lines are connecting me to other sacred huacas. In other places. In different times and dimensions. The lines radiate from my lifeforce, my kawsay, to mountain boulders, to the Pleiades, to the Pillars of Creation, the Pillars of Earth, and to the sacred objects on Kuntur's mesa.**

My mind flickers back to Tawantinsuyu. I am an Inca brave running on the roads to deliver a message to the king. I carry a wad of knotted strings, a *quipu--a bookkeeping device, I'm a bookkeeper! I'm an Inca chaski!*

I hear a clatter. I awake. The door blows open. A soft, cool breeze caresses my face like a lovely little butterfly kiss. Like butterfly stars. I relax comfortably on my vicuña blanket, stare at the rafters and smoke hole, and smell the steaming jungle brew drifting to the mountains. My mind is spinning. I don't need another cup of ayahuasca tea.

Tupac Inca is nearby. I feel his kawsay. His presence. We are connected. Kuntur is chanting icaros to Pachamama. He names the nearby mountains one by one. "Salcantay . . . Misti . . ."

Tawantinsuyu pulls me from his icaros. A child appears. I am a child? I'm eight. My skin is light brown. My black hair hangs in two long braids tied together at my back. I'm barefoot and wear an ankle-length tunic with a belt made of the textiles I weave. I have dark eyes like those of a llama. They reflect an innocent, loving heart. I love the king. I love Tupac Inca as much as I love my parents, my village, and lord sun, mamas earth, moon, and stars, the ladies of harvest, the lady of the lake, and our mountain grandfathers.



Chapter 23: Sisa

Each morning, before I fetch water, I praise Copacati, Lady of the Lake. At night, I praise our Lord whose name is too great to utter. We call him Viracocha. At the beginning of time, He arose from the lake to created everything then wander the world He crated. Then He vanished across the ocean but will return one day with legions of warriors from the sky sea.

My younger brothers call me Older Sister. My parents call me Sisa. It means flower. I won't receive a real name until my quicuchicuy marks the day I become a woman. Then my parents will give me a name and I will sing icaros and dance like awki spirits because I will have a spirit of my own.

My people live in the cold, dry altiplano south of Cusco, a place we call Qullasuyu. To the east and west of my family farm are apu mountains. My home is beside Copacati. The Lady of the Lake gives us catfish and killifish. The bulrush sedge at her shores brings egrets, flamingos, gulls, and lapwings. My people use the bulrush to make boats, houses, and floating islands we anchor to the lake bottom. Some of my uncles and aunts live on floating islands and grow potatoes from Mama Axo.

I don't know the language of the Inca people. My people speak Puquina, the language of our Tiwanaku ancestors. Long before Earth Shaker conquered our land, Copacati covered the Tiwanaku to protect them forever.

I raise small animals. My father uses my cormorants to fish and our village elders pay tribute to King Tupac with my chinchillas. When the stars fade and Inti appears, I collect eggs from my duck, feed my hairless dogs, and milk Father's llamas. My brothers help Father herd the llamas and alpacas grazing in the altiplano.

In the season of ending rains, I help Mother unearth Mama Axo's potatoes then we plant her squash, peppers, and tomatoes and Mama Quinoa's amaranth. I help my brothers gather beetles and fresh grubs to eat. When Star Lady Coyllur returns with her sisters in the season of Pachamama, Mother roasts the frogs and guinea pigs I keep in bullrush cages. For Mother's cooking fire, my brothers and I collect llama dung and wood from shrubs on the altiplano.

Every three years, men and boys of our village round up wild vicuñas for shearing. I help Mother spin the wool that the Elders give in tribute to King Tupac. The gods and the Inca king bring good things to me and my people. We are well fed and live in a peaceful prosperous, well-ordered world. Kon Tiki has never unleashed his wrath upon my pleasant life.

It's the seventh year in the reign of Tupac Inca, son of Earth Shaker. The summer is especially dry. Word spreads to my village that Apu Panaca Viramayta, the king's younger brother, is traveling the Inca roads to find girls for the king's chosen maidens. When they arrive at our lake shores, our head elder Cacique arranges for Viramayta to meet my parents and me. I'm afraid Mother has boasted about my beauty and obedience and love for my family, my village, my animals and for the lady of the lake.

“You cause me to leave you forever,” I tell Mother. “Who will care for you and Father in your old age?”

