

My Brave Inca Dove

A novel by Teri Ekland



Chapter 1: Night Hawk Way

February 26, 1996

Steve Tyler

“It’s 2 a.m. and my wife is missing!” I shout over the cordless phone as I lean on the kitchen counter and run my hand through my receding brown hair. I tell the officer at South Phoenix Precinct that Muriel has *always* told me where she’s going and *when* she’ll be back. Until last night. “She wasn’t home when I returned from Intel!”

“Does she work? Could she still be at her job?” the officer questions. His voice sounds calm, as if this matter were road routine when it’s not.

“My wife is a bookkeeper for the neighborhood Blockbuster. She works at home and volunteers for a local charity that delivers food on the reservation. Officer,” I add with impatience, “Her office appears untouched!”

The policeman asks for my address. I tell him we live on Night Hawk Way while picturing Muriel at her desk looking out the window at the sunset-colored stucco houses along the street with red tile roofs, desert landscapes, and slump block walls surrounding each backyard and keeping whatever is back there hidden from view.

“Anything gone from the house?” the officer asks, awakening me from my thoughts.

“Her clothes? Jewelry? Purse? Her car?”

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

“Her car is gone? Well, that speaks volumes, Mr. Tyler.”

“Officer, my wife didn’t just take off. I found her purse on the bedroom dresser with her Nokia phone. Her wallet was inside with all her credit cards, her driver’s license, and the cash I put there this morning. Before I headed to work The only thing I found missing was the jadeite necklace I gave her before we married, to win her over. I bought it during a business trips to Malaysia. It’s worth five thousand dollars. It brings out the green in her eyes. But she almost always wears it so whatever has happened I’m sure she had it on.”

“I see,” the officer says. “What else was she wearing when you last saw her?”

The question ties my stomach in knots. No matter how hard I try, I can’t remember what Muriel had on when I left for Intel yesterday morning. Had I even kissed her or did I just run out the door ? Did she say anything to me? I feel sick inside because I can’t distinguish yesterday morning from six years of mornings jumbled together in my mind. “She might have been wearing a loose-fitting T-shirt,” I say. “One with that flute player, Kokopelli, or some kind of Hopi design. She likes Native American designs. 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 wears it. That annoys her sometimes.”

“Any distinctive marks, scars, tattoos on your wife, Mr. Tyler?”

I hear the officer ask and my wife’s naked body appears in my mind and the thought of my intimacy with Muriel somehow reassures me that she’ll be back in a day or two. For some reason, she’s trying out her independence after being cooped up with the same man for so long.

She just needed a little break. A pause from her routine. “Well,” I say at last. “She has a very large chest. Kind of a burden to her.”

“Did you check with her parents?”

“Her mom is dead and I don’t want to worry her old man. He’s seventy and suffers from Parkinson’s.”

“Mr. Tyler. The truth is 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 is still missing or if you find anything unusual. Any signs of a break-in or foul play.”

“Foul play?” I stammer and hang up because I have no intention of even considering that possibility. I immediately speed dial Betsy Sanders, a hairdresser at Lakewood Salon in Mountainside Plaza down the road. Betsy trims my wife’s shoulder-length, light-brown hair once a month. Under most circumstances, I never think about Betsy, one way or the other. She’s someone Muriel calls during the week and meets with for lunch or a movie from time to time. They sometimes jog around the neighborhoods of Ahwatukee, across cotton fields and the powerline easement, and around the manmade marinas of Lakewood. Betsy is a single mom and I never socialize with her like Muriel and I do with our “couple” friends from Intel and the Unitarian Church. Betsy’s simply Muriel’s best friend and the only person I can think of to call during this time of escalating crisis.

“Hello?” I hear Betsy’s groggy voice. “It’s the middle of the night whoever you are. I hope this is important.”

“Betsy,” I say. “This is Steve Tyler, Muriel’s husband.” She knows who I am but I want to be sure. It is early and I’ve just woken her up. “I’m sorry to get you out of bed but Muriel wasn’t home when I returned from work. Is she with you?”

“No. Mr. Tyler,” I hear her say. “I haven’t seen Muriel since last Thursday when we took the kids to the outlet malls.”

“Do you know where she might be?” I ask, crossing my fingers.

“I really don’t, Mr. Tyler.”

“That’s too bad. I was hoping you did.” I start pacing the kitchen floor. “Muriel didn’t call me all day yesterday to say ‘hi’ like she usually does and when I checked the phone messages a school nurse blared out that my 8-year-old daughter was still at school waiting in her office. Then I discovered that my fifth-grade son was outside playing with the older boys he shouldn’t be playing with!”

“Calm down, Mr. Tyler,” Betsy says. “Did Kevin or Kristin know where Muriel went? What did they tell you?”

“After I rounded up Kevin he said he didn’t know why his step-mommy wasn’t home waiting for him. Betsy, my son showed no signs of concern until we were on our way home from Kyrene de Cielo where I picked up Kristin, which Muriel was supposed to do. When I questioned my son, Kristen started crying and then Kevin grew upset and began asking me about his mommy. Betsy, Muriel’s in charge of the kids!”

“Slow down, Mr. Tyler. Tell me what happened.”

“I told my kids to shut up, that I needed to think. I immediately felt terrible. How could I snap at my own babies? They have every right to be concerned. I have no business adding to their confusion.”

“Steve, Mr. Tyler. You were upset. I understand. Don’t be so hard on yourself. Let’s try to figure this out.”

“In truth, Betsy, I have a difficult time dealing with emotional children. I’m a busy man and rely on my wife to deal with them. Now I’m concerned and worried.”

“Have you checked her computer for clues? Can you remember her hinting about anything?”

“I found nothing unusual in her phone list and text messages. No indication of a mystery lover. Nothing like that.”

“Lover? Muriel? Never, Mr. Tyler. Muriel loves you. She’s said so many times. And she loves the kids. She wouldn’t up and leave you.”

“I checked our joint bank and credit card accounts and found no activity during the past week. I looked through her accounts at AOL and CompuServe and found no mysterious plans. I even ran a web search on Yahoo, Netscape, and Internet Explorer.”

“Did you find anything unusual, Mr. Tyler?”

“Not really. Muriel had pulled up sites about Latin America but I believe this was for our trip to San Carlos last Christmas. No, Betsy. I didn’t find any obvious clues. Her camera and camcorder are still in the closet. Nothing seems to be missing except Muriel and her car. She’s simply vanished into thin air.”

Betsy encourages me to remain calm and offers to come over to make coffee and help me sort out the situation. I’m hopeful that Muriel’s friend can solve this mystery but I’m still overwhelmed with anxiety and continue pacing the kitchen floor until the doorbell rings. I rush to answer it and stumble over Kristin’s roller blades. I curse our typical Ahwatukee home with its vaulted ceilings and lack of doors between the kitchen, dining, and Arizona rooms. It’s the perfect floor plan for kids to strew around their toys, clothes, books, and sports team cards—from their bedrooms to the pool outside the arcadian doors off the Arizona room. This habit

always irritated Muriel. But like a trooper, she straightened up the house as she walked from room to room. Except lately, I'm remembering. It seems that my wife stopped correcting everyone's sloppy behavior and let things go until I got firm with the kids and straightened up the house myself. *Yes, a few changes have been going on lately*, I think to myself as I set aside the roller blades.

I mutter a Unitarian prayer asking that Muriel is standing on the front stoop with an apology and good explanation. But when I swing the door open, a short 40-year-old woman with a tight red perm is standing in the porchlight. She looks hastily put together in a blue sweat suit. My heart sinks as I motion Betsy inside and she sets her purse on the dining room table and goes straight to the kitchen to make coffee as if this were her house. As if she were Muriel. I follow her and sit at the kitchen bar.

In moments, Betsy sets a mug of eye-opening coffee before me. I take a sip, deeply inhale the aroma, and feel halfway revived. At least somewhat comforted. Then Kevin suddenly appears from the hallway looking pale. He rubs his eyes and groggily asks, "Is Mommy dead?" My son is trying to be brave, I know, but he is trembling because he's afraid of the answer. His first mommy had died so unexpectedly. It's something none of us can really get over. Angeline is buried in our psyches just as assuredly as she lies in her grave. I stare at my young son and feel as helpless as I had when my first wife passed away a year before I married Muriel.

Betsy hugs Kevin and I'm grateful that my wife's friend is here. She's well acquainted with my children. "Your mommy stayed out a little late last night," Betsy suggests to Kevin. "Maybe she's playing hooky or got a flat tire or took a drive to Tucson for the night." My wife's friend leads Kevin back to bed and tucks him in. Then she checks on Kristen and reports to me that my little girl is sound asleep.

Before Betsy leaves she promises to return in a few hours to help me get the kids off to school. We hug at the door, something we've never done before, and I let her know how grateful I am that's she's Muriel's best friend.

Unable to sleep because Muriel is consuming my mind, I spend the rest of the night wrestling with my thoughts on my La-Z-Boy recliner. I fell in love with Muriel when I first laid eyes on her at the party of an Intel colleague. Muriel arrived on the arm of Shiv Balakrishnan and I remember thinking *She's stunning and should be with me, not a man from India*. And Muriel wasn't stuck-up like a lot of beautiful women. She laughed at my jokes and I liked everything about her including her slightly overlapping front teeth. But I wasn't able to ask for her phone number in front of Shiv.

Fortunately, Muriel had mentioned having season tickets to the Phoenix Symphony and I went to the next concert looking for her. During intermission, I spotted her across the hall—a beautiful woman in heels and a red sequined gown that accentuated her figure and large chest. She was with a girlfriend, not a man, and was delighted to see me again. I got her number and subsequently took her out to pizza parlors, restaurants, and movies, things I liked doing. And we had grief in common—Muriel had recently lost her mother to cancer and I had just lost Angeline to a sudden and unexpected aneurism.

Angeline is dead and now my second wife is missing I keep thinking as I shift back and forth on the recliner. *Was I neglectful of Muriel's needs? Did she also die before I could tell her she is my reason for doing everything I do? And when will I tell everyone that Muriel's missing? When should I call her dad? When do you announce such a thing?* I'll have to ask my neighbors if they saw my wife leaving and I haven't even met most of them. I'm too busy to attend their

block parties. Fine way to get acquainted, I'm thinking. *Oh? Your wife's missing? Well, come on in, Mr. Tyler. Care for some coffee?*

By the time I'm getting ready for work, I've decided to ask Betsy to watch my kids until Muriel returns, whenever that may be. And if I must, I'll drive to every hospital in Phoenix and every place Muriel frequents to look for her or for any clues to her whereabouts. *I'll find Muriel somewhere, somehow* I reassure myself and try not to think the of the worst-case scenario.



Chapter 2: San Carlos, Nuevo Guaymas

February 25, 1996

Muriel Tyler

My willow-green Eddie Bauer Explorer careens down I-19 toward Nogales. Steve and I bought it a few weeks ago. He was so proud of negotiating the deal for me at Tex Earnhardt Ford. But it was just before a Super Bowl Party with his colleagues, Cowboys and Steelers, and Steve had grown agitated because the negotiations were taking too long and we left the dealership at kickoff time. He wanted to be with his friends glued to the TV eating pizzas, chips, and hotdogs, and drinking beers and sodas. I told him that we'd see the rest of the game when we got to the party and then I asked him why the first minute mattered anyway?

“Don’t they always prolong the end of the game, second by second? Inch by inch? We’ll see Diana Ross at halftime!” Then we argued but it was nothing terrible. Steve simply concluded that I knew nothing about football.

I turn up the car radio. KVVA is playing my favorite Latino singer, Enrique. “*Es una experiencia religiosa* and I feel revived,” I sing along. It’s a warm February afternoon and the windows are ajar so the dry desert air is flushing through the car. On the passenger seat is my new 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 from Incredible Universe yesterday to confuse Steve by leaving my bookkeeping laptop at home. I want to write about my travels if for nobody else but myself. The duffle bag in the back contains used books from Changing Hands on the Maya, Aztec, and Inca civilizations and Spanish language books. I plan to learn as much as I can during the next year of my life. I hope it will be a year.

Two weeks ago, at the Mayo Clinic near my in-laws’ house in Sun City West, Doctor Burhan uttered my prognosis and my mind screamed *My mother died of ovarian cancer!* By the time he said “You have options” I had already phased him out. I felt brittle. Too stunned to hear the words “radiation” and “chemotherapy.” I can’t cope with going through such unnatural treatments like my mother did only to belabor my life. How sinister is that? As Dr. Burhan spoke, I decided in less than a nanosecond that I wasn’t going to tell anyone about my condition and that I was heading south of the border to find a natural cure, beat the odds, and travel to the end of the world.

That very day I dropped everything I was doing, all my household chores and work tasks, and began preparing for this trip. I quit my parttime job, stopped my volunteer work, and started

stashing away new clothes and supplies while cramming Spanish into my head by reading through *revistas*, watching *telenovelas*, and listening to Latino radio stations. I intend to enroll in Spanish language schools in the countries along the Pan-American Highway. Otherwise, I have no set plans except to enjoy my life and keep unpleasant thoughts far away like distant boats heading out to sea.

“From now on I’m Mariella Prichard!” I declare aloud as if to the cars passing by on the interstate. I decide to use the last name I was born with although I don’t particularly like my childhood in Mesa during the time of Wallace and Ladmo bags, Don Bolles, Barry Goldwater, and Cesar Chavez. At 35, I still have complaints about my working-class Baptists parents who were so unlike Steve’s Unitarian parents from Boston. *What was it like to have a stockbroker dad and a mother who didn’t need to work?* I’ve often asked myself. My poor father had to read electric meters to keep our family afloat. We had nothing extravagant. My mother had to work as a waitress until she became ill. And my parents didn’t push me through school like Steve’s parent’s pushed him through an elite prep school and then through MIT. Consequently, I ended up being a mediocre student left to find my own way. I had no idea what I was going to do after high school until my counselor gave me some practical advice. “Train as a bookkeeper,” Mrs. Balch suggested. And I did. But an associate’s degree in bookkeeping from Mesa Community College is as far as I’ll ever go. Had my parents been more like Steve’s I might have become an archaeologist following in the footsteps of Stephens and Catherwood, Hiram Bingham, and explorer Johan Reinhard who writes about the frozen Inca mummies in National Geographic Magazines.

But I must stop blaming my parents for a crappy start in life and move on south of the border. This journey is a notion I’ve had since the sixth grade when I wrote a report about the

Incas. My report centered on a picture from National Geographic of a mummified Inca boy found in the Andes Mountains. The fate of that child frozen in time, mystified me. I wondered how he had felt before he succumbed to the harsh elements. Did he slowly freeze to death? Did he feel honored that the Inca king chose him as a sacrifice to their gods? Or was he as afraid as I sometimes am because nobody really knows what lies beyond this life? All those years ago I thought about traveling to the countries south of Arizona but life kept me stuck in Phoenix. Until now.

This morning, after Steve left for Intel and I dropped the kids off at school, I took off. It seemed the right moment to launch my journey. I grabbed a few personal items and kept my wedding and engagement rings to minimize clues about my disappearance. Except for my jadeite necklace which I couldn't part with, I left everything behind that might declare that I had planned my departure. *Am I not the clever one?* I think to myself. *My disappearance is mysterious like my life will now become.* In a way, I feel like I've just committed a murder, cleaned up the scene, and fled. There's no turning back because I've executed the unthinkable crime. But that's not quite true. I could turn back if I wanted to. I could call Steve and say I needed a break. That's all. He would understand. He's a very compassionate man, a Unitarian, another reason he drew me into his fold.

For six years I've cared for Steve and his children as if they were my own. Now it's Steve's turn to protect Kevin and Kristen from the harsh realities of life. *Mommy's gone away. New mommy or old mommy?* I can hear the kids asking. I turn up the radio to drown out my troubling thoughts about my step-kids.

I stop in Nogales and buy Mexican auto insurance. I don't want some Mexican cop to pull me over and toss me in jail before I even get started on this journey. Then I drive to the

border crossing. Back in Ahwatukee I didn't have time to work out every detail of my trip, such as getting a passport, a visa, or an international driver's license. Fortunately, Mexico doesn't require a passport from Americans. At the crossing, I wait in line until customs inspectors usher me over the border. My appearance and "profile" aren't causing any alarm. "*Welcome to Mexico, Señorita. Bienvenido!*"

My first stop along Highway 15 on the Pan-Am is Playa Algodones, one of many coves in San Carlos, a seaside resort town that attracts American and Canadian snowbirds who want to live in paradise a stone's throw away from the U.S. Last Christmas, Steve, the kids, and I had vacationed here at the Howard Johnson's, the only resort hotel at Playa Algodones. I had loved the calm bay with its offshore fishing vessels and islands, the tan coastline with pebbles and shells, and the dunes edging the beach and providing tourists with a playground for horseback and dune buggy rides. Not that I intend to do either. My plan is to simply relax and catch my breath before the long journey ahead of me. I hope it will be a long one and that I'll make it to Tierra del Fuego fully recovered. This is the first time I've ever ventured away from home alone and plunging into the unfamiliar all at once is daunting.

Typically, Steve, the kids, and I spend our Christmas vacations in California where the kids enjoy Disneyland and we stay in a two-bedroom suite at a luxury hotel. Really, for Steve vacation is Intel. He works very hard and his reviews are always "exceeds expectations." Intel is his life force, I quickly learned soon after we married. I also learned that people admire Steve and assume he's full of information about everything because he's an Intel engineer with an MIT degree.

No one looks up to me in that way. No one ever has and I doubt they ever will. Friends, family, society, people, everyone says to me, "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 Kristin's antics and capabilities but then someone would inevitably say something like, "By the way, Steve, what do you think about Clinton and Gore? About NAFTA? The Middle East Peace Accords?" Not being taken as seriously as Steve bothered me but I can't change everyone's perceptions and prejudices. Besides, people are right. Steve is the acute one in our marriage who holds all the cards and manages the finances. I'm merely a parttime bookkeeper with an associate's degree who works from home.

But it was me who pushed for Christmas in Mexico. I thought it would finally be my opportunity to venture south of the border. I found ads in the Arizona Republic about San Carlos and suggested to Steve that we vacation in Mexico instead of Disneyland. At first, he was reluctant to cross the border but he and the kids grew to like the idea so I organized the trip and got literature from AAA.

As I now drive into Mexico, for the second time in my life, I remember how that Christmas vacation turned into a complete disaster. First off, when we were walking along the surf the evening we arrived, a man-of-war miraculously stung my foot. It was so painful I required treatment at the hotel. Then Steve and the kids kept messing up the sink. *And why does Steve depend on me to organize his luggage? Clean up after everyone?* It isn't my responsibility to remember his bathing suit. To top everything off, when we were driving through Hermosillo on an afternoon trip, Steve flipped off a Mexican driver in front of the kids and the enraged 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. That was when the resentment started. I knew I would never have kids of my own as long as I stayed with Steve. The dreadful truth is that now I will never have children unless I find a cure.

By the time I check in and head to the beach, it's nearly dusk. In the salty breeze, I sit on the wet sand and watch the sun touch Isla Venado in the northwest. As the horizon turns orange-yellow, fish are jumping for insects, terns are chasing the waves splashing ashore, and pelicans are flying high above the sea. My thoughts wander to the places I might go. I plan to stay in San Carlos a while to rest and gain the courage to continue my long journey. It takes nerve to leave everything behind—a husband, children, and friends. A stable and comfortable life in Ahwatukee. But really, I had no choice.

Steve and I were almost always upbeat with each other. We never talked about sad things like the grief we were suffering when we first met. As the Sea of Cortez darkens, I feel certain that Steve never got over his first wife's death. The kids have. They miss their real mommy but their young, burgeoning lives have moved on and I quickly became their new mommy. I didn't leave for Steve's sake. No. I left for Kevin and Kristen. For my dad. I wanted to spare them from watching my illness progress. As for Steve, it was time to leave him anyway.

Before Steve proposed he told me about his vasectomy and apologized that he couldn't offer me kids of my own. But I decided that it was all right. At the time, all I wanted was a good, supportive husband and Steve needed a replacement wife and mother. I wanted a way out of Mesa and a way to help my father financially. It was a plus that I liked Steve's kids and that he was a goodhearted, well-off, and honest man. The instant family seemed a good fit for me.

My thoughts make the sound of waves. I'm now without a family but being alone strengthens me and allows me to choose the mood. And I'm not feeling lonely. Instead, I feel totally free. Happy, it seems. Truly happy.

“How can I be happy?” I say aloud and stand to leave the beach. “When I’m about to die?”

I return to the resort and catch a taxi into town instead of driving the Explorer because I anticipate having a few drinks and encountering a little romance. The taxi drops me off at Mariscos Restaurante which is perched on a bluff overlooking the bay. Inside the front door, a man in an embroidered Charro suit with metallic buttons is playing a large Mexican guitar and singing *Cielito Lindo*. At a side entry, men are carrying buckets of shrimp and lobsters into the kitchen from an old blue Chevy. The bamboo walls have fishing nets, floats, starfish, and shells. Retired gringo residents, tourists, and local Mexicans are seated at nearly every wooden table inside and out on a veranda. The aroma of grilled seafood wafts from the kitchen.

Clad in jeans, a V-neck tee, and my jadeite necklace, I look around the restaurant for an empty table. I’m feeling a bit self-conscious and I’m not used to feeling this way. It seems like everyone is watching me not because I’m an attractive woman but because I am alone.

The friendly owner shows me to a table in the far corner of the veranda which has a view of the surf. His nametag reads “Hector Sanchez” and his flirtatious smile puts me at ease. “You like San Carlos?” he asks in tourist English.

“I was here for Christmas. Don't you remember me? I was with my husband and two kids.”

“I can’t imagine forgetting you. Welcome back! *Bienvenido*.”

I order the house specialty—shrimp *sarandeados*. Dieting is a thing of the past, I tell myself, tossed out the window with a lot of things! Like Steve and a suburban life in Ahwatukee. For now, my past is all but gone and my future is whatever my present creates for me.

I nibble on the chips and salsa and glance around at the other diners. At the far corner of the veranda, I notice three stylishly dressed women sitting with a suave man in a white long-sleeved shirt with the cuffs rolled a few turns. He has dark hair neatly combed back, a thick mustache, and a square jaw. He's holding a Motorola cell phone close to his ear. Appetizers and dripping Coronas sit before each of them. *The man epitomizes Mexican machismo* I think to myself. Perhaps he's an executive having happy hour with his secretaries.

The suave man catches sight of me. I quickly turn away but then glance back. He keeps eying me. After my marriage to Steve, I learned to ignore flirtatious stares from other men but I suspect the stares had never ceased. I simply stopped noticing everything around me. The man winks and nods. I smile.

Hector places before me the steaming grilled shrimp. It has a sharp garlic and chili aroma. As I'm eating, I keep glimpsing at the executive man, tempting him to look at me again. But he doesn't. *Was I mistaken?* I ask myself. *Am I completely out of touch with men after six years of a vacuous marriage?*

The group of colleagues suddenly stand from their table and head for the exit. One of the women takes notice of me but the man doesn't even nod as he passes my table. I'm disappointed because I felt sure that he and I had somehow connected in front of his lady friends. He at least could have said *hola!* on his way out.

I lean back on the hard chair and summon Hector for another beer. Perhaps I'll invite him back to my room. There's no reason I should ever be alone at night during my venture down the Pan-Am Highway.

"Todo esta bien, Señora?" Hector asks, stirring me from my thoughts.

My Spanish is clumsy and when put on the spot I tend to come up with words from my high school French. “*Ca va bien,*” I say. Hector smiles; he seems charmed by my attempt. But I can’t summon the nerve to ask him for a ride to my hotel, let alone to my bed. All of a sudden, I’m feeling inexperienced and drunk with shyness and cervesas. Perhaps tonight I’m meant to walk alone on the moonlit playa.

As I’m asking Hector for the check, I notice a white Toyota Land Cruiser pull up to the restaurant. It’s the same vehicle the flirtatious man and his female colleagues departed in. The man gets out of the car and enters the cantina. He’s alone as he approaches my table with the stance of a powerful man accustomed to having his way. My imagination soars and I wonder if he’s a Sinaloa drug lord.

“Is this seat taken?” he asks with a deep voice and slight accent. He wears the same white dress shirt, perhaps a fresh one, and he carries his suit jacket over his shoulder. He’s very handsome up close and quite intimidating in a way. He holds the top of the chair beside me and I see that 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 he sits beside me, the stranger offers a firm handshake and introduces himself as Francisco Javier Vasquez. He is looking in my eyes as he speaks, unlike the typical American man who zooms in on my chest. *Am I imagining this?* I ask myself. *Did he return and join me at my table?* Such fantasies left me long ago and were replaced by marriage and children. But now I’m having an awakening at the playa de San Carlos and feeling young and beautiful again.

“I’m Mariella,” I say, a little unsteady. Not that the stranger cares.

With a raised hand, Javier asks Hector for two cervezas. “I noticed how beautiful you are,” he says to me. “And I think to myself *How can such a beautiful señorita be sitting alone?* I had to return because the moon is nearly full tonight. And we can make beautiful love.” He removes a pack of Marlboros from his jacket pocket and offers me one.

“*Gracias*,” I say and decide to resume smoking which I haven’t done since I began dating Steve who grows distressed when someone around him smokes.

The man lights my cigarette with a gold lighter from his jacket pocket. “I was afraid you had already left. But I had to take my sisters home.”

I give him a teasing look. Whether or not he’s telling the truth hardly matters. In fact, the casual way he fabricates his situation makes me feel comfortable. His façade allows me to relax under my own.

He tells me he manages the Sonoran Bank in Guaymas then he compliments me on my necklace of green pearls and we drink and chat about the cities in Mexico.

“You must see Mexico City, Oaxaca, the Yucatan,” Javier says, holding my hand.

I hesitate to mention my goal of traveling to the end of the Americas, even to the end of Mexico. Somehow it doesn’t feel right to speak about the future during such a wonderful present. It’s better to reveal nothing, to live day by day, and to relish each moment I have. I do, however, tell Javier about my drive to San Carlos from Phoenix.

“I want to make love to you,” he reminds me.

I look into his brown eyes sensing his desire. It’s a face I like.

Hector approaches the table and asks if he can call me a taxi despite the presence of my handsome gentleman friend. “I can drive you to your hotel myself,” Hector adds. “If you wait half an hour.”

“*Gracias*, but no thanks.” I grin. “I was planning to walk along the beach in the full moon. *Muy bonito*.”

“Very well,” Hector says somberly. “Can I get you anything else? A flan dessert to go? On the house.”

I feel sorry for Hector. He looks disappointed. But I really do want to walk on the beach or else drive off with Javier, a man I’m growing to like. He’s a fantasy out of Cosmopolitan. He makes me feel sensual while Hector makes me feel merely flattered.

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

“I’ll drive you back to your hotel,” Javier whispers. “And show you the El Mirador viewpoint at night. Your hotel is too far from here. It’s getting late and the beaches in Mexico are never safe for a woman walking alone at night. It’s my pleasure to escort you on a walk along the playa.” He places his hand on my shoulder and makes me tingle.

“And then what?” I tease.

“Only as you like, Señorita Mariella. I’m here to please you.”

Javier pays my bill and we head for the front entry. He tips the guitar player on the way out.

Javier’s SUV smells of new leather, like my Explorer, as we drive off to view the city lights along the bay. He pulls into the viewpoint where the full moon—*la luna llena*—is shimmering on the dark sea. He doesn’t kiss me or even draw me near as 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.

I lean on his shoulder and make the first move. I can’t help it. I’m nearly passed out and drunk with passion. I’ve never felt this way with Steve. He was shy around me, almost to the point of embarrassment about his sexual needs. Sex between us was rare and quick. At first, it

hadn't mattered. It seemed like a reprieve from the lustful men I had previously known. What was it that 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 firmly takes my hand and leads me beyond the swimming pool and nasturtium gardens. His suit jacket covers my shoulders in the chill of the night. Like a gentleman, he helps me down the steps to the beach and in the fresh, warm, salty air, before the clashing surf, he places his jacket on the sand and helps me sit because I am quite tipsy. He doesn't care if his jacket is ruined. I'm sure he has many and can afford a new one.

"Listen to the sea and dream about the magic of love," Javier whispers and I hear the splashing waves and crickets chirping like fiddles from the grassy sandbanks. I look at the western horizon of the dark seashore and see Orion and his dogs locked in their starry world of night. Unlike me, I think. I am free, whimsical, and unleashed.

Javier untangles my jadeite necklace from my hair, unclasps it, and places it in my purse like a considerate gentleman. Like Steve was most of the time.

Everything clatters around me, including my thoughts. I wish Javier had been my first lover instead of arrogant and clumsy Cliff Turner in the backseat of his father's Duster. After I turned 16 and became endowed, boys wanted to have sex with me or at least to feel me up and I finally gave in to Cliff because he was a quarterback on the varsity football team at Mesa High. But my first experience had been painful, fast, and I had faced learning about sex alone because of a bad experience when I was ten. Mom and Dad had humiliated me over something that had been so innocent. I was sitting on the toilet and my six-year-old sister Shirley had been sitting on the bathtub across from me. We were just talking when my father happened along and

completely misconstrued what he saw. He told my mother that I was showing Shirley how to play with herself then mother sat me down and asked if this was true. My parents even asked Shirley about the incident and the whole thing evolved into a monster. Although I remained cordial with Mom and Dad, I never talked to them about sex or boys. The subject became taboo between us and the sham experience with Cliff disgusted me and I held off on having another sexual experience until after I got through high school. But I learned that I could choose to be either sexy or aloof. Tonight, I chose to be sexy and now I'm very glad about that choice.

"You have beautiful eyes," Javier says as he kisses me and reaches under my blouse to touch my back. His touch is warm and comforting, unlike that of Cliff or Steve or a mere stranger, although that's who Javier is. I know nothing about his work, his life, his family, or whether he really is a Sinaloa drug lord.

"Are all Mexican men so macho?" I ask after the kiss ends and I catch my breath and a warm breeze from the sea tussle my hair. Or am I feeling flushed and that is making me warm?

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

He helps me lie back on the jacket, we embrace and make love as I listen to the splashing surf and realize that I love men and what they can offer me, especially considering I had a terrible first experience and then a passionless marriage for six years. A passionless life.

Before I know what has happened, Javier is waking me and saying, "It's one a.m. and I must go. But I want to see you later." He kisses me and leaves me on his jacket. I fall back asleep until sunlight begins breaking over the sand dunes and seabirds are cawing. I stagger to my hotel room, exhausted and terribly hung over.

Later that day, Javier finds me sunbathing on the beach and reading the January issue of the *New Yorker* featuring Hubble's stunning pictures of the Pillars of Creation. He takes me to

lunch at the San Carlos Grill by the marina in town then he moves me into a hotel suite at Howard Johnson's and we make love. He leaves but comes back at ten o'clock that night and stays until one.

By the end of the week, while I'm lying on my beach towel and staring at afternoon clouds tumbling inland from the sea, I suddenly tire of the situation with Javier and decide that recreational sex isn't all that. I have nothing to say to him anyway 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. I return to my suite and throw together my things, leave the maid a tip, and drive off toward Guaymas without even bothering to check out of the hotel. Javier had paid for my week's lodging anyway. He insisted. He was even ready to rent me an apartment near the beach—a ridiculous notion.



Chapter 3: Spring Break in Mazatlán

March 4, 1996

Muriel

Under gray clouds, I drive away from Howard Johnson's and head for Guaymas, about fifteen miles southeast of San Carlos. On Mexican Highway 15, lumbering trucks and a few old Chevys pass by me. Occasionally, I pass tour buses and beat-up sedans. The Sonoran landscape is vast with saguaros and scrub brush on rocky hills; it reminds me of the drive between Phoenix and Tucson, except for the clumps of organ pipe cacti.

A thought suddenly occurs to me as I drive along. I had betrayed Steve the night I took Francisco Javier as my lover. Or did Francisco take me? It was mutual. At the time, the complexity of the act simply hadn't occurred to me and I'm trying not to rehash my decision to leave Steve. I'm living day to day, hour to hour, really, and I just don't have the time to care about the consequences of what I am doing, whether it's right or wrong, or if I should feel guilty or remorseful. Anyway, my marriage of convenience was already over. Perhaps it had been from its beginning.

Guaymas

I've read that when the Spanish ships first arrived in Guaymas Bay, Yaqui tribes were living in the area. About 1900, the government rounded up the Yaqui people and sold them into slavery, shipped them off to San Blas, or sent them on a march to die. Subsequent wars between the Mexicans and Yaquis occurred and many Yaquis migrated to the southwest US. I had been volunteering to deliver food to the poor Yaqui people in Guadalupe, a little pueblo north of Ahwatukee with Catholic churches and shamans who make *kachina* dolls. After I learned about my condition, I considered visiting a Yaqui shaman in Guadalupe 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 is a sizable city, but it doesn't bear the charm of Hermosillo. It's fairly rundown, in fact, with boys on the streets eager to wash my car windows or juggle beanbags for a small price. Beat-up VW bugs, small Japanese cars, old Thunderbirds, Chryslers, Chevrolets, and lots of old Ford pick-up trucks bustle down the avenues and lanes.

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 but I'd hate to run into him when I left so abruptly and without any note. Down another side street, I pull into a park called the July 15 Plaza, where mostly Yaquis and Mexican caballeros are sitting on green park benches under palm trees and loudly telling stories to one another. One caballero sits by himself, singing aloud, like the sparrows in the surrounding trees. An old gringo is sprawled out on one of the benches, apparently sleeping off his drunkenness. In the center of the park stands a white gazebo where a mother watches her two little girls play on the steps with their dolls. It looks like a fairly safe place to park my Explorer, I surmise—a family park out in the open. No boys around. Besides, an 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 of cut-up coconut, pineapple, and watermelon.

I walk to an American Express, exchange dollars for pesos, and convert nine thousand dollars into traveler's checks to be safe. If I lose my twenty thousand dollars in cash, I'll have nothing but credit cards and once I start using those Steve will track me down even though I had arranged for the bills to go to a box at Mail or More. I had considered using Betsy's address but I didn't want to involve her in what I was doing and tell her about my condition. I didn't want to tell anyone; I just wanted to get going and be on my own.

By the time I finish my business at the bank, rain is pouring onto the busy streets. Along with half a dozen other unprepared pedestrians, I wait at the entry vestibule and hope the rain will soon stop. But it doesn't and I figure that 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 safely sleep in the car. I had simply left San Carlos too late to get very far and 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 into the windows.

"Stop!" I yell through the dark rain.

Ignoring my shouts, the boys remain at the Explorer. They're soaked and don't seem to care. It's part of their daring mischief. They try to open the door to the passenger side where my ThinkPad lies hidden under newspapers. The alarm goes off but the boys merely giggle, undeterred.

From nearby, the gringo who had been sprawled out on a park bench suddenly appears out of rain. He wears a Padres baseball cap and has a long, drenched braid hanging down his back like a wiggling gray snake. He begins flogging the boys with his closed umbrella as his long gray beard drapes over a soaked SDSU T-shirt. The boys laugh at him as they dash away, gesturing wildly and yelling, "*Viejo gringo, hijo de puta!!!*"

When I reach the man now standing by the Explorer, I turn off the alarm with my fob and say "*Gracias*." In Phoenix, he would be a derelict living on Van Buren. Here, he's probably an old expat beach bum. An old hippie alcoholic who smokes weed.

The park is nearly empty now because of the rain and approaching darkness. The gringo must have been sheltering in the gazebo, along with a few other caballeros who now stand passively watching the incident at my Explorer.

"They're local thieves," the gruff old man says. He 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 the umbrella over my head to shield me as I enter the driver's seat. "Had a nice rig myself once," he says, holding the door ajar so I can hear him. "Got stolen in Mazatlán few years back."

I gaze at the 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 man interested only in my chest and ass! "Thanks again, mister." I smile.

"Name's Jack Senna, but for thirty years folks have been calling me Moby Jack. I once owned a sailboat in San Diego."

"All right, Moby Jack. Can I buy you some coffee or something to eat? I mean, I really appreciate what you did for me." I imagine he's scraping by down here in Mexico, or perhaps he's living off a merchant marine's pension.

"Well, thank you, ma'am, but 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. I suggest we go to the Los Barcos steak bar across from the shipyard. It has great seafood and steaks.

"Hop in," I say, unlocking the passenger side. I'm ravenously hungry myself, 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 and turquoise chairs carved with parrots and 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 Moby Jack a pack of Mexican brand cigarettes. It appears he has very little money and I'm feeling increasingly sorry for the old gentleman. I'm a compassionate person, perhaps to a fault, Steve and a few other people told me this.

Moby Jack and I both smoke and I find tobacco harsh, like a cigar. But I like it and I like Moby Jack. Perhaps this is what I've really been needing to keep from thinking about my predicament—a little harshness and a crusty old barnacle of a man to take my mind off the reality of what's happened to me and what I've done—abandoned my father, husband, and stepchildren.

After rabidly guzzling his beer and a shot of tequila, Moby Jack tells me he was born in 1938 and that he, his older sister, and mother lived with his mother's parents while his dad fought in the South Pacific. "My father's wartime adventures on the Pacific inspired my love for the sea," Jack adds, pauses a moment for another shot of tequila, then asks, "How about yourself?"

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

"I hate to spoil your plans, young miss," Moby Jack says, setting aside his shot glass of Tequilla. "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 Darian Gap? I want to blaze a trail on Earth from Ahwatukee to Tierra del Fuego."

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

“Positive, ma’am.”

I ask Moby Jack to call me Mariella but he seems unable to call me anything but ma’am. It makes me feel older than I am. But I don’t bother correcting him because now I’m too concerned about what he’s telling me. “I could have sworn the Pan-Am was a direct route from Prudhoe Bay to the tip of South America,” I say.

“Nope, ma’am,” Moby Jack says. He 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 off the 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*. I ask him about his situation. He claims that he took a bus from Tijuana to San Carlos about a month before to check out real-estate opportunities. He had come to Guaymas last Wednesday to pick up money wired from his oldest son, Jack Jr., who manages his pension and social security funds. “Some thief stole all my money from my pants pocket while I was sleeping in the plaza.” He takes a drink and adds, “A park bench is a convenient place for a *siesta*.”

“That’s terrible,” I say, picturing him in a drunken stupor on the park bench while 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 to it, I could accompany you as far as San Jose and watch your car along the way. Sleep outside it at night. With a rig like yours, believe me, you’ll never make it past Mexico City. Nicaragua, especially. And there’s still a lot of trouble in Chiapas, with the Zapatistas demanding their land. I won’t get in your way,” Moby Jack adds, as if detecting my thoughts.

I seriously consider the idea but am not sure about having this needy and 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, and I don’t want to adopt Moby Jack and lavish him with cash for alcohol and food. He would most likely be a burden to me 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 has put a curse on me and that someone is most likely God! On the other hand, although I’ve vowed to no longer fear anything, I still feel apprehensive about heading off by myself. “I’ve heard that the beaches in Costa Rica are magnificent,” I say. “And that there are lots of language schools.”

“That’s Costa Rica, ma’am. I’m hoping to visit an old college chum in San Jose. His name is Arturo Barrantes and he teaches astronomy at the University of Costa Rica. He’s a stellar man,” he jests. “My son sent word that Arturo was visiting SDSU and had tried to look me up. During our college years in the sixties, Arturo and I surfed together and worked as summer hires as crew hands on yachts.”

I nod and encourage Moby Jack to tell me more. He takes my mind off my own situation.

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

I suspect she left him because of his drinking, but I don't comment.

"I was a successful man," Moby Jack suggests with a slobbery grin.

"What happened?" I ask, knowing it's his alcoholism but wondering what caused him to drink.

"I 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?" I ask, thinking of 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 how Moby Jack's wife felt.

"Honeywell gave me early retirement, which I grabbed. And that's when I took off. That's the money my son sends me. Got no bills otherwise, only taxes, and Jack Jr. handles that as well. Least, 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've always wanted to see more of Costa Rica, 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 me more money, I'll help with the gas."

After another swallow of Modelo, I begin to warm up to the idea of having a traveling companion but I don't want to eagerly commit to anything, remembering my father's advice not to make rash decisions. *It's my own personal journey and only I can plot it out*, I think to myself.

Still, I like this crusty old barnacle. He seems to have a harmless curiosity and 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, rust, and barnacles, he's a man as smart as my engineer husband. But he's deteriorated and now talks with a slur. He drinks to live, or lives to drink, and I doubt that he really 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 I want to see . . . I don't know . . . maybe Acapulco. I'm hoping to find a *curandero* who can put me on a health regimen. You know, rejuvenation and all that." I don't tell him about my condition because I don't want to discuss it with anyone, except with a specialist in curing.

"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. The beaches there 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. As for Acapulco, that town is simply the old hat of a bygone Hollywood era. Way overcrowded now. I'm positive 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.

The two-day drive to Mazatlán along the Pan-Am Highway edging the Sea of Cortez, passes uneventfully. It's not a bad nomadic life. We sleep at roadside campgrounds—Moby Jack, his tequila bottle with him, in the front seat while I sleep in the back. Now and then we stop for cervezas, margaritas, and meals at roadside eateries under rusty canopies. At first, I'm reluctant to order the food at these places; I don't want a case of Montezuma's revenge. But eventually, I

reason that I must start eating in less-than-upscale establishments. Moby Jack does. The Mexicans do. And I have a long way to travel to be too finicky.

For much of the drive Moby Jack talks about himself when he's not napping. I turn down the radio and intently listen to stories that bide the time away. He's a pleasant diversion from thoughts about my past, which he never asks about. He probably senses that I don't care to reveal anything other than I'm on my way to Tierra del Fuego. Once I get there, I don't know what my plans will be.

It's the middle of a blazing hot afternoon when I'm driving down the main street of Mazatlán past shopping malls, banks, restaurants, and grocery stores. College kids are everywhere. Some are riding in the back of Señor Frog's Giftshop trucks which are parading around town. They toot horns, hold up beer bottles, and shout *yahoo!* Signs posted at all the hotels read "*Bienvenido*, spring break crowd!"

"This looks crazy," I say to Moby Jack, waking him from slumber. "Why didn't you tell me it would be like this?"

Moby Jack straightens up, wipes the drool off his mouth, and says, "It shouldn't be too bad at the campground. Mostly retired folks go to Mar Rosa. The college kids hit the major 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 then I follow the signs to Mar Rosa. Cacti and magenta bougainvillea surround a stucco sign that reads *Mar Rosa Trailer Campground. El Playa Bonita*. Fortunately, I don't see a sign welcoming the spring breakers. The campground contains mostly retired snowbirds with pop-up vans or large trailers with a few college kids in tents. All the sites are neatly plotted with

cacti and bougainvillea and have portable barbecues, lawn chairs, and hammocks strung from coconut palms or tall sea oaks.

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

"Well, if it isn't Moby Jack!" A tall young man with a pocked face approaches the Explorer and greets the guard. He's wearing Tevas and cut-offs. His shoulder-length black hair is slicked back in a ponytail. "I was playing frisbee on the beach," the man continues. "I noticed this awesome Explorer aimlessly wandering the campground. I knew it had to be you, Pops."

"Told you I'd catch up one day." Through the opened window, Moby Jack shakes the young man's hand and then gestures to me. "This, Mariella, is my baby boy Eric. But folks have been calling him Lizard since he caught one when he was about ten."

I nod, pay the camp guard for a night's stay in the park and for guarding my car. I then park the Explorer at Lizard's campsite. Without pause, we head to the beach to join Lizard's spring break college friends. The men carry the case of ice-cold cervezas I bought and bottles of Monte Alban mezcal tequila, each with a worm inside.

The temperature is a perfect 80 degrees with a slight cooling breeze off the dazzling sea. People are parasailing toward the three offshore islands. A speedboat splashes down the surf towing a long banana boat carrying students having the time of their lives in the clapping waves. On the long stretch of white sand that slopes into the sea, young gringos are playing football, frisbee, and volleyball. Many young women are sunbathing in slinky bikinis and thongs. A beach vendor is carrying finely carved ironwood armadillos, lions, and marlins to sell to tourists, and an old Mexican woman is selling colorful string bracelets. Eric's wearing a dozen of them on each

wrist. He sits under a beach umbrella beside a woman with brown shoulder-length hair in tiny braids with beads. Her small breasts are bare and sunburned. Eric motions for Moby Jack and me to sit on a blanket under the shade, and he takes a joint from the bare breasted girl. Along with the scent of the reefer, Coppertone coconut oil permeates the air.

Moby Jack sits but I remain standing, feigning to get a better view of the late afternoon seascape. In truth, I'm feeling ill at ease amid this group of youthful, scatter-minded 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. I don't want my life to turn out pathetic. Or stupid. Which is why I'm on this adventure along the Pan-American Highway.

Moby Jack nods to the woman and says, "This is Eric'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. I detect a slight smile on the woman's face, but I can't be sure. It might be a shadow. Lizard explains that he and Ashley skipped a semester at USD so they could drive to Puerto Vallarta and surf along the coastline. "We got bored with classes and needed a break." He glares at me and says, "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 gets comfortable by propping his head on a log of driftwood, like a cowboy on his saddle or an old sea salt on his barrel of whiskey. "And she's spoiled rotten," Moby Jack continues. "But so is Lizard. That's why they're perfect for each other. I spoiled my kids with too much play money." Lizard and Cinnamon pay him no mind.

A barefoot Mexican boy in loose white trousers approaches us 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 says, slyly concealing the joint.

"He's been here three times today." Cinnamon suddenly rises, leans on her elbows, and squints at me. "I ought to buy the poor thing and let it go."

"He'd catch it again," Moby Jack suggests. His shirt is off now, revealing a chest of gray hair. He's already downed a fourth of a bottle of mezcal tequila. "Sit, Mariella." Moby Jack playfully motions me beside him.

I sit, but I 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 just plain weird. But I drink a cold Pacifico and try to relax so I can clearly decide whether to stay with this group of beach-bum hippies. 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.

"We could rest here, just for the night," Moby Jack suggests. It seems he senses my concern. "Then head straight to Costa Rica in the morning."

"Costa Rica?" Lizard exclaims. He turns to me and adds, "What's this old fool been telling you?"

"I told her about Arturo," Moby Jack says.

"Barrantes?" Lizard asks, then takes a heavy hit on the joint, sucking it in as if he's buried high in the Andes and desperate for air.

"None other. I thought I'd take him up on his invite. Got a problem with that, Son?" Moby Jack suddenly rises and playfully wrestles with Lizard, kicking sand onto me in the

process. I brush it off and look down the beach, trying to ignore them. When I look back, Lizard's releasing the older man from a neckhold. He then relights 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 merely shrugs and passes the joint to his father. Moby Jack sucks it in deeply and then holds it out for me. "Don't worry," he says after he releases a puff of smoke. "People are cool around here as long as we're cool. It's a good bud. Will help you relax."

I sit back and look at Moby Jack. I haven't smoked pot since before I married. Steve never even smoked a cigarette, let alone pot, and I'd never smoke marijuana around him, even given the opportunity. But now, I'm suddenly feeling a bit daring, and I take a hit, although not as deeply as Lizard or Moby Jack.

Ashley sits up and asks me, "So, 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, stabilizing. I loosen the buttons of my blouse and even consider sunbathing bare breasted. *Wouldn't that draw attention?* I think, then look at Cinnamon, who seems to be waiting for my response. She's still looking at me. "I'm from Arizona, Darling," I tell her.

Later that day, when the sun nears the horizon north of the offshore islands and beneath wispy clouds, and seagulls and pelicans soar across the reddening sky, the frisbee players join Lizard and Cinnamon at their beach fire. Everyone silently watches the sun sink into the sea.

“Hey,” Lizard says, breaking the quiet moment. “Why don’t we all pile into that Explorer of yours and drive to Playa Sabalo and go skinny dipping under the stars?” He pinches his girlfriend’s slender thighs.

“I don’t know about that,” I respond. “How many people are we talking about? Seven?” No one answers, and I let the question slip away, hoping Lizard is too wasted to remember his idiotic idea. But he does remember, and within ten minutes, I’m pushing aside my luggage and books in the back of the Explorer, and six spring break revelers pile inside with blankets, sleeping bags, alcohol, and food.

By this time, I’m in a more cheerful mood, prodded on by the liquor, pot, and everyone’s boisterous songs and humor. 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. Obviously, I’m the most responsible member of this little party. Maybe I even feel like I must watch out for everyone else. As if the responsibility has somehow fallen onto me. I might be carefree on my Pan-Am journey, but I’m not irresponsible. I’m not a hippie. At least not yet.

When we arrive at the secluded Playa Sabalo, it’s dark, and no one else seems to be around. The sandy cove is quiet except for the murmuring sea and the boisterous noise of our little party. The men quickly gather driftwood and build a beach fire, while Cinnamon and I set out snacks and cold chicken for dinner. Then I help gather wood using a flashlight. 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 my own words because I can barely manage whatever else is going on in my mind, body, and soul.

“That’ll do it,” he says as he takes my hand in his.

A shift suddenly occurs in my head, and I no longer have any interest in Moby Jack. I no longer care to know him personally. The old barnacle is a remote Steinbeck character adrift on the Cortez Sea, and he has become tiresome. I find no attraction to the man holding my hand now, 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 am I doing?* Moby Jack now begins to disgust me, and I want out of this situation. *But I can't just take off in the Explorer and leave all these revelers stranded, can I?* I ask myself as I release Moby Jack's grip and walk to the surf for solitude. I wade until the water is up to my calves while trying to recall, in the haze of my mind, where I'm headed and what I'm doing.

I think about the National Geographic 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 rediscovered and placed in a museum in Chile. Sometimes, I want to be that child. Left alone. Frozen in time on top of the world. I gaze at the dark clashing waves, hear voices from behind me on the beach, and continue walking in the surf while 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, with or without the old sea salt. More likely without him.

The shouts of men and the shrill of a woman's scream grab my attention. Cinnamon, Lizard, and his friends 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 him 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, which Moby Jack throws ashore. He 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 swim out to the higher waves in the surf, following Moby Jack, who holds up his tequila bottle and shouts nonsense while he’s wading. 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.

Moby Jack tosses his tequila bottle to Lizard, who tosses it to one of his friends. When they tire of that game, Moby Jack teases me and pulls me around him in a dance. The moonlight catches his smiling, bearded face, his missing tooth. But I’m delighted with his blissful play, as if I’m in love with this old barnacle, this man who awakens sensations that pulsate throughout my body. He’s a companion and nothing more until or unless 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 respond to me like a well-conducted symphony. He must have learned from someone that to truly be with a woman means to love her when she aches for unconditional love and then to fade into the background until she desires him 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, and I know I'm as drunk in the seawater as he is. Then, without warning, a tremendous wave splashes over my head and knocks me down and out of Moby Jack's hold. I struggle back up, gulping the salty water, and then 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 I know it's Moby Jack from the feel of his long seaweed beard against my neck. Giggling, I sit back on his lap, surprised by his tantalizing touch. I playfully free myself and then shove him back in the water.

"Are you having fun, Mariella?" he teases, smiling at me with his beard dripping wet and his long gray braid dangling over his shoulder.

I begin laughing, and Moby Jack pulls me against his body. He feels strong. He has snared me into the moment. At first, he kisses me like a friend, and then his bristly lips probe my neck and face, as if I might go away at any moment.

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

"I'm afraid I won't be much good to you," 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 for more delightful surprises in a thriving sea of waves.

In the moonlight shining over the sea, Moby Jack leads me to the shore and to the blazing bonfire. Lizard and the others are already there, 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 away from the bonfire and from 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 Moby Jack puffs on the joint, I sit comfortably beside him and stroke his naked 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 reasonability.*

"I can't tell you how young you make me feel," Moby Jack whispers in my ear as he holds my naked body against his. His bristles find my neck again. "You're the young feathered maiden of fertility and precious flowers. Xochuquetzel."

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

"This is fun," I whisper to Moby Jack. "But I'm not sure I care for these young spring break drifters of yours. To be honest, they bother me, especially that 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 mezcal tequila and suggests that we "fiesta" in Mazatlán tonight and take off tomorrow morning. "But for now," he adds, "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, as quarterback Clifford wanted me to fuck the entire football team in front of him. *No.* Moby Jack has already told me that he's impotent. *And he just can't be that big of a clown, no matter how drunk or wasted he is.* To my relief, Moby Jack has become lost in his beach

party, in his drinking, smoking, and discussions with the spring breakers, while I, his quetzal flower maiden, am sitting at his side.

I lie down on the blanket, rest my head on Moby Jack's leg, and gaze at the moonlit Milky Way over the Cortez Sea. A shooting star crosses the sky.

"What's the Aztec name for Milky Way?" I ask, knowing someone in the group must know. From the discussions I've been listening to, it seems that everyone knows the history of Mexico, in addition to astrophysics.

"The God Starshine and the Goddess Star Skirt live on Milky Way Road," Cinnamon answers. "Her name was Citlālicue, great mother of the stars. Her messenger was the hawk. Her lover, Smoking Mirror, was god of the night sky."

"Yeah, man," Lizard remarks. "The Aztecs were trippy people high on hallucinogenic psychedelic drugs like peyote, mushrooms, mescaline, and psilocybin." When everyone stops laughing, he addresses me and says, "Ever done hard drugs, ma'am?"

Oh? So now I'm a ma'am again? I think and reply, "Just pot."

"Then you have no idea whatsoever about the Aztecs," one of the spring break students interjects. "They were permanently on LSD. Even their gods were tripping on hard drugs."

Everyone bursts into laughter, including myself. I'm feeling pleasant and warm as I return to gazing at the night sky. *The moon is high among the Milky Way gods spread across the celestial sphere*, my thoughts tell me. Then, all of a sudden, the constellations change into distorted 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 and sacrifice*, I can't help but think, which is why one god is enough for me. A peace-loving god. *Or is my God as cruel as the Aztec gods?* Since my prognosis, I've been feeling like my god, the god who took my mother

from me, has cursed me to die like a sacrificed victim unless I find a cure among the folk remedies of the Americas. This is my smidgen of hope for surviving long enough to make it to the end of the world.

“I’ll take Jesus over Huitzilopochtli any day,” I declare. My words are slurred but lucid.

Lizard sprays out mezcal in laughter. When the amusement dies down, a student stokes the fire. Moby Jack and Cinnamon discuss stellar dynamics as an offshoot of the Aztec gods, and I begin to fall asleep. The faces of my dying mom, my elderly dad, and my stepchildren begin to replace the abstract dancing figures in the stars. Family is the last thing I want to remember, so I sleepily turn my attention to Moby Jack and stroke his hand that’s resting across my shoulders. He breaks from his discussion and bends down to kiss my brow tenderly.

Suddenly, out of the darkness, someone shouts, “*Manos, Arriba!*”

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

A flashlight shines on my face as the voice of a Mexican man shouts, “*Su dinero, gringos!*”

The flashlight shines on Lizard’s face as three Mexican intruders hover at the fire. One has a gun pointed at Lizard’s friend. They look like teenage boys.

Moby Jack motions me to keep still as the bandits shuffle through the bags around the fire. Everyone sits frozen in place. Two of Lizard’s friends are still naked, which amuses the robbers. They take watches, wallets, and Lizard’s camera, which he had brought to take night shots of everyone skinny dipping, although he had forgotten to do so.

“Let me at least get my film,” Lizard says as the bandit grabs his SLR camera. “*Mi filmo.*”

“Shut up, gringo!” a bandit yells, pointing his gun at Lizard’s mouth.

“Do as they say, Boy,” Moby Jack admonishes. “They mean business.” He’s sitting up, tightly holding me.

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

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

“You sleep with your daughter, *Viejo*?” The bandits burst into laughter, as if they, too, are high on toxicants.

“Gringos are *muy loco*,” another says.

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, *I have no fear. I’m going to die anyway*. I stare at the man, daring him to continue. After a moment, the intensity of my stare seems to force the young bandit to stop taunting me and return to the robbery. He grabs my bag defiantly. Fortunately, I have very little money inside because I’m keeping most of my cash and traveler’s checks hidden under the front carpet of the Explorer.

“What’s this?” he says as he finds my keys.

Moby Jack, Lizard, and all his friends remain seated, speechless. Then, to everyone’s astonishment, including my own, I stand and say, “They’re keys to that Explorer up there.” 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 Mexican asks.

“I said, give him back the film.” I firmly stand my ground. I have never felt so bold. So brave. 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 and approaches me, trying to frighten me. "*Que dijo?*"

"Mariella, stop it!" Lizard implores. "I don't want the film. Really."

"Sweetheart," Moby Jack says, standing and taking hold of my hand to pull me back down beside him. "Please. Let's not fool around here."

"Sit down, *Viejo!*" one bandit yells, and Moby Jack stoops back down.

"No, it's all right." I peer at Moby Jack sympathetically. "These fools are just boys."

"You, *Puto!* Sit down!" the man with the gun shouts in anger.

I detect his growing anxiety over my resistance. And I don't care because *it doesn't matter*. I'm high. I saw the Aztec gods among the stars. And I can wait for the bandits to give up or shoot me. What happens will happen.

"I said, sit down!" He runs the gun under my chin, poking my neck.

"No." I gaze at him with the same challenging dare. *He's nervous, an amateur. He's frightened of a situation that's out of his control.* I see it in his eyes. "How many times have you done this?" I ask.

"Stop, Mariella," Moby Jack pleads.

"I don't want the film," Lizard insists.

"Girl, back off," Cinnamon finally speaks out, along with the other college kids. Everyone's begging me to sit down.

"No! I won't!" I say, as if I have no control over my words. They just fall from my tongue like a shooting star coming from nowhere in the darkness.

The bandit stares at me, trying to force me to surrender, but then he backs away. His companion, who holds up my keys like a trophy, accidentally presses the red "panic" button on

the keypad. Immediately, the Explorer repeatedly honks, the headlights flash, and the alarm wails. This terrifies the bandits, who seem to think that the *policia* have arrived. They dash down the beach, dropping my keys and most everything else they've robbed along the way.

As the horn is still blaring, I gather my keys, feeling exhilarated. The robbery was, without a doubt, the single most invigorating 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.* 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 found my cure.*

"Are you all right?" Moby Jack asks, reaching me and giving me a hug. But I don't want the hug or the reassurance the old man is offering, so I ease him away. The horn suddenly shuts off.

"Let's get out of here and report this," I urge. "Before they come back."

The others are already gathering their things.

I drive to the Oceano Palace Hotel, where we call the police and report the theft. Then we return to Mar Rosa to get some sleep, even though it's sunrise. Nobody feels sleepy, though, so we sit around the campground 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 says. She stands, declaring she's sleepy enough to lie down in the tent. Lizard follows close behind.

I remain seated for a moment, watching 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 had been. In fact, I've been ignoring him since then, finding him old and staid. Not full of vigor and merriment. *Perhaps Moby Jack thinks it's best now to remain aloof from me 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 guard because 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 engine purrs to a start. I glance over at the camp, seeing that Moby Jack hasn't budged from the palm trunk where he's still sprawled out. 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 4: Sun City West

Steve Tyler

About a week has passed since Muriel went missing ...

My angry tone surprises me because I'm basically a calm, levelheaded person except during heated meetings at Intel. All these details, however, are getting to me. And I have the feeling that the police think something's wrong between Muriel and me. Every time I've called the precinct, they've asked the same questions that imply I'm the reason behind Muriel's disappearance, that I'm a suspect in her abduction.

I park my '95 titanium Taurus GL at the curb of the beige stucco house with an arched verandah and a rustic Spanish tile roof. It stands primly before a yard of white rock and two queen palms encircled by a red brick border. As with every house in the Del Web retirement city, the well-manicured yard is without a single weed, and not a stone is out of place. A sealcoating as clean as the kitchen floor inside even covers the driveway. Sun City West houses are more expensive and established than those in Ahwatukee. The Del Webb retirement and golf club community started in 1978.

As I approach the front door of my parents' house, I haven't felt this helpless since I was a small boy growing up in Buffalo, New York, and my younger brother had fallen from the

schoolyard slide and broken his arm. I could do nothing then but stand there and watch my mother gather up her screaming child. My brother lived in Buffalo until he died of leukemia about ten years ago. He was still a bachelor then, without kids, but he had a good career as a patent attorney. Now, I'm my parents' only child, and we're all living in the Sunbelt, which is a good thing. I need my mother's help now, as I did when Angeline so unexpectedly died.

I ring the doorbell, worried that my parents may be concerned about this unexpected visit during a workday. At their age, I want to be with them when I break the news. They're fond of my second wife and stepmother to their grandchildren. The idea of her disappearance might traumatize them. Mom suffers from high blood pressure, and Dad had a heart attack not too long ago.

When my mother, Bettie Tyler, opens the door and the front screen, her perfume nearly knocks me over. "Steven," she says. She's a small woman of seventy-one with well-styled purplish-gray hair, rouge, and lipstick. "What's going on? Something to do with Muriel? The children?"

I don't answer. Instead, I enter the house and hug her.

My father, Jim Tyler, a bald man of seventy-three, walks down the front entry to greet me. We hug, which isn't something we usually do. Most often, we shake hands, but now Dad seems to know I need a hug. He's a smart man, a retired financier who did quite well for himself.

I'm almost in tears. I feel shaken and disturbed by the events of the past week. By Muriel's unexplained disappearance. For the second time in my life, I must explain to Mom and Dad that something terrible has happened. It nearly overwhelms me. I wish I could spare them the news. But I can't. It's possible they somehow hold clues to Muriel's whereabouts, and if nothing else, I'm going to need Mother's help with the kids once again. I can't keep imposing

my situation on Muriel's friend, Betsy. Why is life treating me this way? I've been asking myself over and over again. Why me, when I've done everything I can to be a good son, a good husband, and a good man?