“We’re honored to give you to the Inca king as our tribute. Tupac Inca and the gods will reward us on Earth and in Hanan Pacha,” my parents tell me. “And the king will make you Lady of the Morning Star. It’s an honor to be the king’s chosen maiden. He’ll give you your name at your quicuchicuy and you’ll possess a royal spirit.”

“I don’t want to leave the shores of Lady Copacati. I’m afraid I’ll never see you again.”

My tears and pleas are futile. Viracocha Himself has chosen me before the king even sees me. “Tutanam, ripusaq. In darkness, I depart forever,” I whisper to the Lady of the Lake when Viramayta and his troops take me from my home.

Along the road to Cusco, warriors carry me on a rosewood palanquin decorated with green hummingbird feathers and shining crystals. Priests have donned me in a fine wool tunic with wide colored bands and checkered squares, a red *chumpi* sash, a turquoise shawl, and pin made of silver. I wear heavy gold ear studs and a conical crown of white toucan feathers. My only possession from home is my feather *chuspas* bag containing a spondylus llama totem and a spoon and comb made from the bones of llamas. They are gifts Father made to remind me of my home along the shores of Copacati.

When the procession arrives at each village, people prostrate beside the road. I am Chaska, Lady of the morning and evening star, the brightest and most beautiful star in hanan pacha. I’m the glorious renewal of spring. Lady Chaska protects me on my journey to King Tupac.

For three years, I live with four hundred acllas in the king's House of Chosen Maidens in Coricancha. People call us Virgins of the Sun and Daughters of the Moon. We dedicate our lives to the king. I haven't had my quicuchicuy and am still unnamed and without a spirit of my own.

Inside Coricancha are the temples of Star Lady Coyllur, Viracocha, Illapa, Lord Thunder, and **Cuichu, Lord jaguar of the rainbow bridge to Hanan Pacha. Mamakilla's Moon Temple has walls of silver and Inti's Sun Temple has walls of gold. The Gold Temple is the most sacred huaca in the world. During the solstice, the king sits on a golden throne inside and Inti's rays stream through the windows and illuminate him. King Tupac is the center of Tawantinsuya.**

During the rainy season, in the tenth year of his reign, Tupac Inca holds court at the Heavenly City, the mountain stronghold of Earth Shaker. Every day llama caravans bring his supplies. Inca soldiers guard Inti Punta. My aclla sisters and I accompany Tupac to weave his daily garments, cook his sacred meals, and light the sacred fires. We reside in a large cloister that Earth Shaker built for his own chosen maidens.

On days without cloud cover, the king and his priests gather at the west plaza of the royal estate. As Inti descends into the underworld of night, the priests ring copper bells, beat drums, and shake rattles. My sisters and I, with our mamacunas, sing icaros as Inti's descends into the world beyond day.

I'm the king's favorite. He calls me his little butterfly star and likes to hear my voice sing when he dances for Inti. He says Mama Alpa blesses me with her beauty. She has many breasts like Mama Axo, lady of potatoes and squash. After my quicuchicuy, the king wants to make me

his concubine and give me my name. I think he will call me Alpa when he gives me my own spirit.

Today, as often happens in the mountains, Illapa brings clouds to the sky. When Inti nears the mountains, an hour before darkness, Illapa allows him to cast long shadows. The king wears the white tunic and red chumpi I wove, a golden sun pectoral, and a headdress of macaw feathers. He raises his spear and wields his star macana as he stands before his priests, mamacunas, me and my sisters. When the king praises Inti we stop our icaras to hear his voice echo through the mountains.

“Praise to Earth Shaker, Manco Capac and Mama Cora Ocllo, and Creator of Everything whose name is too great to utter. I invoke Lord Thunder, Mama Earth, Mama Moon, and our mountain grandfathers. I am your son, Sapa Inca. I command and rule your kingdom on Earth. Giver of life, shower fortune and victory on my vast and mighty empire. Let my people, Children of the Sun, prosper. Let them eat, drink, and live many years in peace and without illness and pain. Give them many descendants who won’t fall into the evil crevices along the road of life.”

The king breaks into song and dance. The priests chant and shake rattles. My sisters, the mamacunas and I resume our icaras.

When Inti nears the mountains, the black jaguar Inti Jiwana suddenly appears and bites and swallows Lord Sun.

We stop singing. Priests drop their shells rattles and prostrate themselves on the ground. Soldiers force our king onto the stone platform and cover him with their bodies. Everyone falls including me, my sisters, and the mamacunas. Birds stop flying and drop from the sky. Crickets chirp that the world has ended.

I raise my head to see if Pachamama stirred a sleeping volcano or if Mama Killa passes before Inti now that she's a youthful lady. I see nothing until butterfly stars magically appear and dance around the swallowed sun.

The darkness passes quickly but returns when Inti disappears behind the western peaks and the dancing stars follow.

The high priest stands and yells, "Illapa, Inti, and Viracocha proclaim their wrath! Mama Killa overtakes her brother as dragon woman. She makes the earth fall. Will Inti rise again?"

On the ground where we fell, we anxiously wait in silence until Inti shows his face at the eastern mountains. Then the king sings praises and declares we return to Cusco.

For several days at the Acllahuasi, the king watches me sit against the stone wall with my handheld loom. I'm weaving the vicuña cloth he'll wear. We never exchanged words. People don't speak to the king unless he addresses them. Men don't talk to the chosen maidens and no one ever looks directly into Sapa Inca's eyes.

Light from cloister windows shine on his face when he tells me, "Your dark llama eyes sparkle as you pass the weft through the warp. You are luminous, precious, my most perfect child, unblemished by your first bleeding. I want you for my Red Palace but my duty is to my empire. **Throughout my kingdom, Children of the Sun have witnessed Inti Jiwana consume Lord Inti. They demand a capacocha** to appease the angry gods. I must give you as tribute to the apu mountains."

When Star Lady Collyur and her sisters return to announce the New Year, the king holds the capacocha ceremony in Huakaypata Square, the belly of the puma and hub of the Inca roads. A stream running through the city divides the plaza. Edging it are the palaces of Earth Shaker and Viracocha, former Inca kings. In the southeast corner looms Tupac's Red Palace where he intended to take me before **Inti Jiwana swallowed Lord Sun.**

.Priests, nobles, and royal attendants gather in the square before a crowd of four thousand citizens. On a gold throne in the center of the plaza sits the king in a purple tunic and red-feathered cape, a colorful turban with feathers and tassels, and a pectoral of Inti made of hummingbird feathers and gold. Gold ear plugs pull his earlobes to his shoulder. Red and black paint hide his face from the common people. His sandals are made of chinchilla with soles of silver. I wonder if these are the chinchillas I raised.

The king sits before a semicircle of royal mummies, the *mallquis*. They sit on golden palanquins with their knees to their chests, arms crossed, faces ashen, and eyes looking downward like me. Mallquis live in Coricancha with their weapons and treasures. Noble *Awkapacas* have clothed them in fine textiles, feathered headdresses, and gold, crystals, and emeralds.

The ceremony opens when Tupac consults the mallquis and the Awkapacas interpret their messages from the gods.

I, the chosen capacocha, sit on a golden throne beside the king before the mallquis council. Mamacunas have donned me in a tunic and red cape held at my nape with a silver llama pin, the sweat of the Mamakilla. A blue-feathered headdress tops my head and my long black hair tumbles down my back in tiny beaded braids.

King Tupac sings of his forefather's victories since the time of Mano Capac and Mama Ocllo. "My father Earth Shaker, son of Viracocha, conquered the world beyond Cusco valley. He established the Heavenly City in the mountains. I implore my ancestors to appease the angry gods. My tribute is this unblemished aclla. For three years, she has woven my clothes. At my father's retreat, she witnessed Inti Jiwana eat the sun. She knows the wrath of Kon. I'm sending her to Huaynaputina Mountain west of Lake Copacati near her family village. The procession will honor her people, her mother and father, and the lady of the lake."

*The mallquis kings and queens are watching me, I think as my king speaks to the cheering crowd. Again, I am stolen away. Twice chosen. First as an **aclla** and now as a capacocha.*

From Huakaypata Square, my procession begins the moon-cycle journey to a sacred platform high on the mountain peak. In the procession, the king's elite centurions carry my rosewood palanquin. Priests and mamacunas follow behind to throw flowers and leaves on the road.

People cheer as we pass through farms and villages. They praise the king for **his twice chosen capacocha**. They all have seen the puma eat Inti the sun.

I pay honor to my village elders, my parents, and to Lady Copacati. When we reach Huaynaputina, my procession disbands. A priest and centurion soldiers climb the mountain carrying offerings for the apu grandfather. One soldier carries me on his back. The priest gives me chichi beer to drink and coca leaves to chew to keep me brave and sturdy with no sign of weakness. He doesn't want me to die before Inti takes me. And he doesn't want me sad. I'm not sad and I don't cry for Mother or Lady Copacati. When I was first chosen, I learned not to cry.