In the Arizona room at the back of the house, my parents and I sit on the apricot soft suede sofa and armchairs around a large glass coffee table. All the windows and doors are covered with white wooden shutters. At one end of the coffee table stands a tall pink and turquoise feathered kachina doll holding its arms up in a dance. It dominates the room and is crass, I suddenly think. A few months before, I had spent a fortune on the damn thing for my parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary. What had I been thinking? Muriel even suggested that it might be too extreme for a wedding anniversary. But I had convinced myself this was the perfect gift for my parents' Arizona room, and Mom seemed to really love it. But it looks fearsome now and seems to be taunting me with its Hopi spiritual dance. I avoid looking at it.

Dad brings me an icy Amstel beer. I take a drink and then admit that Muriel is missing.

"Missing?" my father exclaims. He sits in the armchair next to his wife. Between them stands another glass table displaying a Time Magazine and three National Geographics about glaciers, penguins, and Neanderthals beside a glass lamp filled with shells.

"Try not to think the worst," I suggest. Mom hands me a box of tissues from the side table. She's astonishingly calm, I notice. Her reaction is quite different from what I expected. After Angeline died, Mom moved in with me until I found a nanny to care for the kids and then met Muriel.

"When did she leave you?" Mom asks.

"She didn't leave me. She's missing. Don't you get it, Mom? Her purse is still on the dresser. Her clothes, luggage, camera, and laptop are untouched at home." I break down and sob

while hating myself for showing such weakness in front of my parents. It's embarrassing.

They've always expected a lot from me, but I'm feeling exactly how I felt when Angeline passed away.

Mom gets up from the armchair, sits beside me on the sofa, and hugs me. "Start from the beginning, Son. You're confusing us. Take a deep breath."

I gather my wits and sober up because my parents aren't reacting as distraughtly as they should be. "Look," I say directly to Mom. "I'm here to see if she said anything to you, left any kind of hint of her whereabouts. You two talk a lot."

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

"Mother," I pull away, stunned by her indifference. "Don't you understand? She could be dead somewhere. Murdered. Raped. Oh God!" I take a deep breath and shake my head. Mom's perfume is suddenly giving me a headache, and I think it's from the Estee Lauder sampler I gave her last Christmas.

"Steve!" my mother exclaims. "Where are the children?"

"With Betsy, our friend. She's offered to take care of them until we find Muriel, or until she comes home." I look at Mom, then at Dad, who's leaning back in his armchair recliner across from me and nibbling from a bowl of mixed nuts. "What did she say to you when you last talked?"

Mom glances at my father. "A couple weeks ago, she 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," I say. "I don't even remember her coming up here. Oh hell, I can't remember anything." I blow my nose on one of Mom's scented tissues.

“It was a rather odd visit, wasn’t it, Jim?” Mom says. “Didn’t I say how odd it was that she dropped by as she did?” Dad says nothing.

“What did she want?” I ask, growing impatient and seeing the kachina doll in my peripheral vision. It seems I can’t avoid it. “Why did she stop by?” I continue doing all I can to concentrate and not let the stupid doll or Mom’s ghastly perfume get the better of me. I’m an engineer at Intel. I know how to focus! “Has she come here before without me and the kids?”

“That was the first time in all the years you’ve been married,” Mom admits, straightening the magazine array on the side table. One of the issues was a smidgen out of place. “She wanted to borrow some of our National Geographics,” Mom continues. “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 excellent condition. Someday, they’ll be worth something.”

“That’s all she wanted?” I look at my 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 me through its frozen dance. All of a sudden, everything looks incredibly tacky, and I feel completely out of place. But this is my parents’ home, and it will all be mine when they pass. Maybe I’m just feeling disgusted and angry with myself. Or with Mother’s lackadaisical behavior. She should be as upset as I am.

“Guess so,” Mom says, drawing my 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 featuring the Aztec, Maya, and Inca civilizations. That’s what she left on the coffee table

when she suddenly got up and said she had to leave. 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 I certainly don’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, Son.”

“This is odd,” I say, ignoring my mother’s concerns. “I have no idea why she would be interested in those cultures. Mother, can I see those issues?”

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

“Mother, get me that magazine.”

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

My dad looks at Mom and then at me. “I’ll go get them,” he says as he gets up and heads to their clean, orderly garage off the kitchen, where the walls are lined with professionally constructed oak shelves harboring keepsake first-edition books and Mom’s sacred Geographic collection.

“Mother, I’m afraid something terrible has happened to Muriel,” I finally admit, hoping to stir a little compassion in her. For my second wife and for my situation.

“I know.” She pats me on the back and then looks at me sternly. “But 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 I can respond to Mom’s offensive comment, my dad returns with the specific issues. I take hold of the magazines and look at my mother, shaking my head. I know I’m visibly upset. “I don’t understand your petty feelings, whatever they are. The woman I love is missing.” Then I get up from the apricot sofa with the magazines in my grip, and I leave the house, knowing Mom will call me tonight and ask about Muriel. Like she’s really concerned. She will behave as though nothing unusual has occurred between us. She’s always been like that, willing to easily forget any upsets between her and anyone in our family. I usually admire her for this, but this time I’m hoping—praying—that Muriel will be safe at home to answer my mother’s call.

A few minutes later, as I’m driving along Bell Road toward the I-17 and thinking about the articles on the Incas, I pull off at a McDonald’s for coffee and to browse through the magazines. But after doing so, I simply can’t think of any reason for Muriel’s interest in such stories. She has never talked about South America or these pre-Columbian cultures. She’s a bookkeeper, not an archaeologist. I can’t remember her showing any interest in the native

cultures of Arizona, except for a few items of her clothing with the flute player or some other Native American motif. But that's merely fashion and style, with an Arizona flare.

No, I keep thinking as I sip my coffee and examine the issues. *I can't connect these magazines to my wife's disappearance, and it's giving me another headache trying to understand, so I give up.* This lead, if it's a lead at all, is too obscure, unless, of course, Muriel plans to travel to Peru. But she has only been to Mexico once before, last Christmas, and it just isn't possible that she's heading off to Peru in the Explorer. Alone. She can't possibly do something that crazy. It's simply incomprehensible.

Besides, I plainly can't accept that Muriel would leave me without a hint or a reason, and my mother's suggestion that my second wife is tricky disgusts me. How can Mom be so insensitive when I'm obviously worried sick? I'll have to scold her when she calls and tell her how poorly she behaved. And won't she be sorry when they find Muriel. The thought of Muriel being found harmed or dead makes me shudder. Still, I can't believe that she would abandon me and the kids. We're so happily married, with such beautiful children and so many great friends. I've always been good to her. I give her gifts and flowers for her birthday, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, or even when there's no special occasion. I tell her how much I love her, although I can't remember the last time I did. God, I hope I kissed her the morning I last saw her. But I suspect that I was in such a rush to get to work early that I hadn't.

I close the magazine and call home on my Nokia 9000 mobile phone, hoping and praying that Muriel will answer the house phone. But I hear only the answering machine. "Please pick up, Sweetheart, if you're there," I say. "I'm sick with worry." No one answers or picks up. I call Betsy. She has no news about Muriel. Then I do something I've never done before. Something almost unthinkable. I call Mom and tell her she's cruel and heartless. Then I hang up.

A terrible thing or some horrible accident has taken Muriel, I finally tell myself. I then get back to my Taurus and head to Desert Samaritan Hospital in Mesa. An accident is the most logical explanation. The cops are too incompetent to look into it. So are the hospital peons I've been talking to on the phone. No, it's certain, I decide. I'll have to find her myself. Muriel didn't just up and leave me. I know that for a fact!



Chapter 5: Spring Equinox at Teotihuacan

March 1996

Muriel

When I first leave Moby Jack, I feel relieved to regain my privacy. But after half a day on the road, I start missing his briny company and even consider returning to Mazatlán, fetching him, and seeing him through on his own journey to Costa Rica. He's probably still slouching against that palm tree. I chuckle to myself and quickly dismiss the idea. There's no turning back—that's my creed. Maybe I'll head to the beach, look for a bar or discotheque, and meet a 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 busy at work.

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. I pass lots of Chevy pickups and old Fords, a few family vans, and even an Explorer or two as new and nice as my own.

As I near the city of Tepic, the cut-off to Puerto Vallarta and Guadalajara, I slow down with the traffic to pass a Primera Plus that has broken down at the side of the road. It straddles the nearly nonexistent shoulder and blocks part of the right lane. Some of the bus 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 there's a 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 the pickup trucks in the gravel near a crude shack with a sign saying “*Baños, dos pesos.*” A small, 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 chemicals, and then sit at a picnic table under a flimsy wooden structure with a palm-frond roof.

The grilled chicken at the eatery shack has an appetizing aroma of chilies and lime, so 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 under the shade 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 is large and brightly accentuates her high cheekbones and gray-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 that they’ve been traveling a while and probably plan to do a lot more. They’re both carrying knapsacks and look strong and hardy for their ages. 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.” A waiter delivers my huge plate of chicken and fries, enough to feed a family of four, and I feel a little stupid. Maybe

gluttonous. “What happened to your bus?” I ask after I take a bite of the pollo asado, which is tender and with the precise amount of smoky lime and mesquite. It’s unlike anything I’ve ever prepared for Steve and the kids, which isn’t really 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 said he did, then why did he insist on bringing home so much takeout?

“Transmission went kaput,” the man says with a nod and 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 be smiling.

“Arizona.”

“You’re not so terribly far from home.” She pauses to take a soda from the waiter and then adds, “We’re from Pennsylvania, a little farther away.” She introduces herself as Martha, and then her husband as Henry. “He’s a 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 friend in Mazatlán is a physicist,” I think to say, and I’m about to add that my husband is an engineer at Intel, but I catch myself. I really don’t want to tell anyone about myself. Then they’ll start asking questions, and it’s nobody’s business but my own.

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

I happily join them and invite them to share my meal. “I don’t know why I ordered a full chicken. I guess because it smells so appetizing and is so cheap.” They laugh. The waiter brings

us extra utensils, and my new friends help themselves to a tender piece 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.*

I learn that they traveled by bus all the way from Temple because the university didn't need Henry to teach this semester. They have also been to Mazatlán, on a different trip. This is their fifth trip to Mexico. The professor, Henry Olby, is originally from Norway, but he and his wife of forty-two years have lived in Pennsylvania for the past thirty years. "I met Henry in Norway," Martha says. "I was an exchange student at his college in Oslo." She tells me they've never had children, which fascinates me, but I don't want to impose my curiosity on them, even though I sense they'll be happy to talk about anything. They're in such harmony with each other that I'm awed.

"That's a beautiful jade necklace," Martha remarks.

"Jadeite," I reply but say nothing more. The details of my life are forever in the past.

Like a gentleman, Henry picks up the conversation and recounts their travel adventures throughout their marriage, generally ending with a humorous twist. "That was back in 1961," he says. "Before you were even born." I'm flattered. In fact, I was born in 1961, but I don't correct him. "We've been all over the world," the professor continues. "Alaska, Siberia, Egypt, Kenya, the Galapagos, Tibet, Indonesia, South Africa, Patagonia, and Tierra del Fuego."

"Tierra del Fuego?" I respond. "That's where I'm headed." My heart flutters. I've never met anyone who's been to the end of the world, and this encounter must be more than mere happenstance. "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. The Beagle Channel gateway to Antarctica.”

“And penguins,” Henry adds. “I’m glad you’re heading there, Arizona. I know you’ll like it.”

I don’t correct him on the name, even though I introduced myself as Mariella. I like being called “Arizona.” It has a nice, almost mystical ring to it—a feeling of being rather unique. 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 them why they never had children. I’m hoping that they will somehow ease my sense of guilt for leaving my husband and kids. Lately, I’ve been missing Kevin and Kristin, something I fight against doing. But as soon as I ask my new friends this personal question, I feel embarrassed. What if it’s a medical condition, such as infertility? Impotency? A vasectomy? Why hadn’t I considered that possibility before blurting out the question? I wonder if my face has reddened.

Martha beams at me, however, and seems to welcome the question with grace. “We made a conscious choice,” she says. “And never had any accidents.”

I’m relieved. The couple made a *conscious choice*, which 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 have any children of my own, which is now a big regret because it may be too late for me to ever have children, unless I find a cure for my disease.

“After we first married,” Henry continues, “we worked for a year on a medical team in Nigeria, an opportunity we embraced even though neither one of us knew anything about the healthcare business. But the Nigerians were desperately looking for volunteers, and my physics degree and her management degree were good enough to help set up a hospital.”

“A powerful experience,” Martha adds. “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, “is that 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. And maybe we were a little selfish too. 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 said.”

I smile, although the discussion isn’t really 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.

After an hour passes, I’m ready to go, but I hesitate to leave Martha and Henry. “Where are you heading?” I ask them. “Obviously, your replacement bus hasn’t arrived.”

“We’re headed to Guadalajara then on to Mexico City for the spring equinox festival at the pyramids of Teotihuacan,” Martha says. Then she and Henry describe the upcoming event as having amazing connections in astronomy, archaeology, and spirituality.

“This will be our third time at the festival,” Henry says. “People from all walks of life gather to invoke ancestor spirits and pray for Earth and for healing.”

“Healing?” I ask.

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

My new friends don’t know about my illness, and it can’t be a mere coincidence that we’ve met. I want to join them at this equinox event in Mexico City. It may be the answer to my prayers. It may be where all the spiritual forces of the world join together and cure my dreaded disease. “I’m heading to Mexico City myself,” I say, deciding my next destination on the spot. Forget about the beaches of Acapulco. It’s time I find a natural, or supernatural, cure. “I’d be happy to give you a lift. That’s my Explorer over there.” I point out my car parked between two old pickup trucks. “I’ve got plenty of room, and I’d love your company.”

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

“Well, as I’ve said, I was with a physicist friend for part of the way. But since Mazatlán, yes, I’ve been alone.”

“No problems with theft?” Martha asks.

“I try to keep it parked either under guard or at least in my sight. Anyway, I’d love the company. Do you have luggage on the bus?”

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

“Just your day packs?” I ask.

“We travel light. Best way. 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?”

“And toilet paper,” Henry quips.

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

“And that beautiful Explorer,” Henry suggests. “Say, are you planning to drive that 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. No problem, my friend told me. 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.”

“Well, I do plan to hook up with a friend in Costa Rica. He’s a physics professor, and I hope he’ll travel with me.” I say this with Moby Jack’s friend in mind. I suddenly feel embarrassed at the grandiosity of my expedition, as if I’m after some sort of record for driving alone, like a headline seeker. I haven’t thought about my journey this way before, and I’m not out to impress anyone or gain attention. But the notion of driving to the tip of South America alone suddenly seems overly ambitious.

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

“But I tell you what,” Henry adds. “I sure wouldn’t mind a ride in that vehicle of yours. I’ll even drive for you if you need a break.”

“Yes, I’d love to take a break from driving,” I say.

“Shall we get going?” Henry asks. “It’s a two-day drive, and we wouldn’t want to miss the event.”

March 20, 1996

At 3:30 a.m. on the morning of the spring equinox, the phone on my nightstand rings, and Henry asks if I'm ready to leave in half an hour. Martha and Henry suggested that 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 assured me. As it turns out, the hotel is a few stars below Howard Johnson's in San Carlos. But it's good to start budgeting, I reason. I really don't know how long I'll need to stretch out my money—whether I'll find a cure and live to a ripe old age, like my new friends, or I'll have only about a year to spend all of it. In any event, I'm happy to be in *la Ciudad de Mexico* and hope to gain travel insights from Henry and Martha. Traveling is new to me, and I'd hate to be by myself exploring this massive city that's an offspring of the Aztecs and conquistadors.

I throw on the white blouse and skirt and red sash that I bought yesterday for the event. Martha helped me select this attire in the Mercado de Artesanias. I also grab my new digital Kodak 240DC Zoom, which I bought near the Zocalo so I could have pictures to go along with my travel memoir.

"You look stunning, Arizona," Henry says when I enter the lobby promptly at four. "Like Juno herself." He's leaning against the counter and appears dapper and academic in his white slacks and cardigan sweater. He holds a cup of coffee from a vendor setup near the hotel for the night construction workers 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 for the cold morning that won't heat up until well after sunrise.

Every moment I spend with Henry and Martha energizes me. They appear to be in love with each other after years of marriage. They hold hands, give many pecks on their lips, finish each other's words, 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, from where they plan to fly back to Pennsylvania in time for the ninetieth birthday party of Martha's father.

Henry drives the Explorer to Teotihuacan, thirty miles northeast of Mexico City. Along the way, he explains how the Aztecs reclaimed the site as their own sacred ceremonial center. "The Aztecs aligned the west face of the sun temple to the Pleiades at its zenith, around Halloween. The rising of the Pleiades announced the beginning of the Aztec new year. According to their lore, the gods created the sun and moon and the giant pyramids. They sacrificed humans to resurrect the sun and moon."

"Sacrifice seems to be a recurring theme in the Americas," I say, thinking about the Inca boy and about my own situation, wondering why I may be sacrificed at only thirty-five if I fail to find a cure. But I'm hoping and praying that this massive event will completely rid me of my terminal condition.

We arrive at the pyramids an hour before sunrise. Vendors are already setting up food and souvenir stalls with colorful ceramic, stone, and plaster Aztec gods, plastic skulls, Aztec calendars, and pyramids. Along the dirt road toward the entrance, flagmen are waving drivers toward the parking lot, which is already half full.

Henry pays the entry fee, and we walk to the Pyramid of the Sun, the focal point of the festivities. Police are directing the crowd up the right stairwell on the west face of the pyramid, leaving the left side exclusively for those coming down, but no one's descending at this point. The pyramid's artificial lights and the emerging light of dawn reveal hundreds of people climbing the stone structure, dressed in white and wearing jackets to keep themselves warm. Thanks to the broad stairwell, they easily climbed to the first tier, then the steep stairs narrow as the crowd inches farther up. People are already at the top when we begin our ascent.

I climb a few steps toward the second tier, and my breath grows short from the high elevation. Perhaps—I worry—from my condition. I become frightened; the crowds of people are smothering me. Their energy is drawing away my own, sucking my breath into the pyramid. By the time I reach the third tier, where people are even more tightly packed, I'm feeling faint. I stop climbing and look down, realizing that descending is a difficult feat because the mob wants to keep ascending. I look around at the faceless people and can't find Martha or Henry. The morass of pilgrims has swallowed them up, as the moon swallows the sun during an eclipse, or else, they're already on top.

I move to the side of the steps and sit. My thoughts drift to Steve for the first time in a long while. I wish he were here with me. He would lead my way. I'm too weak to continue, too weary to fend off thoughts of Steve, 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.

I gaze at the approaching throng of faces determined to reach the top in time to welcome the rising sun and heal Earth. I turn to see how far I must climb. I want to give up, to sit where I am and wait for the sunrise announcing the arrival of spring. But I'm on the wrong side of the pyramid, and I don't want to miss the equinox sun breaking through the horizon. "It will energize your soul," I recall Martha's words and remember that my mother also said something to that effect. About religion. About Christianity. About Jesus. It had affected my outlook on life and death as I planned her cremation and memorial service. It was a terrible time and one reason I married Steve. We were each other's saving grace. But it was only a plutonic arrangement that became tedious after a while. Then, *deus ex machina* stepped in and announced my prognosis.

I look around me. 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. I turn to look up the stone steps to see how crowded it is at the top. In the pre-dawn light, I suddenly notice an older woman's face in the crowd about ten feet away from where I'm sitting. She has stopped among the moving flow of ascending people to look down the pyramid, perhaps to see how far she has climbed. All at once, she peers at me. Her face begins to look familiar. It is similar to my mother's weathered, emaciated forty-five-year-old face. I stare at her and then realize that she's my mother, haunting me! Or is she guiding me to continue my climb to the top? What does this woman want from me? What does she expect me to do? I did all I could. I took care of her, watched her die, and then I saw to my father's needs. *I've been a good daughter. What more do you expect from me, and why are you taunting me now?*

I rub my eyes, and the face disappears. Tears stream down my cheeks. I stand and look for a way out of the flowing river of people. Maybe I can crawl over to the steps designated for going down, and from there, I'll witness the rising sun. But I stand frozen, feeling too frightened to move. Then I begin seeing the faces of my stepchildren in the crowd, and I can't get them out of my mind. They're so young and lovely, so innocent and happy. I've never wanted them to be sad. I don't want anyone to be sad.

The crowd begins chanting, and I envision Inca warriors carrying the Inca boy up the mountain among chanting priests. They're taking him to his place of sacrifice in the Pyramid of the Sun, to die entombed alone.

Did the Incas have death visions? I ask myself. Did my mother have them? Do I? No. I didn't want to view my mother's dead body, so I had her cremated.

"Arizona," I hear from behind me.

"Steve," I say, as a hand gently grasps my arm to steady me.

“Are you all right, darling?” I turn and see Henry standing tall and gallant at my side. “Let me help you,” the dapper old gentleman says. “We can take our time. No hurry. The sun won’t be up for at least half an hour.” He gently and cautiously guides me through the crowd and up the steps, considering each step with me in mind, as if no one else exists. He puts me at ease, but I’m unable to talk because I’m breathless and the chanting and noise around me is almost deafening. My only thought now is to reach the top, see the rising sun, and pray for a cure. And this true gentleman, like a priest who exorcises demons, has vanquished my tormenting thoughts about my past. He’s an angel. *Angels are all around me now, I think, all dressed in white and flowing effortlessly and ethereally skyward. Guiding me to heaven.* It feels glorious all of a sudden.

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

“Who, me?” he says, pointing 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. We talk a few moments, then maneuver to the east edge and slither down the pyramid side until we find an empty place to sit and view the eastern mountains.

On the tier below us, a group of Mexicans dressed as Aztec warriors with feathered headdresses are raising their hands toward the east and dancing in step to men playing drums. All around us, the crowd is chanting in anticipation and waving flags, Milagro folk charms, crosses, votive paintings, pictures of ancestors, Jesus, Mary, and saints. They’re hoping for miracles, and so am I. People are burning incense and wearing red headbands from enterprising vendors scattered among the crowd; some are holding up blue pyramid crystals for empowerment.

Then, all at once, the voices all around begin humming like an electromagnetic energy field. I stand and gaze at the distant mountains that will soon explode with morning light—a sight the Toltecs, the Aztecs, and the mysterious people of Teotihuacan witnessed long ago.

When the sun's about to burst from the horizon, the chanting and humming amplify, and people raise their hands to catch the first rays of spring, the promise for the new year, the healing powers of this astronomical and spiritual union. Following Martha's lead, I outstretch my arms and feel a part of the movement. I'm positive that this vast vortex will cure me completely. Mentally, spiritually, and physically. "What is everyone chanting?" I ask, looking at Martha, whose eyes are closed and whose hands are forming a triangle to frame the rising sun.

"Fire, universal and cosmic, energy mysterious, I and you join," Martha says. "Come give me power and health and reign in my heart. Heal me of all my impurities."

A flame bursts over the mountain, and the entire pyramid cheers. Conch shells resonate with deep, penetrating calls. Men are wildly beating drums. The cheering persists as the flaming disc appears full, round, and brilliant. The dances continue, and the chanting intensifies and resounds "Like Tibetan monks reciting mantras that echo in their monastery halls," I recall Henry's description. Hands catch the morning rays as the sun climbs above the distant mountain. I look again at Martha. Her face is absorbing the light, and an orange glow surrounds her, as if she's an apparition of the Madonna.

"Do you feel its energy?" Martha asks as she raises her hands toward the sun.

"I feel the sun's warmth on my face," I say. "Heal me, Inti. Heal me, powerful Maker. Heal my condition . . ."

"And reign in my heart," Martha adds, laughing with delight. "Allow me to flourish so I can heal Earth!"

Now, I'm feeling the power of the morning light, the essence of this astronomical event, this spiritual force upon a world-class site of antiquity. I feel connections with space, time, and Earth. What the New Agers call a vortex. I gaze at the brilliant sun, close my eyes, and listen to the chants and the sounds of the conch shells and drums. I smell the incense and feel caressing warm rays of light on my cheeks and upheld hands. I inhale deeply and exhale slowly. Energy flows through my body like a rush of adrenaline, like pure ecstasy, sudden joy. Like a drug. My thoughts are empty, focused on nothing but my physical sensations. I feel invigorated, alive, and healed. I will live forever! The first rays of the sun have cured me! I know this for a fact!

"We should head down while we can and watch the Aztec dances on the plaza below," Henry suggests. He then helps his wife and me back up to the top so we can maneuver around to the steps leading down the pyramid. People are still climbing to the top and filling every available spot. "They will probably continue to do so throughout the day," Henry tells me.

On the way down, I suggest that I meet Henry and Martha at the bottom of the pyramid, insisting that I can manage and need to be alone for a few moments. "The energy I feel is so intense and powerful," I say. "I just need to sit here a while and contemplate it all."

They understand, and I watch them disappear into the descending throng, which isn't nearly as massive as the flood of humanity climbing to the top. I sit beside the stairwell to think about my life in a positive way. Am I doing exactly what I want to do? Suddenly, the euphoria leaves me, and I feel empty inside. I decide it's time to move on, with or without Henry and Martha. I relish their company, but I can't grow too attached to anyone in my new life. If I encounter my new friends at the bottom of the Sun Pyramid, along the Avenue of the Dead, I will be satisfied. If not, I'll be on my way. They're resourceful. They'll catch a taxi back to the city and continue on their journey by bus.

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, and I keep taking deep, relaxing breaths in the energizing sunrise. When I reach the second tier, I encounter a crowd gathered around a Mexican *curandero* in his thirties. He's burning a clay bowl of smudge sticks and sanctifying people by circling the bowl around them. I stop to watch.

"Señorita," he says, looking at me. "*Quiere bendición?* Can I give you a blessing?"

"How much?"

"*Como quiere. No importa.* I can see that you would like a blessing for your future, for your travels, for your health and well-being. I can see it in your eyes."

I accept his offer and stand before him as he circles the smoking pot around my front and then behind me. I sneeze from the strong smell of sage and other incenses similar to burning mesquite. I'm the only gringa in sight.

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

"But I could die anytime," I can't help but say. "In a moment from now. Your protection's ambiguous." I really wanted something mystical to happen to me, and the man's blessing seems perfunctory. He should have said something like "will protect you during your long life." I hand him a few pesos. He looks satisfied and glances around for someone else to give his blessing to.

I continue down the steps and notice Martha and Henry off to one side of the pyramid, near a Red Cross van. They're probably waiting for me to catch up. In a moment, I decide to slip away, something I can easily do because nearly everyone is dressed alike. I don't feel bad about

leaving them. There's no point in trying to keep up a friendship. I wish I could, but I'll never make it to Temple University for a visit. Besides, it's easier, once again, to leave without bothering to explain anything or to say goodbye.



Chapter 6: Desertrama Trailer Park, Gilbert

Steve Tyler

About a month after Muriel's disappearance, I finally decide it's time for me to drive to Gilbert to check if my wife's staying with her dad on an extended visit. For the past month, I've called Russell Prichard several times. He rarely answers his phone, and the one time he did, the call didn't go well. He hung up on me as soon as I mentioned Muriel's name and said I was her husband.

Muriel's father is senile, I've always thought, and is now living reclusively in a retirement RV Park in Gilbert called Desertrama Mobile Home Community. He has never liked me, has never really accepted me, and didn't come to our wedding. Ironically, I'm the one taking care of him, making sure his trailer lot fee is paid in full, year to year, buying his trailer for him outright, and paying for a caretaker to check on him four days a week. I had cashed out Intel stock options to set up a trust fund and fiduciary for him. But he doesn't know this, or if he does, he refuses to acknowledge it. I believe he thinks Muriel is taking care of him financially.

I had agreed to all this when Muriel agreed to marry me and become mother to my children. I needed her, and she needed me. For Christ's sake, her dad was losing the home he had shared with his wife, who had just died when I came along, and Muriel was almost desperate.

Her meager salary as a bookkeeper couldn't possibly sustain her and her father. And she refused to move in with the old man and be his caretaker.

"I was my mother's caretaker until she died," I remember Muriel telling me shortly after we started dating. She had just cremated her mom, and I had just buried Angeline. Muriel was a beautiful woman, and I fell in love with her and truly believed we needed each other to recover from our grief and help each other out.

When Muriel accepted my proposal, I was nearly as happy as I had been when Angeline agreed to be my wife and when she first told me we were going to have a child. But after the second baby, Angeline wanted no more. It was hard on her health. And I got a vasectomy. Then, she got sick and died, and I encountered Muriel at an Intel party and felt that I had to have her.

These days, Prichard, as I call my father-in-law, never goes anywhere. Muriel visits or calls him about once a week to make sure he's all right. But she spends holidays with me and the kids at my parents' house, mostly because I never liked being around the old, cantankerous man. For thirty-five years, Prichard read electric meters for the Salt River Project. He was a hardworking man, Muriel always told me, who never made much money for his family. His wife had to waitress to keep the bills paid. "Your dad is a company man to be admired," I often told Muriel to flatter her. "Even a janitor has pride in his job," I once remarked. Muriel had scoffed at me, saying I was a presumptuous elitist, and she understood why her father didn't like me.

My father-in-law couldn't afford the best treatment for his wife. He couldn't send his children to Stanford and Berkeley, unlike my mom and dad, who also pushed me to play the flute, piano, and clarinet, whereas Muriel had no time for extracurricular activities at Mesa High. She was stuck at home after classes, taking care of her little sister. I find it odd that I have never even met Muriel's sister, and I doubt Muriel is in Portland staying with Shirley. They never talk

on the phone, write each other, or even send each other birthday or Christmas cards. I assumed they weren't close because of family issues. It didn't matter because Muriel had fit right into my life as the mother of my children, and that was all I really cared about.

The old man opens the narrow door to his trailer. He's thin and wearing a muscle shirt, pajama bottoms, and slippers. Without saying a word, he glares at me as I stand on a concrete stoop at the bottom of the metal steps.

"Mr. Prichard," I say, and then get right to the point of my visit before Prichard can even ask me why I'm here. This is only the second time I've ever been to his place. The first time was when I closed the deal on the trailer, and Prichard wasn't even present then. "Is Muriel staying with you?"

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

"May I come inside and look around?" I ask. I've never been inside before. Never needed to or wanted to. I 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 even bringing the kids. The small trailer has no room for kids, and my children don't even know Muriel's father. He's not their grandfather.

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

“Okay, Mr. Prichard,” I say as nicely as I can. “Do you happen to know where she might be? Have you received any mail addressed to her?”

“What?!” Prichard practically 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 don’t know where she is. I just lost my wife of 25 years, and then my beautiful daughter marries you. No ceremony. None 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 other daughter, but she couldn’t fly down. Mr. Prichard, please let me go inside and look around. I might find a clue.”

“What did you do to my daughter? Did you hijack her with your high jinks?” I step back from the stoop as the old man goes off about things that make no sense—things from the past. Things that are jumbled together.

I patiently stand there, wondering if Prichard suffers from dementia or if he’s drunk. Nevertheless, I try to set him straight and let him know that I’m not his enemy. “Mr. Prichard,” I say, “I don’t think you understand. It’s my hard work that provided you with your home. It was I who 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 me, her poor old daddy. I’m only a hardworking man. You took my daughter away from me! I wanted her to nurse me, as she did her mother, my wife.”

“Of course I took Muriel from you. That’s life. I’m your son-in-law, and I pay your bills. Listen, old man. We need to join together now and find your daughter, my wife. Muriel. My kids need her.”

“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!”

I step farther away from the senile old man and say, “Thank you for your time, Mr. Prichard. I’ll let you know what I learn. Call me if you hear from her.” Then I walk down the driveway toward the Taurus, thinking how helpless I’ve suddenly become with the loss of my second wife. *Thank God for Muriel’s best friend, Betsy*, I think to myself. She’s been a life support since I first asked her for help. I recently hired Betsy away from her hairdressing job at Lakewood Hair Harbor to manage the kids until we resolve the mystery of Muriel’s disappearance. Betsy’s organized. She arrives before I leave for Intel, feeds my kids breakfast, and takes them to school and to extracurricular activities. And she waits for me when I tell her I’ll bring dinner home or take her and the kids out to eat, usually at a fast-food restaurant.

I suddenly hear the old man clamber down the metal steps. I turn to see what he’s doing. At the bottom of the steps, he’s picking up a handful of decorative rocks. I hurry and get inside my car just as Prichard throws them at me and my Taurus. “Coward! Negligent cur!” I hear him yelling as I pull away from Desertrama Trailer Park.



Chapter 7: Camino Real

April 1996

Muriel

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

I don't rush from Mexico City because I need to take care of a few things. And I want to pamper myself, have a "spa day for the girls," as my friend Betsy liked to say. Steve spoiled me with a life so unlike the one I had during my childhood and early twenties, and indulgence is a hard thing to give up. I check into the Hotel Camino Real near Chapultepec Park. I came across the hotel with Henry and Martha during a walk in the park, when we went to the restaurant inside for coffee. I found the front fountain before the valet portico hypnotizing. It's a huge saucer dish that splashes water back and forth, like a god panning for gold.

I spend a month at Camino Real, relaxing at the pool, reading from my cache of books and New Yorkers, and studying my AAA maps and guides. I take daily walks in the park and visit the anthropology museum and Frida Kahlo's Blue House. At the American Embassy, I apply for a passport using a birth certificate and driver's license. Steve was unaware I had a duplicate. At a Joyas de Oro, I hawk my wedding and engagement rings, but I keep my jadeite necklace, which I constantly wear except at night, when I take it off so it won't get entangled with my hair.

On the first of May, I decide it's time to see something different, and I leave Mexico City. Navigating with AAA maps, I head for 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. The ancients dedicated their Grand Pyramid to the feathered serpent and called it Tlachihualtepetl. It now stands in the pueblo like a green mountain, with a sixteenth-century neoclassic domed Catholic church on top called Our Lady of Remedies, which I consider a fitting place to ask for reassurance that my cure is final and permanent.

My next stop is Oaxaca, where I visit Monte Alban, hoping I won't run into Martha and Henry. The ruins sit on a flattened mountaintop where "Cloud People" reigned for 1,500 years. They developed their own writing system of glyphs and had their own gods as well as gods borrowed from the Olmecs. For two weeks, I live with a homestay family while studying Spanish at a language school with a tutor, one-on-one. After hours of intensive *gramatica* in the tropical heat, my mind wanders easily, and sometimes I even fall asleep during the lesson, with my eyes open, like Moby Jack under the coconut palm at Mar Rosa.

One day, as I wander through the herb market of Oaxaca, I encounter an elderly Zapotec *curandero*. I tell him I had a terrible condition that the spring equinox cured, but I want to make sure I'm sustaining my health and not merely in some kind of remission. He gives me a spiritual cleansing in the name of Jesus and the Virgin Mary Saint of Oaxaca, Our Lady of Solitude. The old man then advises me to eat a vegetarian diet based on the native foods of the Americas, and he gives me a list of herbs for teas and infusions.

On May 17, I leave Oaxaca and drive to Tabasco, Chiapas, Campeche, and Yucatan. When I arrive in a new city, I typically stay at the nicest hotel and then find a language school with a homestay. On weekends, I venture to the Maya ruins in the tropical jungle. From the ruins

of Coba in Quintana Roo, I head to Belize, where the people speak English, so instead of intensive Spanish, I spend August at a beach resort, boating, reef snorkeling, and thinking about what I want to do with my life now that I'm cured and on my way to Tierra del Fuego. I decide that, most of all, I want to have my own child. It's a very hopeful wish, perpetuating my life. Steve deprived me. God left me with very little time. What I need is a man with good genes, and I keep thinking about Moby Jack's friend in Costa Rica, Arturo Barrantes. Moby Jack had described his friend as being an educated man with a rich heritage. He said that Arturo graduated from SDSU and then went to UCLA for a Ph.D. in the astronomy of pre-Columbian civilizations. He described him as having the blood of Columbus and conquistadors mixed with the king-priests of Mesoamerica. "A hidalgo man," I remember Moby Jack calling him. The more I think about this, the more I want to travel to Costa Rica to meet this hidalgo man and somehow persuade him to father my child.

In September, I decide to start heading for Costa Rica to look up this hidalgo man and potential sperm donor, but first, I want to see the sights of the countries along the way. I'm in no rush. I still have a good ten years of fertility left. I spend a month traveling through Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua and studying Spanish at a few schools along the way. I learn about all the political turmoil these countries have endured, especially after Reagan 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, on the other hand, has been spared the political trauma of its northern neighbors and Panama to the south.

At the end of September, I arrive in the city of Liberia, Costa Rica, which is just south of Nicaragua. By now, I'm certain that I'll find Arturo and somehow have a baby with him. But how I will go about it seems a delicate matter. I couldn't just pop up in his classroom during his lecture. I decide I must first establish myself at a language school with a homestay. At the first *supermercado* I come across with, I buy the English language paper *Tico Times* and look through its ads for language schools. One in San Juan de Flores catches my eye. The ad describes the school as being managed by a mother and her two sons, and the town of San Juan de Flores as quaint and centered around a stone church built in the 1800s, and not far from San Jose, where Arturo is teaching at the most prestigious and oldest university in Costa Rica.

The 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 for the students and tutors. The backyard has a large green lawn, a koi pond, mango trees, banana plants, and vegetable gardens. The owner, Señora Ana Rosa Herrera, greets me on the front porch when I arrive. She gives me an exam to determine my Spanish language skills, which aren't too bad by now, after several months of one-on-one study in many idyllic settings during my travels. One of Mrs. Herrera's sons then escorts me a few blocks from the school to my homestay with the Morales family, who live in a modern 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 because I've been sticking to the diet prescribed by the Oaxacan *curandero*. 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 Mr. Hidalgo, Arturo Barrantes. I've been feeling so healthy and well fed that by now I'm positive the powerful equinox event cured me and that I'm not simply in remission, and that the Oaxacan *curandero*'s diet and herbal teas are sustaining and promoting my good health.

Wearing my jadeite necklace and showing a little cleavage for my first encounter with this hidalgo friend of Moby Jack, I drive to the Universidad de Costa Rica in San Jose. Like San Jose, the university is landlocked in the central valley amid the volcanoes Poas, Turrialba, and Irazu.

As I wander around the park-like campus, looking for the admissions building, I'm wondering 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 would say. *Sorry, but back in Mazatlán, I couldn't find you when I had to get going.* It would be a lame excuse, but I doubt Moby Jack is 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 the admissions office, I tell a secretary I'm looking for Professor Barrantes, and she escorts me to his office across the campus, in the *Escuela de Fisica* building. At his open office door, she greets the professor, who's wearing a suit and sitting behind a large desk with an HP Pavilion, stacks of files, and this month's issue of *Sky & Telescope*. She introduces me to the esteemed professor as "*una amiga de America.*"

"What can I do for you, my friend from America?" the professor says as he gestures me into his large office neatly arranged with bookshelves and cabinets. One wall displays astronomy pictures, a stone replica of the Aztec calendar, a few pictures of Maya ruins, and the Sun Stone on Machu Pichu taken when no shadow is cast. I recognize the picture from the Hubble telescope

and say, to break the ice, “The Pillars of Creation.” I’m somewhat nervous and feel like I’m on a first date. But the professor has no idea what I’m really after, 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 adds, “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 feel his gaze upon me. “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,” I say.

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 says after he’s seated behind his desk. “But I don’t know yours.”

His accent speaks of his American education. It’s Californian English, but he’s nothing like Moby Jack, although they’re the same age. Professor Arturo Barrantes is a handsome, clean-shaven man with a light-tan complexion. He’s about 5’10 and 160 lbs., and *he doesn’t look Mexican, like Francisco Javier*, I’m thinking, as I smile and say, “My name’s Mariella, but they call me Arizona.”

“I like that,” he says, speaking deeply and thoughtfully, like Vicente Fox. I smell his wood and leather cologne. His eminence seems to fill the room and make me feel comfortable. “How many solar eclipses have you been to?” I think to ask to keep the conversation going.

“First in Florida, 1970. Then I saw the 1979 eclipse in Portland. The ’91 eclipse in Mexico. And I’m planning to see the one over the Galapagos in two years.”

“I’ve been to El Castillo,” I say, and indicate the photograph on his Astronomy wall 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. The Mayas predicted eclipses, but the Inca did not. For them, Inti became angry without warning. Did you know, Ms. Arizona, that the ancient Aztec and Inca civilizations existed at the same time?” I shake my head. He then asks, “And what brings you to Costa Rica?”

“I’m a museum curator on a year’s sabbatical,” I 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 having thought this out before this meeting. I guess my mind was too often in the clouds. “You see,” I continue, letting a story just fall off my tongue as I go along, with some true parts, “I’m studying Spanish at language schools while exploring the ruins. I’m interested in pre-Columbian astronomy. About six months ago, I ran into a friend of yours, Jack Senna, in Mazatlán. You may know that he goes by the name of Moby Jack. He said you were chums at SDSU and that you’re now an astronomer here in Costa Rica.”

“*Encantada*, Ms. Arizona!” Arturo says.

“Moby Jack was on his way to see you,” I say, unable to get over Arturo’s smile, dimples, and intoxicating cologne, “but he couldn’t make it, so I took it upon myself to meet you.”

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. He reveals that after Moby Jack’s wife had died, Jack took to drinking. “I was the best man at their

wedding. Hadn't seen them for ten years. Then Moby Jack called and said to me, 'Patricia's dead.' That's how he said it. She died in a car accident. Spent a week in the hospital, and he believed she'd pull through. I flew up for the funeral and found Moby Jack in bad shape, living in shock. Her death was his undoing." He stops. "I must catch myself. Dreadful gossip is not courteous. Tell me about your museum."

"What?" I ask, and then remember my made-up story. I had gotten caught up in Moby Jack's saga and Arturo's essence.

"You said you're a curator? For which museum?"

I hesitate for a moment and then suggest, "The SW Heritage Museum in Mesa." 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 too far into something I know so little about. I'm a bookkeeper, not a scientist, and this man must know about the Heard Museum. He probably knows the curator. To change the subject, I talk about how I've been driving through Mexico and Central America in an Explorer.

"Are you wearing a Burmese jadeite?" he asks. I nod, and he adds, "Imperial jade, semitransparent, I venture to say. Very valuable."

"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. He checks it and then suggests that he walk with me toward the visitor's parking lot on his way to a quantum physics class he's teaching.

Arturo escorts me along the main campus path, and we stop at a cupid swan fountain before the library. Students are gathered around, and 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."

"This is the main meeting point on campus," Arturo says, then looks at his watch.

I know he's probably in a hurry and that he must be a very punctual man, but I want to prolong my time with him and say, "We have Inca doves in my garden at my parent's house in Scottsdale." I don't want to mention Ahwatukee; it's too close to my past. "I used to watch them from the breakfast nook window. They would bask in the sun and stretch a wing skyward, like a sailboat. I'm amazed that they're here, this far south, but I really don't know anything about the migration of Inca doves. Do they migrate from Arizona or stop over in Arizona?" I'm assuming Arturo knows about the migration of birds because he must know something about everything. He reminds me of Steve in this way, although Steve has nothing else comparable to Arturo Barrantes.

"Inca doves are generational birds," Arturo tells me. "They live year-round in their place of parentage." He grips my hand in a handshake and gazes at me for a moment, then says he must rush off to his quantum mechanics class. But before he releases my hand, he adds, "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."

I tell him about my language school in San Juan de Flores, and he remarks, "I think you're a remarkable young woman. And you know about Hubble's Pillars of Creation." He hesitates, looks at his watch again, and adds, "I'm sorry, but I'm pressed for time. Please allow me to contact you at your language school. I'd like to show you the jade and gold museums if you'll accept my invitation."

His charm nearly blows me over. Everything about him impresses me, and I almost blurt out my request that he father my child. But I pull myself back, shake his hand, and tell him I'd be delighted if he could show me the museums of San Jose. Then I watch him hurry off to teach physics as I hear the Inca doves calling one another from the fountain's edge.

After about a week, Mrs. Herrera approaches my table on the school's back porch and tells me I have a visitor. In the school's office, Professor Arturo Barrantes, dressed in a suit, politely invites me to lunch in San Jose so he can tell me about his country, his college years in San Diego with Moby Jack, and take me to the Jade Museum. "My brave Inca dove," he says. "I wanted to properly welcome you to Costa Rica."

"I love Costa Rican food," I say. "But I'm on a vegetarian diet, except I can eat fish. A Zapotec *curandero* in Oaxaca recommended it. I want to keep fit," I quickly add so he won't think I'm sick and need a special cure. "I plan to hike the Inca Trail during my drive to Tierra del Fuego."

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

In a Mocha Ford Escort, Arturo takes me to Chelles, a quaint restaurant opened in 1909 in central San Jose, near the city'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 of the 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, which is why he named our country Costa Rica, meaning rich coast. These native people are now only one percent of the population. Most of them died after acquiring European diseases.”

As he’s speaking, I’m wondering if he 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,” he says, stirring 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 try to think about what to say. I’m not used to contriving stories and lying as I go along. It just 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? To spare someone’s feelings?* I ask myself and decide to 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 feel like I’m stumbling with my words. But I quickly tell myself that it’s no big deal. Arturo is a professor of physics and astronomy. I’m an attractive woman, healthy, in the prime of my life, and I want to have a baby with this 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 the pre-Columbian cultures. That’s why you came to see me, *correcto?*”

“*Por cierto,*” I say. This gracious debonair puts me at ease. He seems to know the right thing to say.

After lunch, he takes me to the jade and gold museums and then to the university’s planetarium. He’s very proud of the building he helped establish in May 1993. We watch a forty-minute presentation called “Stars over Costa Rica.” Afterward, I say that I’m inspired and would

love to see the real stars over Costa Rica. I'm hoping he will understand that I want our "dating" relationship to continue and move to greater heights, so to speak. He smiles broadly and promises to arrange such an outing.

I'm overwhelmed, even mystified, with feelings for Arturo as he takes me back to the Morales house and escorts me to the front porch. He then offers a firm handshake. No kiss. No hint of anything romantic, and I'm wondering if I've been mistaken about his feelings for me. Maybe he only sees me as a friend of his friend. I thank him for showing me the museums and his planetarium, and then I touch his arm slightly in a friendly gesture. He smiles in response. But it doesn't seem the right moment to tell him what I really want—a baby. I think we're presently only friends connected by Moby Jack.

Before Arturo leaves, he promises to call me at the school soon. "I like your company very much," he adds, stepping away like a gentleman who taps his heels, and tips his brown leather conquistador hat with black Ostridge feathers.

Am I missing my opportunity? I ask myself as I stand at the front stoop of the Morales house. Why am I waiting for him to make the first move? Francisco Javier had no problem. He got right to the point when he said, "I want to make love to you." Arturo is too gentlemanly, and I'm wasting time. As he drives off in his Mocha Ford Escort, I want to blurt out what I'm after, but instead I say, "*Vaya con Dios!*"

A few days later, while I'm one-on-one with my tutor, Mrs. Herrera interrupts to tell me I have a phone call in her office. My heart flutters. Who else could it be but Arturo?

Over the phone, Arturo invites me to a butterfly farm. "I'm on the board of directors at the farm, and I was headed there anyway. I'd love to show you our tropical butterflies. The Finca de Mariposas is in Alajuela, which is only a few miles away from your school."

Within the hour, we're strolling along the garden path inside an enormous butterfly terrarium. The warm humidity is thick, with exotic aromas. A stream meanders through the screened-in habitat landscaped with boulders and ferns, passion flowers, red ginger, banana trees, and bromeliads and orchids on palm trees.

Arturo points out butterflies called Zebras, Dutchman's Pipe, Owl butterflies, and the prized butterfly of Costa Rica, the Morpho Pleiades, whose scales are an iridescent metallic turquoise. At one point, he stops along the path, touches my arm, and points out a fluttering moth with black obsidian wings. "This is a Rothschildia moth," he whispers, as if not to scare the moth away. "She was a goddess of the Aztecs called Itzpapalotl, which means beautiful butterfly maiden. According to Aztec lore, her wings are as sharp as knives, and during a solar eclipse, she threatens to devour people in the darkness."

"Like the puma?" I suggest.

"Yes, Inca dove," he says, touching my arm. "Just like that."

I take a picture of a morpho on a tropical leaf. It remains still, as if posing for me, then it flies away. I want to take Arturo's picture, but he's not comfortable with the idea, and I suspect it's because he's married, and being with me is risky for him. It's just a hunch that I have, and I don't want to ask him because I don't want to know. I just want him to like me enough to make love to me and father my baby. It's as simple as that.

"Here at Finca de Mariposas, we perpetuate butterflies," he tells me as we continue to stroll along the path. He speaks of everything in his country as his because he's obviously proud of his nationality and heritage, as he should be. "We're dedicated to the life cycle of butterflies and study their survival and relationships with plants. They mate and then lay eggs that turn to

larvae and pupae. Then the butterfly flutters into the sun with iridescent wings of many colors. They're resurrected souls on their way to heaven, according to most pre-Columbian cultures."

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 that I have to make the first move because Arturo is too much of a gentleman.

I smell the fragrance in the air, then his wood and leather cologne, as I feel him touching my hand. *Or is it a breeze from the fans overhead?* I wonder. He's sitting very near me and enshrouding me with his essence.

"Butterflies are beautiful creatures." He winks. "And so are you, my brave Inca dove." As he speaks these flattering words, a butterfly suddenly lands on my nose. "A butterfly kiss," he tells me and snaps a photo of me with my camera. "And it's a rare Memphis Ryphea, scarlet red with black trim," he whispers as the papillon flies off my nose into 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 still not crystal clear about his intent. We stop on a bridge over the artificial stream. His grip now feels friendly, like a grip of compassion, not one of sensuality.

I think he's going to kiss my hand 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 he's on the board of directors.

"Que dijiste?"

"I want to get pregnant. I want to have a child. And I like you. To me, you're a perfect man to give me what I want. Do you agree?" I can't believe how brazen I'm being. But I guess when you're facing mortality, you have to get right to the point regarding what you want from life because life is fragile and temporary, not an eternity.

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 that he's a man who loves beautiful women. But I doubt he was expecting me to request him to father my child.

"Lovely lady, *mi cariño*," he finally whispers so no one can hear us. "I'm a married man. My second wife is as young as you. We have two young children, 2 and 5 years old. I'm 55. To have another child at my age isn't...." he stutters. He's completely caught off guard. "It's inappropriate."

"Nonsense." I wink, still holding his hand on the bridge beside boulders, tropical ferns, and philodendrons. He takes my hand to his lips. My heart flutters like a butterfly. "Only women reach deadlines," I whisper. "And I'm nearing mine. And 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*, I'm thinking. But his eyes don't dismiss my provocative idea.

"I want a baby while I can," I say again. I no longer care who's listening.

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

When we’re already seated in his Ford and the engine’s running, with the air conditioner cooling the car, which was warm from the tropical heat, Arturo says, “*Cariño*, yes, I want to make love to you. I’ve wanted to since you came into my office and I found that you 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. Do you understand all these, *Cariño*?”

“Yes,” I say, feeling utterly charmed by his agreeing to my request and by his organized thoughts on how we will proceed.

November 1996

The first weekend after, Arturo’s wife takes their kids to visit her mother in Managua, and Arturo takes me to a coffee plantation near Heredia. We stay at a luxury hotel on thirty acres of rich volcanic earth growing organic coffee and shaded by avocado and mango trees. We swim in a pool with a fountain and tour the plantation, where hummingbirds and butterflies hover over the garden flowers. I get the feeling that all of Costa Rica is a tropical paradise biodome.

Late afternoon in our suite, we eat a vegetarian lunch from the finca gardens and drink chilled Chilean white wine. When we finally make love, my mind is filled with the words of Enrique Iglesias: *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 his limits and reach. And he knows 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, especially Steve, who didn't care anyway because he didn't care about having sex, or so it had seemed to me.

“*Querida amiga,*” Arturo says as I lie in his arms. “Don't worry about such things. Love is pure honey from the gods, from the stars of heaven. An intoxicating drink called balché. Women place too 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 smart and clever—something I'm not used to feeling. I've always been just average but attracted to smart men. Steve, however, is so unlike my new *hidalgo* lover. *Steve wooed me into marriage because he's smart and enterprising but 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?* my mind screams. *It's an unending spiral into the nine hells of doom.* Then I think of Arturo's words “without a past, without a future,” and I decide to make them my motto.

A few weeks later, during the rainy season on the Pacific side of Costa Rica, Arturo takes me to Arenal Volcano National Park, which he claims is his favorite place in his country.

“Arenal is one of the most active volcanoes in the world,” he tells me. “Its 1968 eruption killed many people and destroyed several villages.”

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 natural pools heated by the volcano, make love, hike around lava beds, and enjoy the spa.

At midnight, when the first quarter moon sets and the clouds have departed for the night, Arturo and I stand at the deck railing beside his Schmidt-Cassegrain 16” telescope calibrated and

aligned to the pole star. Arturo shows me the features of the night sky. Many constellations are new to me, and the ones I know look backward or unrecognizable. It feels topsy-turvy. Or is it that I'm in 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 and says, "*Me gusto mucho cariño.*" 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 gently take his hand and encourage him to tell me about Incan astronomy.

"The Sagittarius arm of our galaxy is especially bright in the southern hemisphere," he says. "It has light and dark patches. The Incas saw the dark patches as animals with souls tied to those on Earth. 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 and only 4.37 light years away." He shows me the star in his telescope. "The Incas called the Southern Cross Chakana and viewed it as the rainbow panther bridge across the Milky Way and the center of their universe. It has four corners, with a center hole directly connected to Cusco." He pauses and gazes at me, then says, "I hope you aren't in a hurry to leave me. It's too soon. I will miss you deeply, *Cariño.*" He kisses my neck and smells my fragrant hair washed with lavender shampoo. "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 no past and no future. But we have each other at this moment, when Mars and Venus are both morning stars. We will watch Mercury rise in the morning if we look closely in the east just before sunrise, after we make love. Paloma Inca."

On Sunday, our last day on the volcano, Arturo takes me on an early morning wildlife and birding hike through the tropical rainforest. We don't need a guide because Arturo knows the terrain. We wear olive green ponchos and rain hats provided by the lodge, 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 240DC Zoom, never of my lover, of course, but of butterflies, flowers, and howler monkeys, a little red-eye tree frog, and a coati that crosses our path. "Arizona has coatis," I tell Arturo. "In the trees, we spot toucans, parrots, and red-winged blackbirds, a species also found in Arizona," I tell my hidalgo lover.

"Like Inca doves," he suggests, to be funny.

At one point, we see a sloth hanging from a Ceibo tree. "The sloth is a solitary creature," Arturo explains while I'm taking pictures. "It's not made to walk but to live in the trees or swim in the water."

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 the 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. But you, *Querida Mia*, are my bird of paradise, my clever paloma. There's an Aztec goddess called Xochiquetzal, the maiden with quetzal feathers. She's beautiful, youthful, and vibrant, like you." He 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 away with a *whoop whoop whoop*.

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.

A moment later, he's holding me in his arms as we're watching the clouds sweep down the mountain toward us. He urges that we hurry back to the lodge before the clouds burst upon us. "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 before we get very far, the rainstorm catches us. In a clearing on the sloping trail outside the forest, Arturo stops for a moment in the pouring rain to glimpse through his binoculars toward the forest. "A rare quetzal with iridescent emerald feathers," he says. "The maiden with quetzal feathers." He hands me the binoculars and points to where I should look. The quetzal flies into his cloud forest. Arturo tucks the binoculars under his poncho and stands before me as the tropical downpour drenches us. He takes off my rain hat and says, "I want to look at your face in the rain, *Cariño*. And I want you to fully hear the sounds of nature. Listen to the rain. Feel it penetrate your beautiful skin."

I gaze at his handsome face under his rain hat and then close my eyes. Thunder claps, and Arturo holds up my chin and mystifies me with a kiss as heaven's liquid pours over us. I taste the elixir of gods.

When he stops kissing me, he backs away to look at me and says, "I cannot tell if you have tears or if it's just the rain."

A bolt of lightning illuminates the dark skies, and thunder bursts through the rain. "We had better go now," Arturo says. "Lightning has struck many people on Arenal, including American tourists." But we remain a moment longer in the rain. Conditions and feelings 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 equally in love with me. *Only the gods could have led me to him*, I'm thinking. And I'm certain they've blessed me with his child, just as they've led me to a cure.



Chapter 8: Ciudad de Panama, Panama

Muriel

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

In 1671, Captain Henry Morgan sacked, burned, and looted the New Spain colony on the narrow isthmus between the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. Colonial citizens rebuilt their city west of the ruins, and these days, Casco Viejo, Old Panama, is a historic barrio consisting of Spanish colonial buildings in 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 contemplate how I'm going to have this baby and raise it while traveling to the end of the world. Most likely now, 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. I give credit to my wonderful hidalgo lover for instilling in me such confidence and hope. My feelings of being in love were

intense but fleeting, like the life cycle of a beautiful mariposa. I will 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. My action is reaction.

At Casa Antigua Hotel, I park in a secure garage and check into a queen's suite. After a good night's sleep, a complimentary breakfast, and coffee, 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.

My hotel suite has a kitchen and a Spanish-style desk, where I peck out my adventures up to now, intermingled with tidbits from my childhood. "God changed his mind about cursing me with death. He's cured me and blessed me with this pregnancy. I haven't had a period in over a month, and my time with Arturo in Arenal was during my ovulation. God went beyond what I prayed for. I believe. I believe."

"In 1979, I graduated from Mesa High School, home to the purple gold jackrabbits. I was probably in the middle-lower part of my class. Then, I worked as a waitress while going to Scottsdale Community College for my associate's degree. In 1983, I wanted to travel across the border into Mexico, but I landed a good job at Goldwater's Department Store in Fiesta Mall. That lasted a year. Then, during my twenties, before I married, I had parttime bookkeeping jobs and helped my parents. Now and then, I went out with girlfriends to nightclubs and taverns. I stayed away from abusive men and had a few false starts with Greg Ellars, Mike Skipper, John Johnson, and Dan Dickenson. The right guy never came along. I was looking for someone better than tavern bums from Mesa. Dating was always about having sex. And I never took to promiscuity unless I chose to be sexy."

“It was in 1987 when Mother fell ill, and I had to watch her deteriorate and die. That experience dampened my enthusiasm about everything. But on October 11, 1990, I married Steve when his kids were five and two. I was twenty-nine. Steve was smart, funny, and stable, and for the first time in my life, dating was not about sex. That was a plus. At the time, we were both vulnerable people. Steve had just lost his wife and needed a mother for his children. My own mom had just died. Dad fell apart and lost everything because of Mom’s illness. In part, I married Steve to help Daddy financially and set him up comfortably in a retirement trailer park. I thought my marriage to Steve would be an agreeable arrangement, and for the first few years, everything fit together. I felt that my destiny was to have a ready-made family and a good-quality husband. I was safe, secure, and happy, and I believed that I would be a part of Steve’s family forever. But that wasn’t in the forecast.”

“Nine months ago, when I was fleeing Night Hawk Way, I grabbed the address of my friend Ivet Esquero, a stunning Panamanian woman with thick black wavy hair and a smooth honey olive complexion. At that time, I thought I might visit her during my journey south. ‘Come to Panama,’ Ivet had often told me, and she had described her country as ‘a blend of Caribbean natives, descendants of African slaves, and colonial Spaniards of New Spain.’”

“I met Ivet in 1992, when I took a class on American literature at ASU while the kids were at school. I wanted something to do other than bookkeeping. Steve suggested that I take classes at ASU, and literature was a topic that interested me. I enjoyed reading classic British and American novels. During this time, I signed up for the university’s International Student Services program, which matched foreign students with American hosts to help the students with their English and with American culture. The program matched me with Ivet, and for nearly four years we met at the Memorial Union about twice a month, and I occasionally invited her over for

dinner with Steve and the kids. Ivet earned a two-year degree in system sciences at Panama University and then worked for two years at the Panamanian Department of Transportation. Her employer sent her to ASU to study transportation engineering, systems, pavements, and materials. ‘That’s about as interesting as bookkeeping,’ I had often joked with Ivet. Whenever she returned to Panama for the holidays, she came back with a gift for me that represented her country. She gave me frog and eagle replicas of pre-Columbian gold pendants, and three colorful Kuna mola panels of a turtle, a parrot, and a fish. I considered Ivet a good friend. Now, I’m glad I kept her address because I could really use a friend. I sometimes miss my best friend, Betsy, more than I do the kids.”

After a few days of pampering myself at Casa Antigua Hotel, I call my friend’s number and reach her mother. “*Soy amiga de tu hija*, Ivet. *Soy* Muriel Tyler.” I mention my name, as if Ivet’s mother might know about me. Who knows? The mother gives me Ivet’s number, and the next morning, I’m meeting my exotic friend at the hotel lobby. Ivet gives me a hug and graciously says, holding both of my hands, “*Vamos, mi querida amiga!* I want to show you the best sites in my city.”

In a red Honda Civic, Ivet takes me to Calzada de Amador at the Pacific entrance to the canal. The historical boardwalk extends four kilometers into the bay and is lined with benches, trees, flower gardens, and fluttering flags. It links the outlying islands Naos, Culebra, Perico, and Flamenco, Ivet tells me as we walk along in the warm 70 degrees. Seagulls are cawing, and joggers and bicyclists are passing us by to and from the end of the pier.