We arrive at the tambo halfway up Huaynaputina. The hues of twilight blend with smoky ash from the neighboring volcano Ubinas. During our climb, the spewing mountain is always in sight. At any moment, Apu Ubinas could erupt and darken the skies for a lifetime. But I don't believe it will until after the soldiers place me in my tomb and Inti takes me.

I haven't spoken during this journey. It's forbidden. I wonder about my fate in the language of my Tiwanaku ancestors. How will Inti receive me? Will my journey to hanan pacha be as pleasant as the life I once lived with my family at the shores of Copacati? Will Huaynaputina one day erupt? If it does, I hope it will be the most cataclysmic eruption to ever occur.

I sleep at the first tambo then soldiers carry me farther up the mountain. My breathing is tight against my chest. The intense sun burns my face and hands. The freezing chill of Apu Huaynaputina bites me like Inti Jiwana bit the sun.

At the mountaintop, I can barely breathe. The beer and coca are making my mind stir like a blizzard. The cold stiffens my vicuña blanket. The priest bundles me in a cape of shells and feathers.

The soldiers place me inside the stone pit prepared for me. The priest sings to the Apu grandfather that I will die when Inti reaches zenith and lassoes my **kawsay**. But I have no kawsay. I'm still without a name. I never reached my quicuchicuy.

I hold my knees to my chest like a mallquis and cross my feet in their little embroidered shoes. Offerings surround me. Some are tributes to the gods, some will sustain the kawsay I don't have. Among them is my feather *chuspas* with the spondylus llama, and bone spoon, and comb that my father made for me. There are figurines of llamas, birds, toads, and snakes made of

gold, silver, and spondylus shell. In my hand is a gold face of Viracocha so Inti will know I'm his capacocha and he will lasso me.

I hear the soldiers blow trumpets and pound drums as the priest sings icaros. I'm numb from the cold, coca, and maize beer. In my little mountain room, my tomb, I'm not hungry. The priest fed me the fruits of Mamas Axo Sara and Quinoa. **I'm weak but my kawsay has not left me, the one I don't have because no one gave me my name. I am like Viracocha, I am as great as he whose name is too great to utter. No one has named me. I have no name to say. No one can utter my name.**

Above my little room, the high priest holds a concave mirror. He's waiting for the rays of Inti to burst his ceremonial wood into flames. When Inti lights his sacred fire, the priest and most of the soldiers descend the mountain.

Two centurions remain at the rim of my little tomb. I see their gold pectorals with Inti's face and the star-headed manacas they hold. They're waiting for Inti to pass zenith. If Inti doesn't take me, they plan to hit the back of my head with their manacas. Then they'll cover my tomb and descend the mountain for the last time. I won't notice their departure and will no longer shiver from the cold.

I'm alive now. I hear screeching winds whipping snow on the platform and into my little room. I see cumulonimbus clouds gather above me hiding the sun. *Or has Ubinas erupted to honor my death?*

Illapa appears like the fierce jaguar of night and showers Huaynaputina with flurries. He opens his silver cape and shoots arrows. His voice cracks and thunders like a mountain spewing fire and rock.

The centurions are talking. They worry Illapa stops Inti from reaching zenith and lassoing the kawsay I don't have. "We must kill her now and descend the mountain," I hear one say.

The booming voice of Viracocha speaks to me *you are twice chosen to travel the dark road to Hanan Pacha. Your guide is the jaguar who sees in the dark.*

With what little strength I have, I say to my god who is too great to have a name *I'm fading. Please give me my beautiful lifeforce. My kawsay. Please give me my name.*

The soldiers raise their manacas to strike my head. But before they can, Illapa's arrow strikes a soldier's golden pectoral. The silver arrow recoils and strikes the other soldier in the head. Together, they tumble backward and roll off the mountainside like condors in flight.

Pachamama absorbs Illapa's anger. But the charge is too fierce. It passes through the stone mound, reaches my little room and fills my fading body with the power that makes the Earth tremble with the force of an Inca king.

"Tutanam, ripusaq," I whisper. "Into darkness, I forever depart."

I see the rainbow jaguar bridge between Kay Pacha—this world—and Hanan Pacha—the world of the sun, moon, planets, constellations and milky way where Inti rules by day and Mamakilla by night.