“Noriega had a party bunker on Culebra Isla,” she says after we sit on a park bench. I’m taking in the spectacular view of skyscrapers edging the shoreline of Panama Bay, where

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 I drove into the city because it's part of the Pan-Am Highway.

"Noriega's island was looted and destroyed during the American invasion," Ivet adds. I ask about Panama's military dictator in the '80s. "Noriega was on the CIA's payroll," she says. "And Reagan turned a blind eye to his drug smuggling, but Noriega turned to the Soviets for support. In December 1989, Bush invaded Panama City, and his aircraft bombed us and killed many Panamanians." I agree that the invasion sounds as bad as the US failure in Vietnam and Reagan's meddling in Central America. "In 1510," Ivet continues. "Henry Morgan destroyed Panama. Bush was the second pirate who sacked Panama City. It's no wonder Clinton won."

I ask about her job at the Ministerio de Obras Publicas. "I'm now supervisor of construction and maintenance of infrastructure," she says, touching my necklace in a friendly gesture. "You're wearing the jadeite beads Steve gave you. I remember you wore them just before I left."

I smile, feeling proud of owning such expensive beads, even though they came from Steve. For a moment, I sit back and enjoy the gentle sea breeze, and then Ivet suddenly bursts forth with questions. "What are you doing, Muriel? How's Steve? Your kids? Are you still a bookkeeper? How long are you staying here?"

Her questions take me by surprise, and I wonder if I have crossed some cultural boundaries. "I'm on an extended vacation," I say, then admit that I left Steve. "I thought I was dying, Ivet. Now I'm cured, and I'm pregnant! God has blessed me after a death wish curse."

"*Que dijiste?* Dying? Baby? You're having Steve's baby, and you leave him?" Nearby joggers seem to overhear Ivet's words because they're looking at me.

“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 traditional clinics. You can even go to the San Blas Islands and find a Kuna *curandero*.” She pauses, as if to catch her breath in the causeway breeze. “But what are you going to do? 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 takes 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 yet because I don’t want to jinx my prognosis,” I tell her, stunned by my friend’s reaction. I’m not sure why I can’t just tell her that 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? “Slow down, *amiga*,” I say, for Ivet’s benefit and for my own. “I’m at least in remission, and I pray that I’m pregnant by a wonderful man I met in Costa Rica. Steve was sterile. I had to leave him.”

Ivet quietly gazes at the bay for a moment and then suggests we continue along the Calzada de Amador boardwalk to the end of the pier on Isla Flamenco. She’s a little less talkative now that we’ve become more reacquainted. In fact, it seems that a transformation has happened between us after I mentioned leaving Steve, that I was dying but am cured, and am having a baby. Ivet’s no less a gracious host, though, and as we walk back to her car, she invites me to stay at her home. “My daughter can stay with her grandmother. You’ll sleep in her bed. But my son Nathanael is living at home. He can help you use the computer, if you want.

Nathanael now attends the Technological University of Panama. He's interested in webpage design."

During our friendship at ASU, I never learned anything about the father of Ivet's 19-year-old son and 5-year-old daughter. She never mentioned being divorced or if she had ever been married. She spoke only about her children, as I spoke about my stepkids, especially Kristin. It made me feel like we had something in common: a young daughter. I never felt 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 didn't seem very receptive when I tried to tell her what was going on with me.

We return to my hotel, where I grab my things and then 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 the backyard.

During my first few days as Ivet's guest, while Ivet is away at her job and Nathaniel is at school, I walk to the neighborhood malls and drive to Miraflores Locks, which is not far from her house. It's one of three locks on the 50-mile Panama Canal, which the U.S. controlled until Panama took over in 1999. There are lots of Spanish schools in the city, and Ivet suggests that I attend one. But since leaving San Joaquín de Flores, I no longer want to study Spanish, and I speak mostly English to Ivet and her son. It's less artificial. 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, squash, plantains, coconut rice with red beans, and empanadas stuffed with potatoes. Ivet is as gracious a host as Arturo Barrantes had been, but after a week, I'm sensing that her enthusiasm for my company wanes. She's forthright, smart, a dutiful mother, and warmly hospitable, but after I told her the truth about my situation, I got the feeling that she thinks I'm a bit off. Then, on my way home from a local mall, the Explorer has a flat. I make it back to Ivet's, and Nathanael explains that my tires are all bad 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 then, over her lunch hour, take me to buy a new set of tires.

The next morning, as planned, Ivet drops me off at the gate to Panama Viejo, the oldest European settlement in the Americas, established by the Spanish colonialists in 1519. When England's war with Spain erupted in the 1630s, England commissioned Henry Morgan and his buccaneers to destroy the Spanish settlement. The city then moved to Casco Antigua Panama, where I first stayed upon arriving in the city.

The five-hundred-year-old ruins now adorn a green lawn park with trees and views of the skyscrapers across the bay. I take pictures of the Cathedral Tower Lookout and then decide to leave the park and walk into the barrios, looking for a snack. I'm craving something sweet or salty, some kind of junk food, and I know I'm having a pregnancy craving. As I walk down Avenida Cincuentenario looking for a *supermercado*, my craving grows more intense. But I can't find anything but streetside 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. It wasn't always frail,

and sometimes things were good between Steve and me. I had even told Betsy, on occasion, that Steve was supportive and 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, Steve's a good man*, I think, as I wait for the call. He encouraged me to get a B.A. in whatever major I liked, and I had considered continuing my education once the kids started high school, but I simply wasn't as ambitious as Steve, who could be too progressive at times. He has three master's degrees, dutifully works at Intel, and travels for them to plants in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Israel. He's launching his own web-based business. I hadn't minded dedicating myself to the house and kids, and even to Steve, but I remember that during my last months in Ahwatukee, I had been feeling a need to escape the routine. That was before the diagnosis. Now, in the small phonebooth, routine doesn't seem so bad. I had a good thing going, and I loved my stepchildren. Will Steve take me back with a baby? *Yes*, I tell myself. *He will take me back. I believe. I believe.*

When the phone rings, I start feeling empty and incapable, as if I've fallen into a deep, hollow cavern leading nowhere but to sadness. Maybe it's fear or apathy. What's there to look forward to but death? *But I'm cured, with a child, and on my way to Tierra del Fuego.* When the call goes through, I pick up the phone and hear Steve's voice. "Hello. Who's this? Muriel?" I put the phone down, leave the building, and continue looking for something for my hunger and cravings.

I buy bottled water from a street vendor and keep walking. At last, I encounter a *supermercado*, where I purchase 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 new tires for the Explorer.

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, but I first write a note of apology. *Mi amiga amable, gracias por su hospitalidad. Pero, necesito irme. Es un emergencia. Lo sciento.* I say nothing about the Explorer now parked at the back with four new Firestone tires and lots of unread books. Perhaps Nathanael can read the books and sell the tires and 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, although 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 9: A Body in Tucson

Steve Tyler

Nine months have passed since Muriel went missing. Day by day, I've been waiting for a call from her, the police, or anyone who knows something about the matter. A text, e-mail, or even a letter. I often search through the house and Muriel's electronics, hoping to find a clue.

By the end of the first week after she went missing, I began to suspect, along with the police, that Muriel had left me. *But where did she go? And why?* I kept asking myself. What more could she want from life? That we have sex a few more times than we do?

I vow to myself that I will never stop trying to resolve the mystery of my missing wife. I keep a low profile, however, and I don't call news channels and newspapers to establish a story. I haven't put up any posters, as Muriel did when one of her cats ran away. And I don't establish a website for my missing wife. Why? Because whenever I asked the police about her missing person case, they hinted more and more that maybe I had something to do with her disappearance. As if I were involved in some kind of wrongdoing. I also don't want to look like a cuckold victim if my hunch is right that Muriel left me in the lurch. Mom has suspected this all along. Dad has never said anything about it.

I don't tell Betsy about my suspicions that Muriel has left me. During our daily encounters, she and I don't really talk about Muriel or personal matters. We discuss the kids and what I need her to do for me concerning them. Betsy has been doing what she can to keep Kevin and Kristen from becoming too emotionally stressed. I decided to tell the kids that their mommy went on a work vacation, as Daddy does, and would be back as soon as she could. But my kids keep asking, "Why doesn't Mommy call? Why couldn't we go with her?"

I had to convince Mom that my strategy was the best one for the children. "If the worst happens, then we'll all deal with that when the time comes. If Muriel has simply left, a possibility I still resist, then Muriel can deal with what to tell her stepchildren, if she tells them anything at all."

The mystery remains unsolved, and I don't hear about any movement on the case until the Friday after Thanksgiving. The kids are staying with my folks up in Sun City West after the holiday meal Mom had catered in, and I'm alone in my home office, working on website designs, when I receive a call from a police officer in Tucson. He tells me that the authorities

have recovered a body in the desert outside Tucson. “It’s a woman who matches your wife’s description.”

I’m jolted into shock, but I manage to recover enough to ask, “Is there a large mole by her pubic hair?” It’s the only sure identifying mark I can think about.

“Sir,” the officer says, “the body is not in good condition. It’s partially decayed and lies 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 has determined.”

“Muriel’s been gone nine months, sir. So, it can’t be her,” I say, shaking with desperation that I’m right.

“Mr. Tyler, we don’t know anything about her disappearance, and anything’s possible. Someone could have kidnapped her, kept 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 that of your missing wife.”

As soon as I end the call with the Tucson officer, I immediately and frantically call Betsy. “Steve, what is it?” she asks, sounding panicked herself.

“The police called,” I tell Betsy. I pause a moment. “They found a woman’s body near Tucson. Said it fits Muriel’s description. I’m driving to the Pima County morgue. Please, Betsy, can you come with me?”

Betsy Sanders

“Of course, Steve. I’ll be right over.” I hang up the phone and shudder. Unlike Steve, I’ve been refusing to think the worst. I’ll never admit this to Steve, but I’m sure that Muriel ran off to find herself, to have a fling, and to leave Steve in the lurch in such a cruel manner.

Lately, I’ve been thinking about something Muriel had flippantly confessed to me shortly before she disappeared from Steve’s life. “I need a fling,” she had said while we were lunching at the newly opened Coffee Plantation off Warner and 48th Street, next to the new Reay’s Market gourmet groceries. Muriel had confided in me that her life with Steve was routine and empty. No, vacuous. That’s the word she used. A vacuous life.

Muriel’s confession was shocking, and I’ve resisted telling Steve about it. I don’t want to betray my best friend’s confidence and upset Steve further. He’s confounded enough over Muriel’s leaving him without a word. He asked me into his life to help and support him and to care for his family. I accepted this role because I had always viewed “Steve and Muriel” as a happy couple, or at least a contented one destined to make it together through life, unlike me and that lousy ex of mine.

“This is a midlife thing,” I had told Muriel that day at the Coffee Plantation, and since then, I’ve regretted my stupid words of advice. “Steve’s a great husband,” I had told her. “You’ve said so yourself, many times. Take another literature class. Take on more hours of bookkeeping. 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?*” My own stupid words of advice have been haunting me since I uttered them to my best friend. *Did I inspire Muriel to take that trip? To flee her family?*

I felt strange about offering Muriel advice in the first place. It was an unusual occurrence between us. Muriel was the one who was always supportive of my messed-up life, not the other way around. Shortly before she took off, or whatever happened to her, I had been exploring the

newly launched website Match.com and had, in fact, begun actively dating. Muriel had been protective of me during that time, advising me about the various prospects and warning me that this guy sounded too self-absorbed or too unreliable or aggressive or too nice. “A man too nice has an abusive flip side,” Muriel had suggested.

How Muriel knew so much about men with only Steve in her life, I’m not sure. Perhaps it’s the trait of a sexy and beautiful woman. Perhaps Muriel knows a lot about human nature because she suffered much 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. I’m not.

If this turns out to be Muriel’s body, I’m horrified for Steve’s children. Who will tell them about their second mommy? I will, of course, unless Steve feels the tragic news must come from him. It’s logical that I be the one to tell them. I’m the one who told my own children about the divorce. I’m the one who pushed Juliette into college, as I did for my sons. It makes sense to tell Steve’s children. I owe it to Muriel. A few years back, Muriel helped me through a minor crisis. Juliette was sixteen, quite popular in school, and increasingly distant and snooty with me. One morning, while I was collecting laundry from the floor of her room, I found a marijuana joint in one of her desk drawers. The drawer had been slightly ajar, and I felt a surge of curiosity about what a sixteen-year-old keeps these days. I also wondered if she had a secret boyfriend.

Discovering the joint alarmed me. After the divorce, I had tried to communicate openly with my children about drugs, sex, and values like common courtesy and respect. I believed that my kids would come to me first before experimenting with anything. But Juliette hadn’t, and I felt incompetent, afraid that the next thing I would discover was that my daughter was pregnant. So I left the joint in the desk and confided in Muriel before confronting my daughter.

Muriel laughed, I remember, and said, “If I were you, I’d let this go. She’s a young woman and 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, I remember my own words as I now look at Juliette on the sofa. Muriel was right. Juliette never got involved with a bad crowd, and she never took any hard drugs. My daughter is now in college, and we communicate openly and frequently, usually over a glass of merlot. Had I not followed Muriel’s advice, I might have come down too harshly on Juliette and destroyed any trust she had in me. 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 have dealt with a lot of painful blows throughout my life.

I walk into the living room and look at my nineteen-year-old daughter, who’s watching an afternoon soap during her day off from Mesa Community College.

“They may have found Muriel’s body,” I tell her with tears in my eyes.

“Are you all right, Mom?” Juliette clicks off the soap.

“I’ll be fine. I hope,” I say as I hastily search through my purse for my car keys.

“Chances are good this isn’t Muriel.”

“God, Mom! A body! That’s terrible! Are you going to look at it?”

I open the door to leave. “Let’s pray it’s not Muriel. I don’t know if I could handle it if it’s her.”

“No doubt,” my daughter says as she turns the TV back on and sinks onto the sofa.

“Sometimes real-life drama is just like the soaps.”



Chapter 10: San Blas Islands

December 7–9, 1996

Muriel

At Kuna Eco-Travel near my hotel in Panama City, I tell the travel agent that I want to catch a ferry to Colombia, and she convinces me to buy a tourist package for a sailboat ride to Cartagena via the San Blas Islands. “The islands are a hidden tropical paradise in the crystal-clear Caribbean,” she tells me. “The 365 islands are part of Kuna Yala, an autonomous region of Panama. But the Kuna Indians have controlled the islands since they migrated there from Colombia in the 1600s.”

I’m already sold on the idea because of what Ivet had said about my seeing a Kuna *curandero* at San Blas. I feel like I can use 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, which is known as the gateway to San Blas. From Carti, a water taxi takes me to El Provenir Island, the capital of San Blas Islands. I get my travel visa and meet fellow passengers of the sailboat, taking us to the other islands and then onward to Colombia. 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 I left him 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 pirate," he quips. The two other passengers are Marcy and Brad, American backpackers. Marcy is about forty, from Venice Beach, she tells the captain, and she's 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, although I don't feel like engaging in conversation with them. Marcy's too annoyingly spiritual for me, as if always birthing into a channel or vortex.

Besides, Captain Black has the floor, and he likes to talk. He introduces his mate and cook as Gustavo Ramirez Perez, a Colombian in his early twenties. Then he says, "I usually take on four passengers, but I'm in need of a run, and I've settled for the three of you. Gratuity is not included in the tour price. I'm a buccaneer from Port Royal Jamaica! I come from Pensacola and have captained vessels since leaving the Navy in 1960. For thirty-six years, I've sailed the Caribbean, and for the past five years, I've been sailing this Irwin Cruiser between Panama and Colombia." He then raises a bottle of Captain Black and adds, "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 it. Colombia has the purest cocaine in the world." He laughs with an unabashed swagger.

Truthfully, I'm a bit apprehensive about joining the tour, after meeting this captain character. I'm putting my life in his hands, depending on him to take me sailing through the rough waters of the Caribbean. But I really feel like I have no choice in the matter. I paid for this ticket, and I doubt I could 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 he knows the sea.

Captain Black and his mate take our food orders to buy the supplies, and by late afternoon, we set sail. Marcy and Brad are relaxing with me on the deck, and 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 just can't figure them out. Are they friends, or are they related? But I'm not curious enough to ask, and I don't want to risk lengthy chitchat about them or about my background and purpose for traveling, and so on. They don't interest me enough. Marcy remarks that she admires my jadeite necklace, but that's about all that she says.

For our first night in San Blas, the captain anchors offshore, and we take the dinghy back and forth to an uninhabited tropical island that we have to ourselves. 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 that they're more into each other than anything else. It keeps them from bothering me. I'm no longer in a sociable mood, and my shipmates rub me the wrong way. However, after many hours alone together on a deserted island, I find myself growing more cordial to everyone in Sir Morgan's little group.

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 write. The swaying hammock in the warm breeze, the fresh smell of the sea, and the sound of brushing coconut fronds lull me into a deep, relaxing 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 soul. I have no unpleasant dreams, no toiling memories, just a peaceful, soothing sleep.

When the sun sets at 6:30, I take pictures of the horizon's orange and yellow hues hitting the aqua sea and the waves splashing onto the white beach with leaning coconut palms. The orange blaze from the bonfire ignites the scene. Everyone's drinking *siagwa*, a healthy native drink made of cocoa, sugar, and water. Captain Morgan and Gustavo serve us a dinner of coconut rice, plantains, yucca, corn, lobster, and grilled red snapper that Gustavo caught in the afternoon's surf.

When the bonfire roars and the day is long gone, the skipper and his mate hack off the tops of coconuts and fill them with Panamanian Rum. They serve yucca and corn chips, and we make smores at the bonfire. Soon, the scent of marijuana wafts in the warm sea air, along with the captain's pipe tobacco. Marcy and Brad sit across from me, with the orange blaze lighting their faces. They're nestled together, whispering, and making asides. I just can't figure them out,

except now I'm thinking that she's a world travel cougar with her prey, her boy toy, whom she picked up during her travels. I'm still not about to ask them what they're doing. It's not my business.

"These islands were once ruled by pirates," the captain says while drinking Captain Morgan and smoking his pipe. "That rascal Morgan infiltrated the Spanish main, as I do. But I 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 in San Blas, before heading to Colombia, is a stop in Kuna Village on one of the larger islands. Our captain anchors his sailboat, and we take the dinghy ashore to the village set in coconut palms. Bamboo huts and concrete structures with palm frond roofs line the tamped earth alleyways. The Kuna are a short, sun-rich people, and their colorful culture seems intact. Kuna men wear Western attire and hats, and the women sit on stools outside their bamboo huts and make the molas they wear and sell to tourists. I buy a mola vest big enough to cover my chest. It's obviously made for tourists.

"The Kuna have a matrilineal culture, and even a woman can be the head chief," the captain tells us as we walk through the village on the way to see a Kuna shaman. Back on the uninhabited island, I asked Captain Morgan if he knew of a Kuna *curandero*, remembering Ivet's suggestion. Although I feel upbeat and know I'm pregnant and cured, I want to make sure and maybe even learn my baby's gender. I'm hoping to have a little daughter, like Kristin.

The shaman turns out to be an old woman named Kuna Nele, who lives in a grass hut at the end of the main alley. Marcy and Brad wait outside for their turn to have a private session while I follow the captain inside and meet the old Kuna *curandera*. She's sitting on a small stool by the central hearth, wearing a tattered ethnic dress with molas reflecting her world. She's

wearing beaded anklets and bracelets, and a silver ring is piercing 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 across from Kuna Nele, who's preparing a brew made of native herbs and plants at the hearth. She offers me a cup, and I'm suddenly concerned about gulping it down. "Is this a hallucinogenic tea?" I ask the captain, who's standing nearby, as my translator. "I don't want to lose my mind. I just want a diagnosis."

"No worries," he tells me. "This is just a simple tea for the diagnosis. Not the cure. That comes later, for an additional offering."

Kuna Nele raises a crudely carved wooden doll. "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 evil spirits that are harming you because Kuna Nele has placed her own healing spirit into the doll. Now you must ask her your question or tell her your concerns."

The old woman stands from her stool and waves the spirit doll over me as I remain seated on the sod floor. She then urges me to drink more tea.

But I'm growing more concerned that I'm being drugged, and I don't want to harm the baby, so I impatiently ask, "Am I having a boy or a girl? And am I merely in remission, or am I cured once and for all?"

"*No te preocupes*," Nele says in Spanish. The captain then translates her Kuna words. "You're obsessed with pregnancy. You must not worry. *Estate calmado* or the harmful spirits won't leave you."

The old woman places her hand on my belly and then touches my jadeite bead necklace and admires it. Suddenly, she backs away and sits back on her stool. “*No tienes bebe. No estas curado. No tienes mucho tiempo.*”

“No baby!” I say in shock. “Of course, there’s a baby! I feel it. I’ve missed my period twice!”

“No baby. No cure,” the old Kuna woman says. She then 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 tell Captain Morgan that I’m ready to go and that 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!”

Later that evening, when we’re on the Sir Henry Morgan Irwin Cruiser, leaving the San Blas archipelago, I’m feeling like God has let me down again.

It takes a full day and night to sail along the Spanish main to Cartagena. Away from the stunning sight of the islands, there’s nothing to see but the vast Caribbean. Gustavo sails by day while Morgan sleeps in the cabin, and Captain Morgan sails at night on a smooth sea that bears the souls of his patron pirates, he tells us.

After dinner on the Irwin deck, the captain and his mate throw a party with music, rum, ganga, and stories from the seafaring lore. “I speak creole, patois, French, and Spanish,” the captain says. “I’ve lived through five hurricanes and have had five wives, some at the same time. One is a black voodoo priestess in Jamaica. Got kids scattered around the Caribbean; grandkids, too. My life has been nothing but rum and fun since my stint in the Navy.”

Halfway through the party, Marcy and Brad go below deck together, probably to snort some pure Colombian cocaine or share a bed. They’re not mother and son; that much is now clear. I sit near the captain at the helm, lean back on the seat cushions, and gaze at the celestial

sphere overhead. The large and small Magellanic Clouds adorn the edge of the Milky Way. I recall Arturo saying one romantic evening, “The Milky Way consumes the gas of the Magellan Clouds.” Also prominent in the night sky are the southern cross and the two pointer stars Alpha Centauri and Beta Centauri, the constellation the Incas called Chakana with the llama eyes. Arturo taught me how to point to the true South. “Take the long part of the cross and measure from top to bottom, then extend it four times to the true south.” I miss my Tico Castilian lover, the hidalgo man, especially now that I may have lost our child, if I even was pregnant. Since I left Kuna Nele’s hut, I have kept playing her words in my head, like a ringing in my ears: *No tienes bebe! No estas curado!* 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 is the beginning of my end*, and I cling to the hope that Kuna Nele was wrong.

“How did you navigate before GPS, Sir Morgan Black?” I ask the skipper to take my mind off my troubles.

“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. *The compass seeks the truth*, Columbus once said. Conquistadors used what we call dead reckoning, and they navigated according to the ship’s speed and the ocean’s currents. They figured out quadrants with inaccurate charts that are nothing like GPS, which points directly to the location.”

By ten thirty, I’m snuggled up in my stateroom bed, rocking with the sea. I rise late the next morning and stumble into the cabin, where Marcy and Brad are playing cards and smoking ganja. I grab a cup of coffee from the counter and join them at the table, now truly confined with my fellow passengers. 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 that the woman looks closer to 45 and wears lots of makeup with cracks.

“I plan to hike the Inca Trail,” I say, suddenly wanting to talk with positive enthusiasm to keep me from tumbling into self-doubt and depression.

“The spirit world is infused with natural remedies,” Marcy suggests, 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. I haven’t tried it yet, but it’s supposed to put you in touch with your past lives, clear up your emotions, and open a portal to the spirit world. I’ve heard that ayahuasca cleanses the soul of harmful demon spirits and heals any kind of ailment.”

By the end of a card 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. I’m not the least bit interested, but I thank Marcy and tell her I’ll join them, just to be pleasant and sociable.

Later that morning, Captain Morgan steers into Cartagena Bay. “In 1533,” he tells us as we stand on deck and watch the approaching port, “Cartagena was a walled city on the bay. The Spaniards took their stolen gold to Spain and imported slaves from Africa. English, Dutch, and French pirates, such as Sir Francis Drake, plundered and pillaged Cartagena. Sir Henry Morgan made a failed attempt to sack the city when the Catholic Church was trying to purge all of New Spain of its heresy. *Convert, leave, or die* was their motto.”

At the pier, Captain Morgan Black takes everyone’s passport for the immigration to stamp. When he returns, he tells us that taxis at the gate will take us to any hotel in the city. I give him a hundred-dollar bill, and he tips his cap and winks. Then I easily ditch my boatmate

friends, Marcy and Brad, and take a taxi to Rafael Núñez International Airport, where I catch the first Avianca flight to Quito, Ecuador, with a stop in Bogota.



Chapter 11: La Mitad del Mundo

December 10–17, 1996

Muriel

It's late afternoon when my plane arrives in Quito, a high-altitude city built at the equator atop Incan ruins. From the airport, a taxi takes me to the Centro Historico Town Hostel. Along the way, we pass trees, parks, statues in plazas, and white Spanish colonial cathedrals and buildings. After checking into a room, I return to the front desk and ask about a vegetarian restaurant within walking distance. I'm hungry and want to exercise in the fresh Andean air. The clerk recommends a Hare Krishna restaurant called Govinda Gopa, and he draws me a map of how to get there. "It's only a ten-minute walk," he assures me, "and it's the best vegetarian food in the city."

An hour later, after a hearty Indian meal, I'm returning to the hostel by the light from streetlamps and retracing my route on the map. *Izquierda. Derecho*, I think, as I walk in the middle of the nearly deserted street, away from parked cars and sidewalks edging buildings and alleys. I'm trying to be as safe as I can because the foreign streets in the darkness are creeping me out. I hide my purse in my jacket and tuck my jadeite necklace under my blouse collar. I feel vulnerable in the city's historic district, like a target for robbers prowling for tourists as prey. *Why did I put myself in this situation?* I keep asking myself. *And why had the hostel clerk assured me that the route was safe and that the restaurant was in a good part of town?*

I turn a corner and head down a narrow street I don't recognize. In the darkness, nothing looks familiar, and I know I'm probably lost. Panic begins to surge through my veins as I look ahead and wonder whether to turn around and head back to the restaurant or keep going. Then suddenly, halfway down the block, Ecuadorian soldiers begin approaching in the streetlight. They're wearing camouflage fatigues, tactical vests, and helmets, and carrying semi-automatic rifles. As they near me, I notice that their faces are smeared with olive-green and black camo.

As I've already started down the street, I quickly decide to continue toward the troops. I fear that if I turn around and run away from them, they may chase me or even shoot me as my actions will seem suspicious. I'm in a strange new country, and one that has obviously been having political unrest because these troops are patrolling the streets of their capital. Maybe they're friendly to foreign tourists, and one of them will help me with directions back to my hotel. It's not like I'm up to no good.

I continue casually walking in the middle of the street toward the soldiers. The troops begin passing by me, one by one. I would think I'm blocking their trooping of colors or something, but they're not marching in formation. They're individually patrolling along the street, and they're ignoring me as they pass. None of them say a word. I stare straight ahead and not at the passing troops, whose minds are on their mission. *Has there been a coup in Ecuador?* I keep wondering. *Was the president impeached? The current president is called El Loco, and his country is currently suffering from an economic crisis. Are there territorial disputes with Peru?*

The troops continue to pass, and I pick up my pace as I plow down the street, hoping to get behind the soldiers bringing up the rear. But they keep coming onto the street. At first a dozen, then it looks like twenty, and soon I feel like I'm surrounded by hundreds of troops. *Is*

this a platoon or a battalion? My fingers begin twitching, and my brow sweats, even in the cool night air. *Are they elite guards?* I wonder.

I look down the street as far as I can in the dim streetlight and begin seeing Inca warriors on patrol in the Inca city buried beneath Quito.

My mind tells me this is Tupac Inca's son Huayna Capac, seizing territory in the Andes and expanding the empire into this region. His vast army is made of Inca nobles and conquered men trained to be soldiers since they were ten. Inca braves have integrity, honor, and courage. Their lives belong to Sapa Inca, the Inca king. Their lives are tributes to the king's glory.

On my left and right, the camo soldiers pass by. El Loco is their president in command. I avoid their eyes, but I can tell they're glancing at me. I'm not invisible, but I'm also no threat. I hope this as much as I fear that I could be wrong. A dead-reckoning wrong.

Then again, I see the elite imperial Inka soldiers wearing black-and-white checkered tunics, red V-necks, and carrying slings, bolas, arrows, clubs, and star-headed manaca spears. Their wooden and leather shields bear the image of Inti, their sun god. Colorful bird feathers adorn their copper and leather helmets. Red war paint colors their expressionless faces. No one speaks. The soldiers on patrol are silent until their commander shouts, and the troops recite their battlecry: "Convert, leave, or die! In the name of Inti and the king, we are conquering soldiers." Conch shells sound, drums roll, and the soldiers enter the fray in hand-to-hand combat. They're determined to defeat all enemies of the king.

An Inca brave knows that when he dies in battle on the king's road, his fellow soldiers will bury him with his weapons where he falls, and he will transform into a hummingbird or a condor and fly straight to the place of the sun, moon, planets, stars, and constellations. The Chakana Cross guides their way to a place of light and darkness called Hanan Pacha. After he

dies in battle, the brave Inca warrior knows he will not crawl through the nine Aztec hells. He has already lived them.

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 patrolling rear guards had passed by me, I began to recognize the street I was on and some of the buildings, and was able to locate my position on the map that the concierge had drawn for me.

After breakfast in the hotel's dining room, I ask the hotel's travel agent about my sightseeing options in Ecuador. "We have the Andes, beaches, Amazon rainforest, and the Galapagos Islands," the agent tells me as I sit before her desk.

I'd go to the Galapagos if I weren't fucking dying! I want to say to the agent. But I tell her I'm looking for a place where I can collect my thoughts. Nele Kuna's revelations shattered my hopes and any optimism I once had. Not pregnant! Not cured! Not much time! Her words are constantly screaming at me, and I feel like I must now make new plans and pull myself together. My dreams dissolved into reality when the real became unreal. I'm probably not what I had convinced myself that I was. Most importantly, if I'm not cured or pregnant, then I no longer need to budget. So I tell the agent I'm looking for something luxurious in the mountains.

The agent suggests a mountain hacienda on 100,000 acres. "It was built 300 years ago on the site of an Inca palace. Simon Bolivar stayed at this hacienda during his travels between Bogota and Quito. He's the man who liberated Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia from Spain. The Hacienda Inn has mountain bikes for rental, horses for riding, a sanctuary for wounded and rescued condors, and a restaurant with Ecuadorian food grown in the hacienda's gardens."