It's a good thing a voice says to me The world of infinite wisdom and peace.



Chapter 24: Rainbow Jaguar Bridge

"Pakuq Kuntur closes the accounts and looks over the objects on his mesa."

Raulito's words awaken me but my mind remains far away. *Am I Sisa the twice chosen? Am I a sacrifice to the mountain gods?* I'm not sure. Everything's hazy. The vision was so real, so complete. I felt the cold, smelled the ritual fire burning, heard the clash of Illapa's thunder and my frail little body absorbed his electrical charge.

"The curandero sings of the mountains." Raulito brings me back to the world I'm presently in. I remember who I am and where I'm at. I feel at rest and don't want to move. Maybe I can't move. I fall back asleep but have no dreams, no vision. Only darkness and void.

I wake again, parched.

"A cup of cool water," Raulito says. He's sitting on a stool beside my cot. "A gift from the mountains, Arizona Pillpintu." He helps me drink the ice-cold water. "It's from a glacial steam. How do you feel?"

"I'm fine. Good, in fact, because of the jungle brew. How long was I asleep?"

"Two days," Raulito says.

I lie back and close my eyes trying to recall the dimly lit house I'm in; its thatched roof, sooty rafters, pictures of saints on stone walls, one cot, one stool, a bench outside, and a pachamanca in the yard. Horses and llamas corralled by rock fences on the grassy terraced slope. I remember. Pidru Yupanqui and his family sleep on the floor around the cooking hearth. I'm in the horseman's home.

"Muriel!"

I open my eyes. Steve is standing on the earthen floor beside my bed. His hair is disheveled; he has a beard and is wearing a Brooks Brothers pullover. He's lost weight since I

last saw him. I know he's carelessly keeping a wallet full of cash in his back pocket. He always does.

I wonder if I've passed on or am dreaming. "If I'm dead," I mutter. "Then why are you here and not my mother? And if this is a dream, why do I feel so warm? Is it really you, Steve?"

"It's me." Steve sits on the cot. Raulito walks out the open front door. To give us privacy, it seems.

"But how?" I ask when my mind becomes clear.

"A British lady named Whitney called me."

I close my eyes and shake my head. *That woman*. I can't believe she robbed me of everything, including my last request.

"Whitney said you went to the first village after Kilometer 88. I left my bags at the hostel and hired a porter and a guide. They're sitting at the trailside waiting for my instructions. We had a hell of a time finding you," Steve admits humorously, as if to cheer me up. "No one around the village knows you as Muriel. But Arizona struck a bell."

I laugh. "My name's been Arizona for a long time now." I reach out and touch his hand. He takes hold of it. All of a sudden, I feel deep affection for him. Or is it a kind of pity I never felt before. Steve tried to be good to me but it wasn't what I needed. *Poor man, innocent and yet guilty of trying too hard. Or maybe, not hard enough.*

"Muriel." Steve awakens my drifting thoughts. I still have traces of the jungle brew clouding my mind. "Whitney said you were sick. But I already knew something was wrong. I got the Cigna invoice and then a mysterious call from the Mayo Clinic." He squeezes my hand. "You needed me. The kids needed you. I needed you."

“Damn her!” My mood shifts. I tried to forget about Whitney. Now her betrayal overwhelms me. *And what does Steve want by coming here? To harass me?* “Why do you think I need you now?” I pull back my hand and look toward the dark corner of the one-room hut. I have no tears. Not anymore. “Where’s my curandero? I need more cocaine. I want to sleep.”

“Here.” Steve hands me a bottle of Motrin from his fanny pack. “Please, Muriel. Why didn’t you tell me you had to travel? I would have let you go. My world fell apart once again when you went missing. But I don’t want to torment you with my feelings. Not now. Not ever.”

I look in his eyes welling with tears. I know the truth. He wouldn’t have let me go. No one would; no one could.

“How are the kids? Daddy?”

“The kids miss you, of course. But they’re kids and kids are resilient. Your dad’s all right. Thanks to the trust fund I set up.”

“We set up,; I interrupt. “You still don’t give me credit for important matters.”

“Right. Sorry. It’s a habit, I suppose. Anyway, from time to time, I check on Prichard. Your dad. Through his nurse. He doesn’t know me, you know. And he’s confused about you. He’s not really dealing with reality.”