I take a taxi to the Hacienda Inn to rest for a few days. My suite has antique Spanish colonial furniture made of tooled leather and hardwood teak. Most often, I order room service and eat on the balcony overlooking the llamas on the green lawns and the Andes volcanoes towering in all directions. 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 away because I'm not in the mood for New Age spiritualism. At present, I don't know my own spirituality. It somehow got lost at the break of ruination.

For dinner one evening, I decide to venture to the dining hall for a change. Wooden bookcases containing old Spanish and English books line one wall of the elegant room. There are several wooden tables and chairs and tapestries and rugs 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 speaking about their travels. I have no interest in *that's where I'm headed* travelers' chitchat, but I flash a smile at them and nod. A polite word. I'm no longer gregarious; I'm shattered and stunned by the Kuna *curandera's* revelations. I want to be alone, away from the fray. However, the conversation at the next table keeps grabbing my attention, and I can't help but listen while I eat my food. Three friends—a husband, his wife, and a man, it seems—are meeting up in Quito. The couple have just hiked the Inca Trail. All three are on their way to the Galapagos. The husband relays to his friend, "*A puppy bit him in Cusco. Three weeks later, he died of rabies while hiking on the Inca Trail. He started having chills and running a fever, but they couldn't get him treated in time. It happened so quickly....*"

What I overhear sends me into deep depression. Their story seems to be an omen, a part of my revelation. I leave my unfinished meal and return to my suite, feeling woozy from the thin, dry, high altitude. I feel the symptoms of something. After taking a deep breath, I plop down on

the king poster bed while thinking that God is putting me 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 fueled 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.

Promise. Belief. I set off on this journey to find a natural cure south of the border 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. But the Aztec 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 a certain death. Like dying of rabies on the Inca Trail.

I stare at the wrought-iron chandelier above me. Whom 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 the place of the forsaken souls living in despair. There's no way out of the ninth realm of hell, no possible way to escape, except to extinguish the spirit, the soul. I close my eyes and see panthers with bloody fangs stalking me. I see mountains collapsing on me and wind-blown knives flying 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 condor.

Have there not been angels along the way? A voice speaks in my head. Even the Aztec souls living in the nine hells had a spirit dog to guide them. The dog was brother to the feathered serpent.

The next morning, after suffering a restless night's sleep, I decide to leave my room and quit feeling so gloomy. A car with a driver from the hacienda takes me to the nearby village of Otavalo, which is famous for its artisan market and where I'm hoping to buy coca leaves and clothes for my hike in the Andes.

Volcanoes surrounded Otavalo. The village men wear rope sandals, white trousers, and ponchos. They have long black braids to their waists. Their fedora hats are the origin of the Panama hat. The women dress like Incan villagers in white embroidered blouses, shawls, long black skirts, gold-plated bead necklaces, and red coral bead bracelets, and they wear head scarves or fedoras. Otavalo has three separate markets for food, crafts, and animals. The animal market has llamas, guinea pigs, horses, and chickens. It isn't meant for tourists. In the food market, where I first go, vendor stalls are selling whole roast pigs, herbs, and locro de papa—a cheese and potato soup, but I cannot find coca leaves. From one stall, I buy a bitter green concoction that's "good for health," the vendor tells me. The drink is called sabila and is made of aloe vera, flaxseed, and linseed. After a few swallows, I'm feeling invigorated and infused with nutrients, vitamins, and minerals, and I make my way to the famed crafts market, where native vendors are selling their crafts to Ecuadorians and international travelers. White canvas stalls display colorful purses, bags, knitted ponchos, and llama wool tapestries.

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 will need on the Inca Trail, including a llama sweater and a vicuña wool blanket. I no longer want the necklace. It has probably cursed me because I ran away from the man who gave it to me. And my luck seemed to turn 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, and I accidentally bump into a Western woman, who says to her mate, “Watch out for her; she bumps into you and doesn’t even say excuse me.” I smile and move on through the crafts market, asking myself, *Have I become rude? Am I that out of touch?*

Suddenly, an Otavaleño woman in full costume appears before me. She looks about 50, although perhaps she’s really young. An infectious disease has eaten away most of her nose. It’s probably yaws, I’m thinking, which is 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. But she seems pleased. She has eyes to see it, and she doesn’t hesitate to take the offering and go on her way to show off her prize from the crazy American lady, the tourist in her city.

I make my purchases and return to the haven of my hacienda suite, feeling like I now need to travel to the heart of the Inca Empire to find a *curandero*, and hike the Inca Trail while I still can.

December 17, 1996

During the two-hour Avianca flight from Quito to Lima, I read about Peru’s President Alberto Fujimori, a man of Japanese descent and a controversial figure who survived a coup, an economic crisis, and a bitter divorce and then won a second term. His biggest threats when I arrive are the Maoist insurgents called the Shining Path and the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru or MRTA), named after the Incan warrior Tupac Amaru II, the leader of an uprising against the Spaniards. Ironically, his American rapper namesake, Tupac Shakur, was killed in Las Vegas while I was in Costa Rica. Even more ironic,

the day I arrive at Jorge Chavez International Airport, a terrorist attack is occurring in Lima. Fourteen members of MRTA enter the residence of the Japanese ambassador during a celebration for the Japanese emperor's birthday. They take five hundred hostages, including US officials, diplomats, business CEOs, and military officers.

Because of the hostage incident, I'm delayed at customs for a few hours, but after I leave the terminal, touts bombard me, as if I'm a celebrity. 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, which turns out to be a palace built in 1924 for the centennial of Peru's independence from Spain. On my way to the hotel through the urban sprawl, it becomes obvious that Lima has no emission tests. The public buses are old yellow school buses 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, such as Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand, once stood before the cheering public. For three days, I relax in my room, leaving it only to eat vegetarian food at restaurants in Miraflores, an elite section of Lima that's a little more orderly and cleaner. 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, and a travel agency at the airport arranges for one of its agents to meet me in Cusco, the heart of the Inca empire and its system of roads.



Chapter 12: Christmas in Sun City West

Steve Tyler

I'm thankful I never had to tell the kids or my folks about the gruesome body I saw in Tucson. And I thank the gods that it wasn't Muriel. I was also glad to have Betsy with me on the trip but thankful she wasn't allowed to view the body with me. She was spared the grisly task. I bravely went into that cold morgue examination chamber on my own, and when the coroner uncovered the corpse, I could immediately tell it wasn't Muriel. The chest was too small, and the hands were too large. I also couldn't recognize the clothes. And I could tell it wasn't Muriel's face, despite the fact that something had gnawed away at the corpse's nose and badly damaged the features.

On the way home from Tucson, it was dark and rainy, and I had to concentrate on my driving. Betsy started asking me to describe the body. I'm not certain why. I already told her that it wasn't Muriel, and that should've been enough. But Betsy was curious for some reason, so I told her point blank that I didn't want to talk about it, and she didn't press the issue. Muriel probably would have. And we may have even argued about it. Who knows? But I didn't want to say anything. Of course, I was relieved that it wasn't Muriel, but I felt terrible about whoever she was and what had happened to her. How did she end up dead and decaying in the desert? The Tucson police wouldn't tell me anything, such as whether or not she had been murdered. Then again, it must have been a homicide, unless the poor woman simply got lost in the desert and

wandered away from her home, like Muriel. I felt bad for her and for whomever she belonged to—her husband, parents, children, and other loved ones. I felt bad thinking that maybe no one would ever identify her. So yes, I was relieved that it wasn't Muriel, but I also felt guilty, as if I were doing penance for some kind of sin. Maybe for being a neglectful husband. Maybe for driving my wife away. Simply put, I had too many emotions wrapped up in that poor dead woman's corpse, and I couldn't wait to get back home and have a beer. Thankfully, Betsy kept quiet for the rest of the drive, and I kept my focus entirely on the road. I wanted nothing else but to get the image of that poor woman's missing face out of my head.

For Christmas day dinner at my parent's house in Sun City West, I bring along Betsy. She's been taking care of my kids for ten months, and I've grown quite attached to her. She's a good friend these days, although we still don't talk beyond casual concerns about my children's needs. But lately, I've been thinking about pushing our friendship up a notch. Maybe tonight, after we get home. Besides, I think it's about time Mom gets used to the fact that Betsy's becoming part of my life. Mom should be grateful; after all, she didn't have to move in with me, as she had when Angeline died. She gets to see her grandkids when she wants to—on weekends, rather than all the time.

Everything goes well with the meal catered by Creative Cuisine in Sun City West. I think Mom gave up preparing big holiday meals soon after she turned sixty. But we never really had big family fanfare dinners, and when we did, it was only with an uncle, an aunt, a few cousins, and my late brother.

Dad and I drink Amstel beers, the kids drink grape juice, and Betsy drinks a wine cooler that we brought along because I knew my parents would have only Dad's Amstel beer. When

Betsy offers my mother a cooler, Dad tells his standard joke, “Mom’s too young to drink.” The fact is, my mother has never drunk alcohol in her life, and I think Dad started telling this joke when they moved to Sun City West.

Dad says grace before he carves the turkey and takes the first bite. Although we’re Unitarian and not really believers in my parents’ religion, I believe that tradition is good for my kids, which is why we’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, Dad asks me, “What kind of computer should I buy, Son?” He has an old Tandy and wants to upgrade to something more technically modern.

“Anything with an Intel Pentium chip,” I tell him. “Had I known you wanted a new computer, Dad, I would have gotten you one for Christmas instead of a sweater.” He laughs.

I notice that my mother isn’t saying much to Betsy, beyond a polite word or two. I’m Mom’s only child, and I know she doesn’t always like my choices in women, except for my first wife, Angeline, the mother of her two beloved grandchildren. Mom wants only what’s best for me, but I’ve gone through two wives, and now I’ve brought a hair stylist to her holiday table. Mom isn’t asking Betsy any probing questions because, I detect, she has no interest in her grandchildren’s *nanny*. So I try to engage Betsy and my dad while Mom talks to her grandkids about their school activities and their 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 during TV commercials, Mom and Dad run 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,” he says.

Then Kristen chimes in, “When’s Mommy coming home?”

Nobody says anything until my dad asks for the gravy. The kids already know the answer. Mommy Muriel has gone away, and it’s unlikely she’ll be returning. But at least, as I often tell my children, she didn’t die, as their first mommy, Angeline, did.

Betsy Sanders

The evening is dark when Steve and I finally leave Sun City West with the kids staying with their grandparents. It was a terrible experience for me, sitting with Mr. and Mrs. Tyler, Steve’s parents. I know his mother was evaluating me for the entire meal. I tried to be polite, to draw her in. I even made comments about how nice her hair was. “Very stylish,” I said, although I doubt that I meant it. But the old lady was uppity toward me, and I disliked her more and more during the dreadful meal.

Now I’m sitting in the passenger seat of Steve’s brand-new silver Explorer. He donated the Taurus to charity. While Steve is driving east on Bell Road, we discuss what Kevin and Kristen said during dinner about Muriel. Then I mention that Steve’s mom made me feel uncomfortable.

“She’s just being Mom,” Steve assures me. “She’ll get used to you after she sees how good you are with her grandkids. And Betsy.” He takes his eyes off the dark road for a moment to look at me and smile. “You’ve been my lifeline. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate your stepping in and helping me out with the kids. Forget about my mother. She is who she is. But I think you’re a wonderful and compassionate woman. As good a friend to me now as you were to Muriel.”

Steve’s words flattered me, and I’m sensing that he may have certain intentions for tonight. He’s a bit short and chunky, I’ve always thought, but he’s a productive, stable man with

a good, solid income and career. Long ago, my Pakistani boyfriend dumped me when he returned to his country for a prearranged marriage. And none of my Match.com dates have panned out. Secretly, since I first came to Steve's aid, I've been hoping he would take notice of me. I may not be as attractive as Muriel, but I do have a lot to offer, and Steve seems to be taking this into account. Even though she's gone, I sometimes feel like Muriel's preventing Steve and me from getting too close to each other. I've wanted to push things further with Steve, but I've never crossed the line. I do have scruples. Until tonight. I'm hoping for something more than my being his nanny and helper. I want him to start thinking of me as a potential new wife.

"Muriel wanted a fling," I blurt out as I watch the freeway traffic zoom all around us.

"Fling?" Steve responds. "No, never! Muriel was devoted to me and the kids." He hesitates a moment, his eyes firmly on the dark freeway ahead. "Did she tell you something?" he then asks me.

I look at him, my hands folded on my lap, and describe my conversation with Muriel at the Coffee Plantation.

"Betsy, you've done it once again!" Steve nearly yells, obviously angry. "You withheld pertinent information! Why would you do that?"

We're both quiet for a moment as we travel south on I-17. "I did it for you," I finally admit. "You're such a good man, with so much grief 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 me what I know about the Inca sacrifices in the Andes. He then tells me about the Nat Geo article by Johan Reinhard that he had 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 all this?”

I’m beside myself now because Steve’s thinking about Muriel and not me. Again. Why? I ask myself. Muriel left him, and I’ve stepped in. And I know how to take care of matters. I’m very maternal—more so than Muriel ever was—because I raised my own kids. However, I know very little about anything other than the beauty industry. I’m not like Muriel, my best friend and client. I read *People* magazine and watch Oprah and soaps, while Muriel reads *The New Yorker*. But I like Steve, and he needs my nurturing comfort. It’s a two-way proposition, as it had been for Muriel.

After a moment to collect my thoughts, I tell Steve, “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, and others. Steve, did she ever say anything to you about the ancient Inca civilization?”

My question seems to have caught him off guard, and he’s trying to concentrate on his driving. Christmas evening on the I-10 south is busy, with traffic headlights in the dark. “Well, no,” he finally says. “I didn’t know she even went to my parents’ house shortly before she left.”

I’ve nothing more to say because I’m convinced that I’ve already blown it with this man. But then Steve drives straight to Night Hawk Way and invites me inside to watch a movie and have a drink. “Braveheart or Bridges of Madison County,” he asks as I comfortably sit on his sectional sofa. “Your choice. And would you like another wine cooler or a Corona or an O’Doul’s Non-Alcoholic Beer?”

“Another cooler would be great,” I say, feeling quite happy with how the evening is turning out, after all. Maybe with another cooler or two, I’ll start losing all my inhibitions. That’s what I want to do after a stiff, formal, and unpleasant night at Jim and Bette Tyler’s.

Steve makes microwave popcorn and then sits in his recliner instead of next to me on the sectional. *He’s still being formal*, I’m thinking, *like his dreadful mom*. But after an hour into Braveheart and a wine cooler for me and a few Coronas for him, Steve leaves the room for another beer and cooler, and when he returns, he sits beside me, puts an arm around me, and begins kissing me.

“Steve,” I say, eager to consummate a relationship.

But Steve’s mood suddenly changes. He pulls back and says, “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 the Explorer and left me and my kids.”

He seems to be on the verge of crying, which is not very appealing in a man. I do my best to comfort him and then confess what Muriel told me about her having a vacuous marriage. “She wanted to take a trip.”

Steve is stunned by what I’ve said. He takes his arm off my shoulder and scoots away. He calls my revelation another betrayal of our confidence. “I’ve trusted you, Betsy. 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. Why didn’t you tell me this vital information from the get-go?” he asks. “Or you could have told the police what Muriel said. Then guess what? Mystery solved. Muriel left Steve to raise his own kids. Betsy, thank you.”

I feel like a fool for not being forthright until now. I truly care for this man and his children, but I just don't know what to say, so I remain quiet and disappointed that, yet again, Muriel is coming between Steve and me.

"I accept that Muriel has abandoned me," Steve finally admits, putting his hand on my knee. It seems he's returning to his amorous mood. It's what he wants to focus on, I can tell. "The year's coming to a close, and I want a relationship with you, Betsy. Help me be a man, and help me with my kids. Will you spend the night with me?"

I place my hand on his, smile, and then say that I'd be more than happy to move in. All my kids have moved out, and I'd love to quit paying rent on the house and have such a stable man take care of my needs as I take care of his. I've struggled to make ends meet for a long time, since my philandering and no good ex-husband left me. I've struggled to raise three kids on a hairdresser's income. I did all right, as Muriel herself said. But now, I want an easy life, a free ride, and no more rocky roads. And I believe, with all my heart, that Steve will give me just that. I have Muriel to thank for everything, it seems, and I almost feel like she left this man for my benefit, for the well-being of her best friend.



Chapter 13: Cusco, Heart of the Inca Empire

December 20

Muriel

The temperature of Cusco is in the fifties when I arrive, but the sun bears down intensely in the high 10,860-foot altitude. A short, middle-aged Peruvian man in slacks and a dress shirt holds up a sign that says, “Sra. Arizona.” His name is Salvador Filipe, and he’s my Cusco tour guide. He escorts me via taxi to the Colonial Palace Hotel, an old hotel with a large central courtyard.

On the way to my hotel in the ancient colonial city, I see street vendors sitting on stools or curbs beneath umbrellas. Blankets before them display crafts, food, knockoff Cartier perfume bottles, and Inca relics. The Quechua women have two long braids and are wearing bowler hats that they baked in the sun. They dress in colorful textiles with embroidery, beads and tassels, and woven chumpi belts that hold up their skirts. “Quechua women use the chumpi to carry their infants,” Salvador tells me from the front passenger seat. “The men use them to carry firewood.”

Most of the men I see are wearing red woven ponchos and knitted chullos, caps with earflaps, and tassels that the Quechua men knit. “The Quechua women do the weaving, and the men knit their own chullo hats,” Salvador says. “Their culture is as ancient as the pyramids of Egypt. The Incas adopted the Quechua language, and like the Inca, the Quechua of today are

herders of llamas and alpacas and farmers of potatoes, quinoa, squash, beans, and maize. For one hundred years, Inca kings ruled the Andes, which has an enormous network of roads stretching from Quito to Argentina and from the Andes to the Pacific Coast. They called their empire Tawantinsuya, which means Four Sections of the Empire.”

I check into my room, freshen up, and then meet Salvador in the lobby to discuss my plans in Cusco. The hotel serves me coca tea to help me adjust to the high altitude. Salvador advises me to drink plenty of water and chew coca leaves while in the Andes. “Coca leaves are a natural remedy for soroche,” he says. “Andes people have been using coca leaves for thousands of years. Inca runners chewed them so they could run along the mountain roads. You can buy coca leaves in markets and on the streets.”

“I’m here for Inti Raymi at Sexy Woman,” I say. I had read about the Incan winter solstice festival in my AAA travel literature that I left in the Explorer.

“Señora, you’re in the Southern Hemisphere. It’s our summer solstice now. Winter solstice is summer solstice down here. June 24 is when you must come to Cusco for the Inti Raymi at Sacsayhuamán.”

I smile and sip my calming tea. I’m not disappointed, and I don’t feel befuddled by my mistake. I know about the different hemispheres on Earth. I just forgot to make the adjustment, and I simply blurted out the suggestion, even though it’s not really my primary objective for coming to Cusco. “Oh, I know that,” I say, “but I still want to be there for the solstice.”

“I’m at your service, Señora Arizona. What else can I do for you?” Salvador sits straight as he awaits my requests. His face is round, his eyes are droopy, and he has a relaxed, casual disposition and a positive aura. 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 is a travel agent and not a hustling tout.

Since leaving San Blas Islands, I've been feeling funny in my breasts at times. My stomach is also slightly acidic, and I'm fatigued and have a palpating heart. It could be psychological, though. The power of Kuna Nele's negative suggestions. Or butterflies of nerves, perhaps. Now, I'm hoping it's only the altitude. "I want to see a *curandero* and hike the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu. That's what I really want to do."

"You must be careful, Señora. There are plenty of *brujos malos* in Cusco. Black magic. Voodoo. I'll take you to the best Quechua *curandero* in Cusco. His name is Quenti Quespe, which means Bejeweled Hummingbird. He can balance your spirit, cure any illness you may have, and bring you good fortune. However, Señora Arizona, it takes seven days for the cure to take effect. Give yourself time to acclimatize. I will be your translator and guide."

Dieta of Bejeweled Hummingbird

In the coolness of that evening, Salvador wears a llama wool sweater as he escorts me to the San Blas barrio of Cusco. We walk along narrow cobblestone steps and alleyways edged by whitewashed buildings with red tile roofs and enter one of the houses, where I meet the Quechua *curandero* Bejeweled Hummingbird. He's 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. On the walls, as Salvador points out, are pictures of St. Joseph, Our Lady of Mercy, St. Martin de Pores, St. Rosa of Lima, and Jesus on the Cross. On the table, which Salvador calls the *curandero's mesa*, are rosary beads and *khuyas*—the healing objects, which include knives, stones, bones, coca leaves,

jars of cologne, and seashells. Beside the *mesa* are wicker cages containing live and gibbering guinea pigs called *cuy*.

My session begins when Bejeweled Hummingbird lights candles on his *mesa* and chants in the four directions. “He’s creating the sacred space,” Salvador explains. “Jesucristo is the center of his *mesa*, as Cusco is the center of the Inca world. The *curandero* is traveling through the three worlds to learn your ailment. The world above is heaven, Hanan Pacha. We live on Mother Earth, Kay Pacha. And the world below, we call Ukhu Pacha. It is the place where bad people go. Bejeweled Hummingbird will bring you the healing powers of these three worlds. He will mend your *kawsay*, your life force, and heal your body, mind, heart, and soul. But you must focus on your *kawsay* and be positive about your healing.”

The *curandero* speaks, and Salvador translates, “Awake, remember your Creator! Remember who you are. Open the hidden door of death, and find salvation. *Hayllalla* is what we call salvation.”

“Have you come to our mountains for a cure, señorita?” 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 magical and spiritual powers.” With dry, leathery hands, he feels my pulse and forehead and looks deeply into my eyes. He gestures that I sit on a stool beside his *mesa*, then he takes a guinea pig from its cage and resumes his chanting.

“He chants to send away bad spirits,” Salvador explains, while the *pasos* rubs the squirming animal on my arms, legs, stomach, chest, and head, as Nele Kuna did with her Nucha doll. “*Cuy* absorbs the illness so the *pasos* can diagnose a remedy,” Salvador says.

The shaman stops chanting and, without any warning, chokes the cuy. I gasp as I watch him slit its belly over a pan and dissect the entrails to make his diagnosis.

After the *curandero* explains what he's learned, Salvador translates that I suffer from an irritated uterus, parasites, and an imbalance of heat and cold in my organs because of my childhood traumas. "He says you're sad. You're suffering an emotional ailment."

I say nothing as I watch the old *curandero* go to his *mesa* and spread out a sheet of brown paper. "Now, Bejeweled Hummingbird is making your *ayni despacho*. It's an offering for Mother Earth Pachamama and the Apu gods of these mountains." He uses sugar to draw a cross in a circle, then adds corn kernels, quinoa, coca leaves, flower petals, barks, leaves, and roots. As a final touch, he drips wax from the lit candle onto my *ayni despacho*. He ceremoniously folds the offering, wraps it in cloth, and ties it with a string. While chanting, he rubs the tightly bound bundle over my head while blowing cigarette smoke on me.

"He's cleansing you and asking the saints, Pachamama, and the Apu gods for your healing. Bejeweled Hummingbird will burn your *ayni despacho* on a mountain pass so that the mountains can absorb the smoke of your offering. It's a ritual too powerful for you to watch. He will ask Pachamama to protect and heal you."

At the end of my session, the *curandero* recommends my *dieta* for the next week. He tells me not to consume sugar, salt, alcohol, or caffeine; not to socialize, have sex, or contemplate anything negative; and to rest and drink his herbal teas, take many showers, and eat the Andean diet of quinoa, pumpkin, purple potatoes, sweet potatoes, chili peppers, and corn. For me, it's just another immersion program, like my one-on-one Spanish lessons, and it's a diet I already embrace. Bejeweled Hummingbird gives me the address of a vegan restaurant in Cusco, and

Salvador promises to escort me there and to the market, where I can buy the ingredients for my herbal teas.

Christmas in Cusco, December 1996

During the following few days, I spend most of my time 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 the Nat Geo article at the Sheridan Bookstore in Lima. The pictures and stories keep me engrossed until Salvador arrives to escort me to the pasos for my daily prayers and herbal tea treatment.

I ask Salvador to show me the sites in Cusco. Despite the *curandero*’s instruction that I not talk, I’m keen on exploring the heart of the Inca Empire. But I keep mostly quiet as Salvador explains his Andean heritage. He first takes me to Plaza de Armas, a public gathering place since the Inca king Pachacuti built the city in the shape of a puma. In the 1600s, the Spanish built the colonial cathedral that now fronts the plaza. “It’s called Our Lady of Assumption of the Virgin,” Salvador tells me. In the plaza’s center is a bronze statue of King Pachacuti on a three-tiered fountain. “Pachacuti was the first Sapa Inca,” Salvador says, as the fountain sprays us with mist. He gestures that I stand in the statue’s shade. “Nine Inca kings reigned before him, but Pachacuti expanded the Inca Empire beyond Cusco. He conquered other Andean people and called his empire Tawantinsuyu, *el cima del mundo*, the top of the world. Pachacuti spread Inca culture and religion throughout the Andes. He had a son, Tupac Inca, who also had a son, Huayna Capac, whose son, Atahualpa, was the last Inca king. Atahualpa ruled Tawantinsuyu until Francisco Pizarro conquered the Incas and stole all their gold. The Spanish betrayed Atahualpa and executed him before the St. Dominican Cathedral. The conquistadors destroyed the Inca Empire. Their diseases killed many Andean people, and the Spanish forced those who survived to convert

to Christianity. But the people of the Andes still pray to the Inca gods. We kept our ways and share the magic of our mountains with tourists like you, Señora Arizona.”

Salvador next escorts me to the temple complex called Coricancha, which is the main focus of Cusco. He shows me the oldest wall in the city and explains that 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,” he says. “These nuns are like the Inca chosen maidens, except they’re mostly old women who embroider and use rosary beads when they pray for people’s salvation. But during the time of Pachacuti, Sapa Inca sent his men to search the empire for beautiful maidens between eight and twelve to live in the Acllahuasi. They were called *acllas*, and they cooked the king’s food, made his chicha beer, and wove his clothes. Sapa Inca wore his clothes only once, and then his priests burned them as an offering to their sun god Inti. After an *aclla* first bled, 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 of the king’s chosen maidens married his warriors and noblemen, or the king himself. When the king won a great victory or after a natural disaster, he selected the most beautiful *aclla* to sacrifice as an offering to the gods.” I mention to Salvador the Inca boy sacrifice now in a Chilean museum, and he suggests that sometimes the king chose Inca boys for sacrifice.

On Christmas Eve, I leave my hotel and walk to Plaza de Armas without Salvador. I sit on a green bench and reread my Nat Geo while waiting for a great celebration to happen. For some reason, although no one’s told me this, I’m expecting a procession of Quechua men carrying the Virgin Mary and Saints through the public square, while women are twirling their colorful skirts in dance. But nothing occurs on Christmas Eve, except the normal evening activity; a few tourists are crossing the plaza, and Quechua men and women are sitting on

benches, chatting, or strolling along the parkway avenues. One Quechua woman approaches me and hails me with a censor of smoke. I feel blessed and am glad that at least something has happened this Christmas Eve. I give the woman a dollar and return to the Colonial Palace Hotel.

At noon on Christmas day, I meet Salvador in the hotel lobby to discuss my plans with him. After a week of following my new *dieta*, I'm feeling a resurgence of strength and am certain Cusco has blessed me. Maybe now I'm truly well. Maybe Kuna Nele was wrong, at least about my not having been cured.

I sit on the lobby's velveteen sofa and am 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, *El Nacimiento*, with dried mosses, algae, and cones that local Quechua vendors had brought to the market to sell specifically for such nativity scenes. It has plastic angels, shepherds, Mary, Joseph, three wise men, and the baby Jesus in a straw manger, with his arms raised. Fresh boughs of fir edge the display and scent the lobby.

Salvador pours me a cup of coca leaf tea. "I'm acclimatized now," I tell him with confidence. "I believe the *dieta* of Bejeweled Hummingbird has cured me, and I'm ready to hike the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu. I want nothing to stop me from this, if it's the last thing I'll do on my way to the end of the world."

Salvador warns me that it's the rainy season and then politely says, "Señora Arizona, you recently underwent treatment for an ailment. The trail will be muddy in some places, and the climb is long and tiresome, high among the mountain gods."

"I was only suffering from soroche and disappointment. I wanted to be pregnant," I admit, "but I'm not." I'm suddenly feeling a surge of hope and promise, and I add, "Salvador, a

little rain or mud from Illapa won't stop me. Besides, I can't just go away and come back in June. I'm here now, and I want to hike the Inca Trail and then travel on to Lake Titicaca."

Salvador chuckles and says, "When you make prayers to the mountains, Jesucristo 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 say, and my agent tells me he will arrange for me to join an organized tour. "No," I reply quickly. "I want to hike the trail alone, just I 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 in mind for you, but it will cost much more money than a tour group will."

"I can pay whatever it takes," I assure Salvador. Then, after a moment of thought, I add, "If I can't make it to Machu Picchu, then tell them to bury me where I die. Isn't that an Inca proverb? Wasn't an Inca warrior buried with his weapons in the place where he died in battle or on the Inca roads?"

Salvador gives me a puzzled look and tells me he must go and make the arrangements for my guide and purchase my ticket for a luxury sleeper on the train from Cusco, through the snowcapped Andes, to Puno, Lake Titicaca.

For several minutes, I remain alone in the lobby and look across the room at *El Nacimiento*. The night before, on Christmas Eve, I remember the hotel clerk assembling the nativity display. 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.



Chapter 14: Warmiwañusca—Dead Woman’s Pass

December 28

Muriel

At 5 a.m. sharp on the day I’m leaving for my trek, the phone in my room 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, and then I grab my knapsack containing personal toiletries, sunscreen, a camera, a change of clothes, and herbal teas for my continuing *dieta*. I’m also bringing my wool blanket from Otavalo, and I put on the Cartier knock-off watch I bought 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 place to place. From *huaca* to *huaca*, perhaps. I’ve already made arrangements with the hotel to leave my ThinkPad in their storage. My intention is to retrieve it after my trek, before I catch the train to Bolivia.

In the lobby, I meet Salvador and a young man of perhaps seventeen, while the bellboys are taking down *El Nacimiento*. Salvador introduces the young man to me as Raulito Torres. He’s 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 brows, and a clean boyish face with a honey-smooth complexion. His nose is slightly broad, and he has Asian eyes. “Raulito has worked with tourists all his life,” Salvador adds. “He’s a Q’ero Quechua, last of the

Incas. His ancestors hid from conquistadors in the cloud mountains. Fourteen thousand years ago, at the end of the last Ice Age, his ancestors migrated from Asia long before the Q'ero Quechua settled in the Andes Mountains. Before that, people believe they came from the Pleiades stars."

"I'm impressed," I say. "I don't even know where my people came from or where they now are." I'm trying to be funny, but what I'm saying is pretty much true.

"I'm your guide and cook on the Inca Trail, from EcoTours Peru." The young man stands and shakes my hand. He's smaller than me, like most Quechua people. "*Encandado*, Señora Arizona." He repeats my name until he says it correctly, and tells me it's a beautiful name, one he's never heard of before. A name that suits me quite well. "Condors fly in the Andes," he adds, "the longest mountain range in the world. I will guide you to the top of the world. On Machu Picchu, you will see a rock temple that the Inca shaped into condor wings to worship our natural world."

I immediately like Raulito and agree to pay him twenty dollars a day, plus the cost of food and the porter. How can I resist the charm of such glowing youth? His English is much better than my Spanish.

Later in the morning, Salvador says goodbye as Raulito and I board the train to Kilometer 88, the trailhead to the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu. Raulito carries my tent and sleeping bag, a pack with his cooking equipment, and some of my Andean vegetarian food. He suggests that we buy bottled water and food from village stores along the trail.

The Kilometer 88 trailhead lies beyond wooden shacks and across a steep, narrow ravine. It's already crowded with Quechua porters looking for work and gringos in tour groups when we arrive. The gringos are mostly youthful Israelis and Europeans, Olympic types who are probably

wondering what I—a woman old enough to be their mother, or nearly so—am attempting to do.

The trekkers are adjusting their day packs and enjoying beer from a vendor awaiting the return of his bottles. The porters are young men in woolen red ponchos and colorful chullos who are waiting for a tourist to hire them as an additional porter to their tour group. The sky is clear, with wispy clouds touching the snowcapped peaks.

“The Andes penetrate the blue skies of heaven,” Raulito says as he sets down our gear on the grass by the trailhead. “They’re Apu, the Inca gods at the top of the world.”

Raulito talks to the porters and then suggests that I hire a sixteen-year-old with a cold sore above his lip. Among the porters present, he seems to be the most eager and in need of work. He’s short, stout, and honey complexioned, with dimples on his round face. He’s wearing a well-worn sweater and cholla. “His name’s Teddy,” Raulito tells me. “I know him and his family. He’s a good porter, and he’ll help me prepare your meals. He also plays the panpipe.”

“Teddy?” I ask. “What’s his real name?”

“That’s his real name. He was born when his father took a gringo on the trail. That gringo *se llama* Teddy.”

After most trekkers leave with their guides, the hired 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 porters carry their loads with woven straps around their foreheads called *mecapals*. “They’ll set up camp an hour before the hikers arrive. Quechua porters are like the *chaski* Inca runner,” Raulito informs me as we start up the wide trail side by side. He’s hauling my knapsack and his own while I’m carrying a bottle of water. “The Incas didn’t have Nokia cellphones, Señorita Arizona.” He smiles at his joke. “Inca runners were fit, young men and boys. They ran on the

Inca roads and delivered quipus to the king. Quipus are strings tied in knots that record information.” He looks at me and adds, “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 become tired.”

“I never asked for a horse,” I say. “Do you think I won’t make it to Machu Picchu? What did Salvador tell you 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 when you can.”

“Is there a *curandero* in this sacred valley,” I ask, “who can take me on a spiritual journey with ayahuasca?” Lately, I have been thinking about what Marcy said about ayahuasca back on Captain Morgan’s boat. I’m generally opposed to drugs and medications, but I feel like taking drastic measures in my topsy-turvy journey to the end of the world. I’ve been cursed, cured, blessed, and then cursed again, but I’m still hoping for a permanent cure.

Raulito tells me he knows a *curandero* who treats tourists with ayahuasca, but he recommends that I wait until after the hike to Machu Picchu. “Ayahuasca is a strong therapy. It may take you many days to recover.”

The first part of the Inca Trail consists of tropped earth and stones. It gradually creeps uphill beside the Cusichaca River, which loudly gushes down the valley. The wildflowers, prickly pears, and scrub brushes along the trail are similar to those in Arizona. As we trek along, Raulito points out jays, grosbeaks, cock-of-the-rock, and condors soaring in the thermals.

Whenever we stop to rest, he likes to tell me to look at the snowcapped mountains enshrouded in mist all around us—at our backs, in front of us, to our left, and to our right.

At one point down the trail, I tell Raulito, “You can go ahead of me for a while, if you like. I want to contemplate these spectacular mountains. Take mental pictures of them.” I’ve been stopping repeatedly to catch my breath, chew on coca leaves, and deeply inhale the cool, thin mountain air. Until Quito, I never realized what a luxury oxygen could be. “You said there won’t be any ruins until after the first pass,” I add. “You don’t have to explain anything to me until then.”

“I can’t leave you, Señorita Arizona,” Raulito protests. “In the mountains and trees live awki spirits. Some are good, but many are bad. I know the signs of their mischief, and I can protect you from harm. To stay with you is my job. It is not a problem to go slowly. We stop whenever you like. Salvador said you’ve been sick with *efermedad de alturo*.”

“I’m fully recovered now,” I insist, “and well acclimatized. Just a bit out of shape. I’ve never done anything like this before. Just day hikes with the kids....” I’ve slipped, I quickly realize, by 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 feel relieved, and we continue along the trail, passing 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 since he was twelve, the Pope’s visit to Peru several years before, and the Quechua and Incas. 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 had 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.

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 that I need to catch my breath.

"A Quechua Inca shrine?" I ask about the stone pile.

"This is an apacheta shrine that marks this mountain pass. Travelers passing by must leave rocks, coca leaves, shells, or clay figurines as offerings to the gods. This is an ancient *huaca* on a line pointing to a star. It's a good place to pray to Pachamama and the Apu grandfather of the mountains."

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 now is to see Machu Picchu. Nothing else," I say in short breaths.

"The horse will be here soon. Don't worry, señorita."

"You're so lucky to be from these mountains," I remark, awed by my surroundings. High in the Andes, each step I take feels like I'm having a moment of clarity. "I was born and bred in Arizona. But, really, where's my piece of Earth? I'm certainly nothing like you and your ancestors. 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 *siq'i* lines." Raulito laughs at my joke. "My ancestors are a migratory people." I pause for a moment to deeply inhale the rarified air. "Like your people 14,000 years ago. When you get right down to it, we're all migratory people in one big ecosystem. We're all originally from Africa, Java, or someplace like that. Maybe even the Pleiades. The Andes have drawn me here. And I feel like I belong here,

even though I'm not Quechua or Incan. Or even South American. Where should I claim I'm from if not these Andes mountains?"

Raulito gives me a puzzled look, trying to understand but seemingly unable to. In a moment, he says, "*Entonces*, señorita, you're here all right. We wait here 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 Teddy whistle. My young guide whistles back, and the porter appears, riding a scrawny horse. Not the kind of horse at a riding ranch in Arizona.

"In two hours, we'll arrive at the village of Huayllabamba, which means Place of Good Pastures," Raulito says, as he and Teddy help me on the brown mare. I'm fatigued but want to appear strong, invincible, like someone bound to reach the royal fortress retreat 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?" I say.

"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, as it must be for you now. Then 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 the log bridge near Huayllabamba Village. Then we pass corn fields and stone houses where dogs are dozing and pigs, chickens, and goats are foraging for feed in the muddy yards. Raulito says, "Maize is grown

in the Sacred Valley because it's low enough in elevation. From maize, my people make *chicha de jora*. Tonight, we will drink this traditional Inca maize beer."

"My *dieta* doesn't allow alcohol," I tell him.

"You can make an exception tonight. Chicha is a natural remedy made of sprouted corn. It's not like pisco sour."

Raulito tugs the horse uphill. Many gringos are hiking through the village on their way to the nearby ruins, where their porters have already pitched tents. Many 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. On the grassy hillside, between large, mossy stones, Raulito points to an emerald hummingbird hovering over red trumpet flowers. "As beautiful as a butterfly," he says. "In Quechua, we say *munaycha gente*."

Farther up the trail, we arrive at the hut of the family who owns the mare I'm riding. Their home is made of stone and mudbrick, with a thatched roof. Beyond the hut are terraced hillsides and stone corrals for five horses and perhaps one hundred llamas. A stone wall surrounds the front yard and borders the Inca Trail. In the yard, chickens are wandering among evergreen trees with gnarly trunks, and some of them are jumping over the stone wall to forage on the trail.

We enter the yard, and Raulito helps me off the horse while the Quechua horseman holds the bridle reins and greets me with a grin. He's in his thirties and dressed in a red poncho woven by his wife and a chullo hat that he probably knitted himself, as the Quechua men do. His tan face is weathered by the sun, like his clothes and chullo.

The horseman's handsome wife stands at the *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 tells me, referring to the horseman. “It means ‘he who honors his fathers’. His wife is Pilpintu. It means butterfly.” The Quechua woman smiles at me and then returns to her task at the *pachamanca* oven.

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. The family uses kerosene lanterns and candles at night, and they get their water from the rain and mountain streams.

That night, Teddy sleeps under a rain shelter with the other porters who are his family, neighbors, and friends. 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, I’m feeling a slight pain in my chest that keeps me awake most of the night. When I rise the next morning, Raulito serves me *mate de coca* to ease my discomfort and advises that we stay with our hosts a few days so I can rest before setting out on the long, difficult hike.

By late afternoon, I’m feeling better and ask Raulito to show me around the village. I want to hike every day, no matter how I feel, to keep up my stamina. Raulito invites 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 insignificant wooden crosses and stones circling some of the graves. Many stones are scattered in disarray, as if no one attends 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, who seems to enjoy telling me about his village. With my large chest and

pretty face, I imagine I'm a rare extravagance to him. And being a lone woman traveler is unusual. "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, 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," I say, but I don'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 soul."

I stare at the grave, pondering his remark. Born with or without a soul. 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 our disasters in Kay Pacha. But life is unpredictable and unfair. And sometimes God Himself intervenes. Chooses a sacrifice. Some of us die before we can even live out our lives and accomplish what we've set out to do. "Why do you think that baby didn't have a soul?" I ask, hoping to learn some kind of Quechua wisdom about life.

"No one named it, *por supuesto*," Raulito offers, as if I ought to know that if you don't have a name, you can't have a soul.

"Oh, I see. It's all about being named."

Two gringas suddenly amble into the cemetery. They greet us with “*holas*,” and Raulito motions that we go to the trail leading to the river.

On my second night in the village, it rains until sunrise, and it’s “*chiri chiri*” cold in the one-room dwelling when Raulito wakes me from a deep sleep. “I have pancakes for you,” he says. “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 quickly throw on my poncho and sit on the edge of my wooden bed. It creaks with my every move. While pulling on my wool socks, I begin thinking about my mother, who died halfway through her life. Lately, I’ve been thinking more about her than about Steve and my stepchildren. 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 am I thinking about Steve?* I ask myself, *when I’ve fought long and hard not to dwell on him?* I can’t forget that I left him behind for a reason. Especially not now.

“I’m glad you feel better,” Raulito says with a smile. “We’re lucky today; the clouds are gone. The climb is long and difficult; the highest pass is on today’s trail. But the horse will make it easy for you.”

Within the hour, I’m back on the mare, riding along the trail with the horseman, his youngest son, two dogs, and Raulito. Pilpintu and her eldest son are farther ahead, escorting a pair of attorneys from Washington State. Earlier that 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. Now, when riding up the mountain ridges, I’ve purposely held back to avoid them.

Raulito understands. I don't want to exhaust my energy in conversation when I can silently contemplate the mountains and take pictures with my camera and mind.

From the valley river, we climb a sheer ravine lush with mosses, grasses, ferns, lichens, shrubs, and trees with orchids. In places, a sharp cliff rims the gravelly trail, worrying me because of my precarious position high on a scrawny mare. But I concentrate on each step the horse takes, listen to its hoofs clomp on the ground, and convince myself that the animal is 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 around us. "The mountains are powerful Apu gods," my young guide tells me. "They're watching us travel along their way."

Here and there, the trail runs beside the Llullucha stream. 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 to them 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 to help me climb over boulders and scree on the trail. 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. 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 is it called Dead Woman’s Pass?” I ask my guide when we’re back on the trail, and I’m riding the mare again. “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 and stone look like a dead woman lying on her back,” Raulito says, “but I don’t think they look like that.”

As we near Warmiwañusca, clouds begin to veil the mountains, but when we reach the top of the pass, they’re parting, and sunlight shines onto a flat area of slate gravel and rocks. A dozen other gringos are sitting on boulders, admiring the panorama. Near a marker that reads Peru’s National Park, the horseman meets up with his wife, Pilpintu, who’s with her horses and the attorney couple. Raulito helps me dismount the mare and says, “Now, we must trek on foot because the steep rocky 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 climb off the mare and give Pidru a generous tip. He shakes my hand firmly, smiles broadly, and says, “Good luck and goodbye.” Then he and his family lead their horses back down the mountain toward their village.

I sit on a boulder as far away as I can from conversations in French, English, and German. A swift breeze brushes my face and causes my hair to fall from my braid as I gaze at the distant Runkuraqay Ruins above the river and at the surrounding valleys and mountains. For some reason, I’m feeling distressed rather than peaceful, probably because all the chattering

disturbs the mountain aura. There are too many people. Are the gods of the mountains disturbed as I am by so many trekkers?

“Here, you can find your soul like in no place else,” Raulito says, as he sits on the grassy ground beside me. He’s looking across the valley, toward the ruins.

“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 eternally proud of her son, I imagine. He has that kind of aura.

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. “Are you traveling alone?” I ask suddenly, wanting to engage with a fellow traveler on the road to Machu Picchu.

“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 he sounds disgusted. “We ended up with thirty-five people. I don’t even recognize most of the people in my group. 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 is now heaving on his huge pack to head out, probably to get away from the crowd. A fellow loner.

“You’re brave to go at it 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 troubles? I mean, thugs along this trail kidnap people like us!”

“I hope you’re just getting 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 smoke. He slings on his pack and heads down the trail.

“Come on, señorita. Let’s go. It will soon rain,” Raulito says, sensing 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. Fortunately, we have a short descent to Rio Pacasmayo, where Teddy is already pitching my tent and preparing my evening meal. “Tonight, we eat potato cheese soup, giant corn, fava beans, and chili salad,” Raulito has mentioned many times along the trail.

“*The diet is the cure*,” I chant as we begin following the road the Incas traversed 600 years before.

Down the trail, it starts to rain. I put on my poncho from Raulito’s pack, and 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 and roaring Pacasmayo stream. The site is a muddy mess.

Nearby, porters are shouting as they're setting up tents for their tourists. Some foreigners are chatting inside the tents already pitched. Down the stream, guides and porters are cooking everyone's dinner and preparing their own beds on the rough ground under an open wooden ramada, as I would call it. It's the kind of shelter Inca *chaski* runners must have used when running up and down the Inca roads.

The rain ignites the thin air with scents that make it easier to breathe, and reminds me of the creosote scent in Arizona after it rains. I drink bottled water and wash my face and hands in the stream. A waterfall roars down distant craggy peaks. Some gringos come up to the stream where I'm sitting, and 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 dry everything.

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 like a burst of sunshine. "And 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 like."

"I appreciate you, Little Raulito," I say, as 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 tells me, 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. The Andes possess eternity. They possess me. I feel happy. Do you also 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 says, taking 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 the voices from the neighboring tents. Soon, I start feeling a slight gnawing pain at my side. Then my stomach ties into a bulbous knot, and fear overtakes the pain and overwhelms me. I’m afraid that I won’t make it to the heavenly ruins. Let alone to the end of the world. Then, suddenly, the faces of Kevin and Kristen appear in my thoughts, and I’m tormented that I will never see them again. *I had spent six years as their mommy, and now I’m missing them.*

After I finally fall asleep, I have a haunting dream—I lose myself in the misty mountains, looking for my lost children. Banditos appear, laughing at me. Pointing at me. Pointing guns at me. Then the Shining Path and Tupac guerrillas catch my stepchildren and taunt them with long blades. The guerrillas then become Inca warriors on the road, like the soldiers I saw on the streets of Quito at night. My mother appears in the dream, standing above me on the mountain, like the woman at the Sun Pyramid in Teotihuacan. “You’re dead!” I yell in my dream. She silently 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!” I wake up and hear the rain against my tent. The morning is dimly lighting the soiled canvas walls. “Señorita, if we leave now, we can reach the lodge tonight. But first, we have a long climb. I’m hoping we go soon.”

“Yes, yes,” I exclaim. Fear is still possessing 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 peers at me. He’s soaked in his rain poncho; his hair is drenched, and his face is moist.

“Please, Raulito, come in,” I tell him.

“You look pale. I think you’re sick,” Raulito says. “My heart worries.” He takes off his shoes and poncho and crawls inside the small tent.

“My heart worries, too, sometimes,” I say and then laugh, 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 back to Cusco. Or you can hire a helicopter.”

“I had a nightmare. That’s all,” I admit, sitting up as Raulito sits beside me. He lets me draw him into my arms. “I just need to hold someone for a while,” I say. “I’m not well. It’s true. And I had a family back in Arizona. I left them all behind. My husband, stepchildren. Even my elderly father. And sometimes they haunt me. But I shouldn’t feel guilty because I was really sparing them from watching me fall ill. Like I had to watch my mother.” Raulito rests his wet head against my shoulder without saying a word. In a moment, I release him and add, “I’m sorry. I had a difficult night.”

“I’m afraid for you.” Raulito sits back. In the dim morning light, I can see that his young face is filled with concern.

“I’m okay now, Little Raulito,” I say. “You’re helping me. Now, let’s get started on our day. There’s no way I’m *not* going to reach Machu Picchu.” Impulsively, I tenderly kiss Raulito on his lips, even though he must be embarrassed. Yet somehow, I sense he knows the kiss is not sexual but personal and even spiritual—the kiss of a caring mother wanting to warm 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 pull on my poncho over my alpaca sweater. I’m feeling much better now. No fear and no pain. The time is right to trek onward despite the downpour. Or maybe because of it.

“Gracias, Arizona. 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 soul. But I won’t let it, I swear to myself. Never again. If it takes all my remaining strength, I will bravely continue the trek and keep to my *dieta*. I have too much to gain now and too much to lose by succumbing to fear, disappointment, and regret. Depressing matters. I’m in the Andes, where condors ride the thermals of Apu gods and soar high into the up drafts and the furrows and eddies because their wings are too large to lift them in flight.



Chapter 15: Machu Picchu, the Heavenly City

December 31–January 2

Muriel

From the stream, the trail steeply ascends the mountain and then passes the oval-shaped Runkuraqay Ruins, where some trekkers have pitched their camp. Raulito and I hike through tundra and then 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 up, 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 the trail, we encounter a promontory of rock 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.

Raulito helps Teddy serve dinner as I sit on a bench at the cooking pit. The sun sets, and the thin air cools dramatically. From afar, I hear voices murmur and crickets reverberate their

fiddles. Then a mama llama or alpaca hums to her baby; her hum's like the harp music of an angel. In the darkness, the Milky Way stars and constellations spread across the hemisphere. Teddy brings out his panpipe and ignites the evening with Andean music.

"You can see the Southern Cross as far north as Costa Rica," I say, as we're all sitting by the fire's glowing embers and keeping warm. The peaceful and romantic night keeps reminding me of Arturo.

"Chakana is sacred to the Incas and Quechua," Raulito says about the Southern Cross. 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 will lead. I only know that he makes me feel happy and alive when he's near me, beside me. If nothing else, I praise the Apu gods that they have delivered him to me as my guide to their mountains.

"Tell me more about the Chakana," I say.

"Ancient Incan priests from Machu Picchu," Raulito continues, "announced the rainy season when Chakana shone high above Salcantay Peak, the highest mountain seen from Machu Picchu. The greatest Apu god of the Incas. Many people climb Salcantay these days to look for the remains of Inca sacrifices."

I'm feeling light and airy, perhaps starved of oxygen, as my guide's story engrosses my mind. "Seeing Chakana over the most holy mountain must be like seeing the face of God," I say.

"Yes, Arizona. For the Incas, God is the sun, and His wife is the moon."

"The Aztecs believed in 22 realms of heaven and hell and hundreds of gods. I'd say the Incas better understood their natural world. Tell me about your philosophy," I say to Raulito, as Teddy's panpipe music brings magic to the night.

Raulito gently squeezes my hand and seems to realize that I'm interested in his beliefs, which makes him happy. By the light of the cooking fire, I see his young, round face smile. I know he's very proud of his heritage and history, very content to be a guide in these mountains, and rightly so. He is where he belongs, I think, and so am I.

"We're a people who live in the clouds," Raulito says. "We come from the Pleiades. But these days, I believe a great change is coming. When Jesucristo returns, there will be a reckoning and an end to chaos. They say that when the northern eagle flies with the Andean condor, the world will be filled with love and compassion." He pauses and gazes at the fire. Then he adds, "*Kuyaykim*. I love you, Arizona."

I squeeze his hand and say, "I love you too, Raulito." In the power of the moment, I feel entrenched. "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 also an excellent ecotourism guide, Raulito."

"We believe in the harmony of two," Raulito adds. He seems flattered and encouraged by my words. "You cannot 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. *Kuyaykim*. I love you, Señorita Arizona. Always remember this, even when you go away and leave our mountains."

"Raulito," I say, still holding his hand. We're both gazing into the cooking fire. "I don't think I'll ever leave these mountains. At least they'll never leave me."

"*Munay ki*," my little guide says again, while Teddy continues making his panpipe music.

The next morning, we trek from Dominant Town on the winding trail that passes through narrow Inca tunnels cut into hard granite cliffs and continues down to Rio Aobamba and then up a slight climb reaching 3,700 meters. A cairn of stones, an *apacheta*, marks the third pass, which

offers us views of the brown Urubamba River surging through the valley and providing power to its inhabitants and mystique to its visitors.

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. After an hour, we reach the switchbacks to the hostel lodge high on the hillside, near power lines from the Urubamba River. The trail ahead appears even longer than the day's entire hike, and by now, my legs are cramping. But I push myself 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, but it seems to grow more distant the farther along we hike. My only thought is to rest there for at least a day after eating a meal in its restaurant and using its facilities to clean up.

When we finally arrive, trekker tourists, porters, and guides are flocking the hostel. There are no bunk beds available, and there's only one sit-down flush toilet for the public, and there's a long line to use it. In the main hall of the lodge, we sit at one end of a long cafeteria table. I buy Teddy and Raulito fries, roasted guinea pig, and beer, and for myself, I order nutritious green rice, fried papas, 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 find that I don't have much of an appetite. I give what remains of my meal to a porter hovering near me like a vulture awaiting its turn at the carrion.

The neighboring gringos at the table are talking about sleeping on the floor of the lodge, and 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. The room smells of fried foods and the odor from the crowd—cigarette smoke mostly—and no one seems to be using deodorant or foot powder.

“I feel well enough to push on early tomorrow morning, whether it’s raining or not. I’m just tired now.” In truth, after the fear I had last night, I don’t want to be alone. I want to be with someone, anyone, even among a crowd of strangers. “I’ll bundle up in the corner over there, near those women.” I look at Teddy and ask him to fetch my sleeping bag. He understands. Then I turn to Raulito and say, “You can sleep beside me, if you like, and wake me up 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 vortex 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 that my bouts of pain and episodes of fear distress him, although he tries not to show this.

“I’m glad for you,” he says. “These mountains make you well.”

That night, I sleep soundly, despite the chill, and hear nothing but the snores and chatter from the 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 in a friendly gesture. He’s my spiritual best friend at the moment.

“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 gringo 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 high jungle forest. Several gringos catch up and pass us quickly. “You can tell me about your dream now,” Raulito reminds me.

“In my dream,” I begin, “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 alit on the window sill. And it wasn’t afraid of me either. I reached over, and one dove flew to my hand. I was amazed at how fearless they were.”

“What do you think does it mean?” Raulito asks, not pausing from his pace but looking back a moment.

“That I needn’t be afraid of dying,” I say.

“*Que dijiste?*” Raulito asks.

“We’re all going to die, aren’t we?”

“Not till a long time from now, I hope,” Raulito says, stopping for a moment. “Not you. Not me.”

“I know, I hope. But we shouldn’t be afraid. The doves represent inner peace. The condor to the Inca and 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 high-altitude lightheadedness. Everything seemed right. I’m a migratory bird in the Andes. Like the Inca dove. Like the Andean condor.”

“You’re beautiful, Señorita Arizona,” Raulito says. “*Munaycha*. The condor is from the Inca trinity, along with the puma and snake. But the condor is lord of the sky, Earth, and hell. He 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. The bird of transcendence lifts our spirits to the wonder of heaven. If I’m not afraid of dying, then I’m not afraid of anything. Like an Incan warrior, I suppose,” I say, and then 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 from your home or your past 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, then Steve is probably still looking for me after nearly a year, waiting for me to come home. I had hoped Steve and the kids would just get on with their lives, that they would realize that 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 death. 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. And I'm no longer sure that 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. 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'm feeling fragile, and I venture to ask my young companion, "What kind of message would a dead person send?" I want to learn the wisdom of the Andean people.

"*No es bueno, señorita,*" Raulito says. "Sometimes the dead are selfish and want their family to come to them because they cannot go home. Do you have someone dead? Your mother or daddy? *Hermanos? Abuelos?*"

"No," I answer, not wanting to talk about my mother.

"Then I think someone from your home wants to talk to you. You should call your parents when we get to Aguas Calientes." I agree. I haven't told Raulito that I'm on my way to Tierra del Fuego. It's too much of an embellished tale for a high-altitude trek. Besides, I'm not even sure anymore if the end of the world is really where I'm headed. Maybe all along, my destination has been to reach the top of the world: *la Cima del Mundo*.

After six days on the trail, we finally reach Inti Punku, the Sun Gate on Old Mountain, which is the main entrance to the Inca Fortress of Machu Picchu. Teddy has already left for Aguas Calientes, the small village at the foot of Machu Picchu, edging the Urubamba River. He will meet with his porter friends and wait for us to arrive and catch the train back to Cusco. Teddy will then head back to trailhead Kilometer 88 and wait for more work as a porter.

Raulito and I rest on the stone steps to the gatehouse beside a wall of terraces. Several other trekkers are passing us 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 long lashes adorning its large dark eyes. Beyond the llama stand the mist-enshrouded ruins of the Heavenly City between Huayna Picchu and Putucusi—two green peaks piercing the clouds.

“Machu Picchu was a sacred retreat for Sapa Inca Pachacuti,” Raulito says. “What do you want to know? 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 spiritualism and supernatural phenomena. The mystic rapture at Teotihuacan in the last spring equinox didn’t cure me. And it was a highly charged spiritual and astronomical event, an 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 into the Andes, with the most pleasant guide imaginable. And yes, I do love a mystery. It gives life a kick.”

Raulito looks at me. His bright smile is a channel into his compassionate soul. “Let’s go to Machu Picchu, señorita. 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. “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. When we get to Aguas Calientes, I will take you to a *curandero* who specializes in ayahuasca. I know you’re not well, but I believe you have time to fulfill the oracle of your dream.”

Raulito’s charm touches me like the mountains themselves, like the Heavenly City, and I decide to call him Tupac Inca. It seems like 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 says about the rounded stone tower that extends from a natural outcrop above a cavern. A chilling breeze comes from deep inside 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 tired from the arduous 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. "From the tower, Inca priests observed the sun's path along the mountains. The south window was aligned to the rising of the Pleiades."

Anxious about the night, I ask Raulito to check if a room is available at Hotel Machu Picchu, the only hotel on the site. Salvador had tried to book me a room ahead of time, but the hotel was filled for months in advance. "Tomorrow morning, I want to watch Inti rise over the mountains," I say and hand him money for a meal in the hotel's café, where I suggest he wait for me. I appreciate Raulito and his knowledge about the ruins, but I want to be alone awhile to absorb the serenity and aura of the site.

After Raulito leaves me at the tower, I begin wandering around the mystical setting and arrive at the central plaza, where 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 twitters. A few tourists are also wandering around the park; they're either trekkers from the Inca Trail or guests staying at Hotel Machu Picchu. The tour buses haven't arrived.

I walk past a beefy German man posing with one of the llamas, pretending to jump on its back while his wife takes his picture. The llamas continue to graze, ignoring his idiocy. Then I notice a tall, dark-complexioned young woman sitting on the stone wall edging the plaza. Her

hiking shoes and socks are on the ground, and her long legs are stretched out on the stone wall. Her toes are long and elegant, like her fingers. Her nails are painted, and she's wearing a silver toe ring on each foot.

She's not a fat German tourist, not a ragamuffin trekker from the trail. She must be a hotel guest, I conclude. Her shoulder-length black hair hangs in tiny braids, her ear lobes have silver studs, and a silver ring is piercing 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.

Suddenly, the powers of Machu Picchu seem to wisp me away. Awki spirits grab hold, and I see an Inca princess. A priestess. The incarnation of an Inca queen herself. Mama Coya. 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 dressed in fine vicuña wool and wearing gold ear studs, necklaces, bangles . . . gold, gold, gold, the sweat of Inti the sun. As I pass near the exotic woman, my mind begins to focus. She's too tall for an Inca queen, I tell myself.

The woman glances at me, expressionless at first, and then she proudly smiles. Winks? A beautiful woman who, at the very least, knows she's stunning. I continue to the stone masonry at the end of the plaza and take pictures of the grazing llamas, stone buildings, and terraced slopes, while surreptitiously capturing the Coya woman in each photo. I inhale deeply; my chest pains slightly. But it's something I can ignore. *I'm still viable*, I think. *And this is my reward, this calm and beautiful sanctuary in the Vilcabamba Mountain Range above the Urubamba River*. I feel like an angel afloat on heavenly clouds.

I meander to the highest point of Machu Picchu, the Intihuatana Stone, which the Incas aligned to the equinoxes and the December solstice when the stone's pillar casts no shadow.

According to Inca belief, Raulito had told me, the solstice tied the sun to the stone, as the soul of a sacrificed child was forever tied to Inti, the sun. To God in heaven.

I begin pondering my own situation. *Am I but a capacocha? A child of sacrifice? No. I'm not a virgin. Unless having no children counts. Maybe because I'm childless, I have been chosen for sacrifice?* I inhale deeply while hearing a few voices from behind me and 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 intimately interconnected to Earth, not just to one region, not just the Andes, Ahwatukee, Mesa, or anywhere else. I feel like I'm the hub for all life and geology wherever I am. I'm the starting point of all the *siq'i* lines and Inca roads from *huaca* to *huaca*. I myself am a *huaca*. No matter what I do or where I go, I'm part of the pillar of creation. This truth, my reality, is the only truth. No saint or scholar can disarm me with their philosophies. It doesn't even matter where I die, because I'm like the birds around the globe, flying here then there, beginning where they're hatched, ending where they die. I find comfort in these thoughts, and my pain disappears into the thin, cool air. Once again, I feel healed, and once again, I breathe deeply.