You’re a good man, Steve. I’m forever grateful you helped me out. And your checking in on Daddy.” I fall back and close my eyes to catch my breath and organize my thoughts. “You must hate me for what I did. Leaving you with Kevin and Kristi.” I deeply inhale the cool, thin air. “Can you understand?”

“I put it together after the doctor called and the police concluded you had left me. There was no indication of foul play. And I knew you traveled to Latin America. The embassy in Mexico said they issued you a passport. Then Ivet called about the Explorer in Panama. You’ve

been leaving a trail behind.” Steve begins to chuckle, then he chokes up. “I thought long and hard. About your mother’s death. About you. I’m not sure why life is so cruel to me. I’ve lost two wives when I’ve always done what’s right, what makes sense.”

I decide to take charge of Steve’s emotions before he gets carried away and breaks down sobbing. It’s not something I need or want from him. I look at Steve. “Stop it. I’m where I want to be.”

“I have to tell you, Muriel, I’m with Betsy now,” Steve confesses like he’s getting it off his chest. “But I was never unfaithful until long after you left.”

In the dim light, I gaze at Steve and slowly inhale. I hear birds twittering outside and trekkers chatting as they pass by. The hearth crackles and I smell cuy roasting on the pachamanca outside. I’m warm and numb and my thoughts aren’t clear. Or are they? “Everything’s like a blending of time,” I tell Steve. “Of what’s real and what’s not. It’s like I’m living in another dimension. Maybe the ninth.”

You mean fifth”

“Sure. I’m here in some Quechua hut and I’ve never felt more at peace. You’re with my best friend. Everything’s okay for the first time in my life. It takes dying to understand life.”

I pause a moment to catch my breath and notice Raulito standing at the door looking at me, checking to see if I’m all right. His soft boyish face shimmers in the afternoon sunshine. “He wants to give me some tea with cocaine,” I say.

Steve nods, as if giving Raulito permission to approach me.

“Come home with me,” Steve declares. He stands in the light shining through the door. “I can’t leave you here. You’re still my wife. I’m responsible. There are laws that forbid this kind of thing. It would become an international incident.”

Steve's remark drains me. Of course, he'd go against my last wishes. "You must leave now," I say as firmly as possibly. "I've worked everything out with these people." I look at the hearth where Pidru sits smoking. His wife is cooking outside while her boys are playing with the dogs. I see them through the open door. "Except," I add. "Please give these people some money. I was robbed by that woman who called you. Please don't rob me too."

My own words exhaust me. I feel like a small child in bed, huddled up with a fever, missing school, trying to get better so I can play with the kids outside. I must rest because I honestly don't feel well. I envision my mother. Or maybe I'm hallucinating. Maybe not. She enters the one-room hut with a glass of Seven-up to help settle my stomach and sits at my bedside, stroking my sweaty brow. *Everything will be all right* she says. *You just need to rest.*

"You must go," I tell Steve again. "I'm all right. I have my Inca boy and my curandero to see me through this."

Steve looks pale. Raulito takes his arm and leads him outside for air. They sit on the bench by the open door as a young, bearded trekker stops before the yard. He stares at them for a moment, then swings off his pack and leans it against the stone wall. He drinks from his bottle of water. "Are you alone or with my group of thirty-five?" he asks Steve with an Israeli accent.

"I'm not even hiking the trail," my husband says. "I came here to meet my wife. She hiked all the way to Machu Picchu and back to this village. Amazing what you can do when you put your mind to it."

I clearly see the young Israeli look at Steve. He probably wonders if Steve's mocking him. He slings on his backpack and heads up the trail.

Raulito begins laughing. Steve does too. "Señor Arizona," I hear my Inca guide say to Steve. "I can take you to Machu Picchu, if you like, after we bury her."

“You talk as if the matter is settled when nothing’s settled.” Steve’s stands by the doorway and takes out his wallet, removes a wad of hundred-dollar bills. Raulito takes the money, nods, and enters the house.

I hear Steve telling his guide and porter that he’s ready to return to Kilometer 88. I know he’s eager to leave before he goes against my wishes. He’s done what he can. Found me. Helped me with cash. Why disturb me any further? He probably thinks I was wrong to leave him and the kids without a word. But *he’s* wrong. When he gets back to civilization, he’ll immediately call Betsy, the woman who’s been his rock through all this, who’s at home with his kids. *Yes, Betsy will know what to do. Has he told her lately that he loves her?* I wonder. And as he’s heading down the trail behind his porter and guide, Steve will be thinking about his return trip to Phoenix and the hassle of finding transportation at the end of the trail.

Over the next few days, Tupac Inca, as I now call Raulito, gives me soothing teas and medicines from Pakuq Kuntur and Mama Koka.

I mostly sleep on the cot in the dimly lit stone house and smell the boiling quinoa and potatoes cooking on the *pachamanca* outside. I thank Mamas Quinoa Sara and Axo for my Andean dieta.

In the mornings and evenings, Tupac takes me outside to watch the sunrise and set. We bundle together under my vicuña blanket from Otavalo and view mountains to the left, to the right, in front, and behind. We lean against the stone wall edging the Inca Trail and the horseman’s front yard. Tupac tells me the names of the mountains.

At twilight on a full moon night, we watch Inti descend behind western peaks as Mamakilla rises. All the while, trekkers are straggling along the trail to camps where their

porters have already pitched tents and are cooking their dinners. *Probably pasta, tuna fish, and Kool-Aid*, I think to myself as they pass. *And they'll be satisfied with the meal.*

"I'll take you to Lake Titicaca." Tupac retains a thread of hope that Pakuq Kuntur's prayers and dieta will cure me. He's witnessed and heard about many miracles happening in the mountains. I believe every miracle he reveals to me.

I rest my head on his shoulder and deeply inhale.

"Señorita Arizona Pillpintu, *mi amor, cariña*, you're tired. It's time for your Quechua dinner and Pakuq Kuntur's tea and medicines. Perhaps I'll give you a little more coca tea tonight. A little more cocaine from Mama Koka."

I say nothing and we sit a while longer. The Apu gods and awki spirits are silent. They're asleep for the night, like the birds, like the trekkers in their tents. The fresh, rarified air is the pure essence of all world spirits. Goodly spirits. The pain fades. My every penetrating breath is as soothing as sabila infused with nutrients, vitamins, and minerals.

"It's all so amazing," I tell Tupac. "The Apus gave me a vision of a civilization that lasted a hundred years. Such a short history for an empire as vast in its scope as ancient Egypt."

"How long did their empire last? Pillpintu."

"Over three thousand years."

"Yes. I'm sure the Egyptians were great people but we have the mountains and live closer to the realm of gods."

I squeeze his arm and drink from my cup of tea. "Her name is Sisa,"

"Who?"

"The *capacocha* of my ayahuasca vision, the ice maiden Johan Reinhard discovered last year."

“Sisa means flower,” Tupac tells me.

“That’s something I already know. From my vision. Tell me about the goddess of flowers and youthful maidens, the goddess of the moon. Tell me the names of all the Inca goddesses and queens. It soothes my heart just to hear their stories.”

“Mama Sara, Killa, Pacha, Alpa,” Tupac happily recites the names. “Mamakilla is the old woman moon tonight. She rises as her brother-husband sets. Manco Capac is her son. Mama Ocllo is her daughter. We also call the full moon Kutirimpuy. It means to be reborn and cured of all ailments. She will cure you tonight, Pillpintu.”

“My thoughts mystify me, Tupac Inca. Here we sit in this mountain ecosphere near Dead Woman’s Pass. I’m living outside the butterfly biodome in a tremendous world. The sky is my hanan pacha. Earth is my home for a life of forming a family and making friends. People are like the birds that fly across the planet. Some are residential, living year-round where they’re born; others migrate and fly, here then there, beginning where they’re born, ending where they die. Like my very thoughts, sometimes.”

“That’s beautiful, Pillpintu. Like your kawsay. Tell me more.”

“Biodomes determine our lives, parents, family, and friends,” I say to Tupac. “Do we have any choice in the matter? Have we been placed like foster kids in difficult environments that determine a fate preordained?”

My little Inca guide laughs. “*Me gusta mucho. Munay ki.*” He kisses my hand. I shiver from his touch. Even though Mamakilla is casting the evening’s chill, I’m as warm and comfortable as I’ve ever been.

“I love you too, Tupac Inca.”

At this moment, my young guide on the Inca Trail is the best thing that's ever happened to me. He's my dearest friend at the end of the trail on top of the world.

"Dying is nothing to fear, Tupac Inca," I say as we huddle under the vicuña blanket. "It only means God has chosen me one more time. Whoever that god may be."

My little Tupac Inca says nothing. I feel happy knowing he's happy just to be with me.