"God! Keep your promise this time!" I say aloud to the Sun Stone. "Like the frozen Inca boy, lasso my soul to the sun. To Inti. To the divinity of these mountains." I close my eyes to absorb the sun rays and picture the exotic woman in a procession among concubines, priests, warriors, Apu generals, and mountain deities. *She's Mama Ocllo, the first Inca Coya, the sister-wife of Manco Capac, and the first Sapa Inca 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's new clothes that he wears every day.*

“Amazing, isn’t it?” I hear a woman’s voice. When I 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 I can’t think of anything to say. She mystifies me and leaves me entranced.

“This place was built for virgin nuns, you know?” Her voice is as elegant as her illuminated face. She seems to be assessing the stone’s quality with her hand. Perhaps absorbing some kind of energy from the *huaca*.

I nod and finally think to remark, “You seem to know a lot.”

“It’s reincarnation,” the woman declares. “I’ve been here before. Oh, not in this life. But in another one, when I was a warrior, an Inca soldier.”

“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 found buried at Machu Picchu were female.”

“I’ve been feeling some kind of energy force,” I admit. “It comes and goes. Like hope and despair. I see heaven and hell as I sit on top of the world.”

“I know what you mean. This place is a spiritual vortex.”

“A *huaca* at intersecting *siq’i* lines in the Inca web,” I say, showing off my own knowledge.

The woman smiles at me and sits on the nearby stones, gracefully crossing her long legs and leaning back on her hands. “You alone, luv?”

“Kind of,” I say. I like talking to this woman. She brings a charge of anticipation to the ruins. 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 fragrant sandalwood. She’s obviously a world traveler, although she could be a model 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 can’t help but wonder. Why did she suddenly appear to me? Could she be one of those alien beings that people claim to encounter 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 that she is. She’s too independent for that. Besides, it’s still fairly early, and none of the tour buses have arrived.

She stamps her cigarette out 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, and buses and tourists are stranded in Aguas Calientes. Imagine making the journey of a lifetime, spending your long-saved earnings, and then not being able to see the ruins! I had to climb straight up the mountain. Took me two hours.” She pauses and puts the cigarette butt in her bag. “So, luv, we have the ruins to ourselves, the llamas, and a few hikers and hotel guests.”

“I wanted to spend the night at the hotel and watch tomorrow’s sunrise. Tonight’s sunset,” I remark. “I sent my guide to see if there were any rooms available, and from the looks

of it, there are. I feel fortunate, although I'm sorry for those poor tourists. Good luck for me. Bad luck for them."

"Got that right, luv. Plenty of cancellations today. By the way, I'm Whitney." She approaches me and extends her long, slender hand. It's soft and as cool as the surrounding air.

"I'm Muriel Tyler," I say before realizing I've used my married name for the first time since leaving Ahwatukee. I got so caught up in the moment that I simply forgot, 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 offers me enough remuneration." Whitney pulls her tote bag over her shoulder.

My desire to be alone has vanished. I want to be with Whitney, in the company of a woman friend. After all, I left behind my best friend Betsy, and all my other women friends, the women from the Unitarian mother-daughter group. Since leaving Ahwatukee, I've mostly been around men, except for Ivet in Panama. And for some reason, I feel drawn to this woman. I want to absorb her aura and get to know who she really is. Somehow, I believe that she may be an incarnation of an Inca warrior, but, more likely, of an Inca queen. "I'd love a reading," I finally say.

Whitney offers her hand and leads me to the middle of the central plaza. We sit on the lawn, and Whitney 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 Rider cards from her bag. She shuffles, I cut the deck, then she lays out on the shawl a configuration that she calls the Celtic cross. "Ask a question."

"Am I cured?" What else is there to ask?

Whitney explains her reading. “Judgment is on the top; the devil is descending into death. No swords, two cups, one wand, three stars, one king, one page.” She pauses and then concludes, “The Andes trek brings you to the next spiritual level. You will grow spiritually, says 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 thinking about your tarot message,” I say, not wanting to part from her company.

At the hotel snack bar patio, I find Raulito at a table, waiting for me. He smiles and rises as soon as I approach. But he looks puzzled when he realizes that Whitney is with me. Nevertheless, he excitedly tells me that there were several cancelations because of the landslide. “I already booked you a room. My word is good here. It’s a nice room with patio chairs and a view of the mountains. Let’s go check in,” he says without acknowledging Whitney’s presence.

I introduce my young guide to Whitney, and then I 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.”

“Why are you with her?” Raulito asks while we’re standing before the front desk, waiting to check in. A large Frenchman and his femme are checking in before us. “I thought you wanted to be alone?”

“I’m sorry,” I reply, realizing I may have hurt Raulito’s feelings by not wanting to be with him. By wanting to be with someone else. “Are you jealous?” I tease while stroking 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 that I don’t like.”

“Don’t be silly, Tupac Inca. She has *ojos bonitos*, and she’s harmless. She’s traveling alone, like me. I just needed a friend.”

“*Pero soy tu amigo*. You’re not alone.”

“No, I mean a woman friend. *Amiga*. Someone who’s like me. Someone who has traveled a lot.”

Raulito backs off, trying to understand, it seems, but not happy with the situation. He’s a travel agent of the Andes and has guided many gringos along the Inca Trail. But he doesn’t trust the woman and *is* jealous of her because he’s told me that he likes me more than any other traveler before. I’m special, he said, special to him. Now, I’m certain he fears he’s being replaced.

“Don’t worry.” I try to reassure my young guide. “Whitney will probably leave after we have lunch, and I’ll explore the ruins while you teach me about Quechua wisdom. 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 many bad dreams. I want to stay near you, in case you need me. I want to take you to a *curandero* in Aguas Calientes.”

My young friend flatters me, and I’m feeling richly rewarded by so many nice people crossing my path. I hate sending him away because of my deep spiritual feelings for him. 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, and I think he somehow knows that I intend to ask Whitney if she’d like to share my room before she flutters away as mysteriously as she appeared, like the Inca goddess of butterflies, birds, and flowers.

I give Raulito money for his dinner and a hotel in Aguas Calientes, and he promises to return to fetch me at noon the next day 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, and 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. Not that she's bragging; she's just young, beautiful, and full of enthusiasm and confidence. I don't mind her stories. In fact, I love having this woman's company for some unexplainable reason, perhaps electromagnetism. Quantum mechanics. She mentions that she's 25 and comes from Liverpool, and that her father was a British diplomat who met her black Brazilian mother while he was working in Brazil.

"For five years, I worked as a receptionist to save money to travel the globe," she says. "I started in Europe and then went to Turkey and Syria. I spent several months on a Kibbutz in Israel and 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 Stewart's Copacabana Concert, the largest concert ever held, they say. I have family in Rio, and I'm going back there."

"You have quite a story," I say and sip my coffee. "You travel where the wind blows across the planet. I've been traveling down the Pan-Am Highway for nearly a year now," I admit. "My adventure has been living day to day, by God's curse or blessing. A lot has happened as the days have piled up. Now I'm heading to Lake Titicaca and then to Tierra del Fuego at the end of the Pan-Am Highway."

Whitney sips her tea with grace and beauty. “Maybe we can travel together to Lake Titicaca,” she suggests. “I’m planning on taking the bus to Ascension, then I’m off to Copacabana, to where Christ the Redeemer overlooks the City of Beaches.”

“Have you always traveled alone?” I ask while dunking my roll in the strong mixture of coffee and milk. Peruvians have a peculiar way of serving their coffee. One small pitcher contains strong, thick coffee, and another pitcher has hot milk to be mixed with the coffee according to taste. The coffee tastes all right, although it’s nothing like the strong, fragrant, fresh-ground Costa Rican brew that I shared with Arturo months before.

“I was with a woman for nearly a year,” Whitney 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 a lot of nice people along the way. Such as yourself.” 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 get the sense that she’s a budget traveler and is stretching her money out as far as it will go before it runs out.

Whitney exhales the smoke sensuously. Her smile seems enshrouded in diaphanous Apu 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 to an ailment,” I admit. “I’ve seen a *curandero* in Cusco, a *curandera* in San Blas, and a *curandero* in Oaxaca, who put me on a vegetarian diet.”

“Impressive.” Whitney smiles and nods. “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. But I’ll walk you to the trailhead,” I say. I then pay the bill, and we head off to the other side of the ruins, beyond the Sacred Rock. Along the

way, I invite Whitney to stay the night in my hotel room. I feel a bit awkward at first, shy, in fact, as if I'm 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 agrees.

The few tourists who are wandering the ruins have either hiked the Inca Trail or recently arrived after a long hike up the hillside from Aguas Calientes. One determined older woman tells us that she hired a Quechua boy to hold her hand and help her negotiate the steep uphill climb through mud and loose gravel.

Whitney leaves me sitting on a stone wall near the trailhead, and I look at the sky. The rain clouds have subsided, and the high-altitude sun shines so intensely that I slather more sun lotion on my face. I remain seated as my new mysterious and wraithlike friend disappears down the trail to Huayna Picchu. Meanwhile, a few tourists approach from behind me and to the left. All of a sudden, it becomes crowded at the ruins, and I return to the hotel for a long, hot shower and to wait for Whitney. She said she'd be back in time to watch Inti set over the ruins. "Together," she had remarked, "we will be virgins of the sun at the house of chosen women."



Chapter 16: Cordellera de los Andes en la Cima del Mundo

January 2–3

Muriel

Outside Hotel Machu Picchu, Whitney is sitting cross-legged on a granite wall beside a sloped garden near a clump 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 and poncho. Songbirds are announcing themselves from neighboring cloud forests, and a cool breeze is rustling the bamboo and bringing the scent of recently mowed grass at the hotel footpath. Those not staying at the hotel, the Aguas Calientes tourists, left hours ago, eager to begin their difficult descent in daylight. Some remaining hotel tourists are preparing to photograph the setting sun at Machu Picchu. *A huaca in a huaca*. Except for a few murmuring voices, the moment is quiet yet filled with contemplation and expectation.

A broken cloud cover diminishes everyone's hope for a vast display. But as the sun nears the western horizon, the tall green peaks flanking the ancient city emerge from the haze. The 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 Whitney 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 this exotic woman, and the surrounding mountains bless her with their towering presence. Inti especially sanctifies my new friend, even at the cusp of night. She's illusory, someone I could never fully approach or understand.

"Inca Coya is goddess of the Full Moon," I utter, feeling overwhelmed and inspired by everything around me, especially by Whitney. "She's the Evening Star Queen."

Whitney smiles as she takes pictures with a compact point-and-shoot camera. "This damn thing can't liberally take pictures as your digital camera can," she says. "May I see it?"

"Of course," I say and show her how to use my Kodak.

When she sets my camera aside, she touches my cheek. I shiver and feel flushed. "Have you ever been with a woman before, Muriel Tyler?" she asks and runs her long fingers down my arm. Her dark-brown eyes exhibit unbound sensuality and freedom.

Feeling awkward yet mesmerized, I admit I never have, but I don't tell her that since we had coffee that afternoon, I've been anticipating this encounter. Now, I feel more naïve than I had felt when facing Cliff 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 feeling under the spell of Mama Ocllo, who's staring toward Machu Picchu and then peering 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 the 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 down 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, ala carte, yucca, sweet potato, purple potato fries and salsa, fried plantains, and empanadas with sautéed mushrooms. Whitney agrees to go veggie tonight. She’s not a strict vegetarian, she tells me. “What I eat depends on my mood and the company 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 of grapes.

Whitney awaits room service while I take another long, hot shower. It feels fantastic to sud up and scrub off the dirt and mud from the Inca Trail. One shower was hardly enough. 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 feel 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 such feelings should happen now, at the end of a long, exhausting hike. Maybe I’m going out of my mind. A symptom of my poor health. I never discussed the symptoms and stages with Doctor Burhan at Mayo Clinic. As soon as I had heard the prognosis and the possible treatments, I fled to find my own natural cure or to die as a healthy 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 will be like to be with a woman. Suddenly, I'm feeling a soft sensation across my belly and down my thighs. The warm naked body of Whitney draws near from behind me. I can 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 for 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. But Whitney must lead the way. I cannot bear making a sudden clumsy move and taint the moment. That would be dreadful, as it had been with Cliff. I glance at Whitney's well-tanned 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 suspected she would have.

After we shower, Whitney dabbles the towel over my body and hair. Her hands feel like silk as she eases me to the bed, pacifying my insecurities. We toast with our pisco sours. "Cheers, luv," she says. The strong drink is sweet and bitter.

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 its sensations? 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 his performance and my participation in that performance. Whitney really cares about my feelings. And I grow more confident in exploring her taut form, which is so unlike my well-rounded curves. My large DD chest.

Without warning, pain begins to encroach on my sides. At first, I struggle to stop the conflict between pain and pleasure, and I pray that the pleasure wins out. Then, just as I have

nearly conquered most of the pain, visions of my stepchildren and my father grasp my mind, leaving me to feel cold, raw, and exposed during a game of idle self-indulgence. I start to miss them more than ever before, especially seven-year-old Kristen. 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 among the main reasons 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 then orders two more.

I say nothing. Tears have welled in my eyes, and I hope Whitney won't notice them in the dim light. I don't want to upset my friend or cause her to pity me, but I can't help but 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 the gods of natural forces. Gods that most likely don't even exist. All of a sudden, my mind begins to 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 say, lying on the bed and staring at the dangling ceiling chandelier made of geometrically shaped pink, smoky glass.

"What are you on about, luv?" Whitney pulls on her turquoise sweater and hands me my sweater. It's somewhat chilly in the room, and Whitney wants to smoke a Peruvian brand called Inca that I bought her in the hotel lobby. "You're either nervous or a little lightheaded from the pisco sours," Whitney says. "It's early, and I don't mind listening to what you have to say."

“That boy,” I say soberly, as 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 repeat, lying back down and staring at the ceiling again. Gnawing pinches are creeping inside me.

“What Inca child, Muriel Tyler?”

I look at Whitney and take hold of 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 asks. She looks annoyed with me.

“I sometimes wonder about his last thoughts. Poor boy. I’m sure he was scared. His own mother left him to die. But he didn’t die from the cold. Not right away. He missed his mother at first. Didn’t understand his fate. Then he grew numb and cold and fell asleep. They drugged him from coca and maize beer.”

“We’re about to make love and you babble over some stupid kid frozen centuries ago. You’re crazy, woman.”

“I’m not crazy. Just dying.”

“Dying?” Whitney pauses from dragging on her cigarette, stunned by the word.

“I can feel 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 rumbled 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 up 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, I realize, and I've just made it look unpleasant and grim. Telling a lover that you're dying would cause a crimp in any romance. Now, 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 Mayo Clinic near my in-laws. No one suspected a thing. Not Steve, not my in-laws. I didn't want anyone to know. I wanted to spare them the agony of watching me painfully 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 still smell the disinfectant and taste the reused cooking oil of hospital food. Have you ever been in a hospital room where someone's dying?"

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 just leave them? I’m sure your disappearance troubled them more.”

“I didn’t want them to watch me suffer. Have you ever watched someone die? Someone you love?”

“Never!” Whitney exclaims, as if asked about a contagious disease. *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 buried 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, and she has little or no money. I’m paying for everything.

“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?”

“I settled that matter long ago. Please don’t ruin this for me. 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 aborted our romantic night.

I gently kiss her hand to reassure her. “I’ll rest now. But please make sure I’m up for the sunrise. I don’t want to miss it.”

Whitney kisses me on the lips and then sits in the chair and begins reading a Ken Follett novel that 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.

“We need to run more tests, Mrs. Tyler, before we’re certain of anything.” I picture Dr. Burhan leaning against the counter in the small examination room at Mayo Clinic.

I was using Intel’s Cigna health insurance because that’s all I had. I was just a parttime bookkeeper. Steve didn’t encourage me to work outside the home. He wanted me to take care of the kids. But I had something of my own going on in my own office space. Sure, Steve will eventually find out about Cigna’s coverage at Mayo Clinic. But so what? We never shared anything other than our day-to-day lives with the kids. For perhaps a year, I had been thinking about leaving him before I did. And it was not an easy matter because of the kids, my beloved daughter and my son. And Steve was such a good, solid provider.

I could sense that Dr. Burhan felt uncomfortable informing me of my terminal illness. But it was his job— what he signed up for. But there’s always a chance he’s wrong. A test could have been misprinted, a process gone awry. And it’s better to be sure before announcing devastating news. Burhan was the Herald of Doom. The Grim Reaper.

I was sitting solidly on the examination table. A shroud loosely covered my nakedness. I knew the truth, knew it weeks before, when I first felt the lumps under my left armpit. It angered

me that the doctor was patronizing me. Oh, he was such a gallant man, ordained and obligated to lead me through tests, further biopsies, chemotherapy, radiation treatments, and mastectomies. Sure, go ahead, butcher my body. Have a lump or two while you're at it.

"Come on, Doctor. Don't beat around the bush," I recall saying defiantly, asserting what little dignity remained with me.

"Now, calm down. I still want to run another test." His thick, black-rimmed glasses rested low on his hawkish nose. He looked over the test results from the week before.

"I know what I have." I stared at him sternly and thought, Why do I always have to take charge of the situation when things are troubling? As a child, 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 my troubles and tell me honestly what I might do to prepare for what lies ahead?

The doctor reviewed the chart a moment longer. I'm sure it gave him respite from the truth. Some patients become subdued at this point, I'll bet; others, like me, are very defiant, feisty, angry that they will be taken before their time.

"Why do you doctors try to hide everything?"

"We just need to be certain." Burhan looked up from the chart.

"I'm certain. I can feel it happening to me. I know." My face certainly showed no sign of sadness or even shock, only defiance.

"Please lie down a moment, Mrs. Tyler. I'll send in the nurse with phenobarbital." Dr. Burhan then left the room.

Sure, just pop a few sedatives down my throat and I'll go away. Bastard! I remember thinking as I fell back on the exam table and rested my head on the hard, sterile pillow in a sterile room with tubes and ointments, tapes and pills. In the hospital room of my dying mother.

Calm yourself, Muriel, I tell myself and look over at Whitney. She's still reading her novel. 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, as I drift to sleep and begin dreaming...

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 blouse. From a stiff white cap, her long gray hair tumbles down her back. Old skeletal hands carefully close the door.

"What do you want?" I ask, angry about the intrusion. I've lost my place of serenity, and the room smells of disinfectant and the nurse's rancid perfume and tastes of hospital food fried in reused cooking oil. I gag and cover my nose with my hospital shroud. I close my eyes, trying to bring back the mountains and the fresh, rarified air.

The nurse approaches the exam table, scuffing the linoleum floor as she walks.

I glance at her; she holds out a glass of juice and a cup of pills.

"Jesus." I leap up and gasp. The nurse shakily holds the cup. Her face is that of my mother yet older, but still with my mother's tired eyes. It's as if God had allowed her to age before she enters heaven.

"Go away! You're dead!" I yell, knocking the glass from her hand. It shatters against the floor.

“Take these,” the nurse says. Her face is wrinkled and expressionless. She hands me the cup of pills.

I jump off the table, covering myself with the shroud, looking for my clothes or a button to call the doctor. The old woman’s cold and bony hand clenches my wrist, hurting me, hurting my sides and chest—paining my heart because the dead woman, the hideous old nurse, is really my mother.

I wake up to a start, feeling pain on my sides. The room is lit. 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?” I see that the bed is empty, and she’s not sitting in the chair, reading her novel. “Whitney?” I look in the bathroom. Nobody’s there.

“Whitney?!” I yell, instantly frightened, both from the dream and from being left alone in the hotel room. Whitney’s tote bag no longer hangs from the chair. Has she cleared out? Maybe she’s in the dining hall, eating breakfast, I tell myself. I start dressing, but the sharp pangs on my sides are slowing me down. How cruel to start in on me now, I think. How cruel that I should miss the sunrise on Machu Picchu. How cruel that my own mother abandoned me.

In the dining room, a few tourists are helping themselves to the breakfast buffet with potatoes, maize, and quinoa. Whitney is not in the room. At the front desk, I ask the clerk, “Have you seen my friend? *Ve la mujer con migo?*” In Spanish, the clerk explains that my friend left at sunrise. “She says you will check out later today because you’re not feeling well.”

I return to my room and notice that my passport and wallet are lying outside my daypack. *I didn’t leave them out*, I’m thinking, as I look through my wallet. All of my traveler’s checks,

credit cards, and cash are missing. Everything is gone, except for a hidden \$150. 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.* I collapse on the bed, feeling too weary to cry. I 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 will be ruined. The children will see me dead or dying. The emotional, physical, and mental anguish becomes unbearable. I inhale, exhale, and convince myself once again that disappearing was the best and easiest solution for me. I curl up on the bed, snuggle with the pillow, and tighten my muscles to ward off the pain. As I drift asleep, I'm hoping to dream of a faraway place like Hanan Pacha, the universe or heaven.



Chapter 17: Huayllabamba, Place of Good Pastures

January 3–5

Muriel

A knock wakes me from a restless slumber. “Señorita Arizona. It’s Raulito, Tupac Inca. Are you all right?” It’s 11 o’clock, I note, as I grovel to the door. The pain has subsided somewhat. Raulito enters. We hold each other, and I cry.

“Señorita, we must leave the room now. I will take you back to Cusco. To a doctor.” He feels my face and then the back of my neck.

I gaze at him long and hard. In the mirror behind him, I see that my eyes are red and dark with 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, and I’ll give you everything I have. You, Pidru, and his family. Whitney 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 that the tall woman had left, and I felt strange about that. She’s not a good person. She doesn’t help others. She doesn’t follow our philosophy of *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.”

“I know that you speak the truth,” Raulito says. “I knew this since we started our trek, but I never asked you about your true quest because I sensed you’re a private person. Now, what you’re saying to me is difficult to hear, and I don’t want it to be true. I will take you to a *curandero* to treat your illness.”

“Will you take me back to Huayllabamba? Find me a *curandero* there who can treat me with ayahuasca.”

“Of course, Arizona. *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 can be 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 can help you, maybe even carry you on my back.”

Charmed by his goodheartedness, the suggestion makes me smile. He’s smaller than I am. “I can pay only for the train to Kilometer 88. If we take our time. And if I die, take me to the mountainside.”

“*Por favor. Esta bien. No moriras,*” he protests.

“But if I do....”

“Come on. We go now. Teddy waits in Aguas Calientes. I will 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 that 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 while Teddy retrieves the horses. It's a three-hour horse ride to the farmhouse, where I strike a deal with Pidru and his family. They feel I'm a spiritual woman who will bring power and honor to their home while the mountains restore me. And as Quechua people, they live by the principle of helping others in order to be helped. *Ayni*.

Raulito leaves me at the hut, fetches some cocaine for my pain, and arranges an ayahuasca ceremony with a village *curandero*.

The next morning, with my vicuña blanket over my shoulders, Raulito takes me to the curandero's hut across the village at the edge of a terraced hillside near stonewall ruins. It's a sacred place, Raulito tells me, a *huaca* at intersecting *siq'is*. The setting is quiet, except for the distant murmurs of llamas, voices of tourists, 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 does not 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. Raulito translates, "Miss Arizona, you are under the care of a master healer who will perform sacred Inca and Christian rites during your healing journey."

The room is dimly lit by an open window and lit candles on the floor. 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 that I used to make in Ahwatukee to remedy a cold.

The *curandero* stirs the ayahuasca jungle tea with a long wooden spoon. His *mesa* is a cloth on the sod floor near the hearth. On it are a cross, candles, feathers, shells, coca leaves, and a Mapacho cigar. Raulito explains that, during the day, Pakuq Kuntur wanders the mountains in search of sacred herbs and objects for his *mesa*. “He buys his healing objects in Cusco, the center of the three worlds and the axis of all directions.”

Pakuq Kuntur starts singing *icaros*, which are magical Inca chants of healing, Raulito tells me. “He calls on the Awki spirits of the mountain to help with your diagnosis. He opens the account and tallies his *mesa* objects.” The *curandero* lights a candle for Saint Martin de Pores, a Dominican saint whose father was a Spanish nobleman and whose mother was an African slave from Panama. “Kuntur petitions our saint of racial and social harmony to heal you with his miracles.”

The old man sips the hallucinogenic jungle brew and sprays it onto his *mesa*. “Pachamama absorbs it and accepts his offering,” Raulito explains. The *curandero* then holds up three perfect coca leaves. “These leaves represent the three worlds of the Incas and the trinity. Little by little, the *curandero* will guide you through the three worlds and send you to Hanan Pacha, the dreamworld, where you will explore your sickness so you can heal.”

Kuntur lights his Mapacho cigar and blows smoke on the boiling brew to chase away bad Awki spirits. As I sit cross-legged before his *mesa*, he waves his lit cigar in front of me, at my back, and at each side of me to cleanse me. He fills a ceramic cup with the jungle brew and gives it to me. I take a sip and almost spray it out as it’s so bitter and unpleasant.

After ten minutes, I've drunk most of my tea and am listening to Kuntu's hypnotic *icaros*. I feel queasy, as if suffering from acid indigestion. Then I become dizzy and noxious. 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, at the smoke hole in the ceiling where the bad Awki spirits are fleeing, and the good ones are entering with healing powers from the Apus of the mountains. The smoke from the fire and the vapor from the brew mingle and rise through the smoke hole as an offering to the mountains.

The fluttering music of Teddy's panpipe resonates in my head, although no one's around playing the music. My mind sees hummingbirds, butterflies, and a condor in flight. I want to be that condor and soar the furrows and eddies in the mountain skies.

Kuntu's chants intensify and then fade. Like the candle of Saint Martin de Porres, my mind flickers into and out of a dream, into and out of reality. My heart palpitates and skips a beat, and my breath is heavy. In my peripheral vision, I see the *curandero* move objects on his *mesa*. My mind wavers, becomes aloof, and escapes into a vision of where I want to be—in the faraway place of Tawantinsuyu, the empire of four quarters.

Quantum mechanics . . . string theory . . . I'm thinking, as I picture lines connecting sacred *huacas*. The lines radiate from my lifeforce, my *kawsay*, to mountain boulders and outcroppings, to the Pleiades, to the Pillars of Creation, and to the sacred objects on Kuntur's *mesa*. *Huacas* are centers of energy connected by invisible strings that extend into the three worlds; my mind flickers back to Tawantinsuyu.

The quipu is a bookkeeping device, and the *chaski* runners are record keepers. *They were bookkeepers! I'm a bookkeeper! I'm an Inca chaski!* I hear a clatter. I awaken. The door blows

open. A soft, cool breeze touches my face, like a butterfly kiss. It feels lovely and refreshing. I relax comfortably on the 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 jungle brew.

Tupac Inca is nearby. Kuntur is chanting *icaros* to Pachamama. He names the nearby mountains one by one: "Salcantay . . . Misti . . ." Then suddenly, once again, Tawantinsuyu pulls me from the *icaros* of Pakuq Kuntur and into a vision . . .

A child appears to me. Or am I that child? She's eight. Her skin is light brown, and her black hair hangs in two long braids tied together in her back. She's barefoot and wearing an ankle-length tunic with a belt made of textiles she herself wove. Her dark eyes reflect her innocence. She's beholden to Sapa Inca, her parents, her village, and to the gods Inti, Pachamama, and the mountain Apus.



Chapter 18: Sisa, a Vision from Ayahuasca Jungle Tea

During the Reign of Tupac Inca

Sisa

Each morning, before I fetch water, I praise Copacati, the Goddess of the Lake. At night, I pray to the “god of everything whose name is too great to utter” but whom people call Viracocha, the god who arose from the lake at the beginning of time. He created everything and did good deeds while wandering the world until he walked across the vast ocean and disappeared. I know he will return one day with legions of warriors, as the Pleiades returns after forty days. When it reaches its zenith and there’s no moon, I can count thirteen stars in the Seven Kid Sisters.

My two younger brothers call me Older Sister. My parents call me Sisa, which means flower, but it’s not my given name. I won’t receive a real name for another two or three years, not until after my first bleeding, when I’ll have my *quicuchicuy*—the “Combing of Hair” rite—and I’ll become a woman. It’s an event I look forward to, as does every other little girl in the Inca empire of Tupac Inca, son of Pachacuti, Earth Shaker. On that day, the day of my first bleeding, my parents will give me my permanent name, and I will have a soul.

I live in the cold, dry grassland plateau of the altiplano south of Cusco, in the southeast quarter of the Inca empire, a place the Incas call Qullasuyu. To the east and west of my family farm are towering mountains and volcanoes. My home is at the shores of Copacati's enormous lake. The bulrush sedge in the wetlands attracts egrets, flamingos, gulls, and lapwings. The lake provides my village ayllu of 100 people with catfish and killifish. The people of my ayllu use reeds to make boats, houses, and floating islands, which they moor to the lake bottom. Some of my uncles and aunts live on these floating islands and grow potatoes.

I don't know the language of the Inca people because I speak Puquina, a language of my Tiwanaku ancestors who lived on the altiplano long before Pachacuti Inca conquered our land. Copacati has covered my ancestors with her waters, including the sun gate of Viracocha. I raise small animals for my parents and my ayllu. My father uses my cormorants to fish; the ayllu elders pay tribute to the Inca king with my chinchillas. In wicker cages, I keep frogs and guinea pigs, which Mama roasts on special occasions. For Mama's cooking fire, my little brothers and I collect llama dung, bromeliad, reeds, and wood from shrubs on the altiplano.

In the season of ending rains, I help Mama dig up potatoes and plant squash, amaranth, peppers, pepinos, and tomatoes, and my brothers and I gather beetles and fresh grubs to eat. We eat llama meat only when the Pleiades rises overhead in the season of Pachamama and on the day that the Inti stops at his southernmost station. My ayllu neighbors join in a feast of sacrificed llamas and alpacas, cuy, and killifish from the lake.

When the stars fade, I collect duck eggs, feed the hairless dogs, and milk the llamas. My brothers help Father herd more than 200 llamas and alpacas grazing in the altiplano. Every three years, men of our ayllu round up wild vicuñas for shearing. Then I help Mama spin the wool that my ayllu gives in tribute to Tupac Inca. The gods and Sapa Inca bestow good things to me and

my ayllu. I'm well fed and well loved. I live in a peaceful world, a prosperous, well-ordered universe. Never before has Kon-Tiki unleashed his wrath upon my pleasant life.

It is the seventh year in the reign of Sapa Tupac Inca, son of Earth Shaker, and the summer has been especially dry. Apu Panaca Viramayta is the king's younger brother, and he travels with his troops on the many Inca roads to find remarkable girls for Sapa Inca. These girls will become the king's chosen maidens; they're called *acllas* of the king.

My parents tell me that Viramayta and his troops have arrived at the lake shores of our altiplano and that the head elder of my ayllu, an old man called Cacique, has arranged for Viramayta to meet my parents and me. I believe that my parents boasted too much about me and have caused me to leave them forever. I will not care for them in their old age, but they will be honored to give me to the Inca king as a tribute, or to the gods as a sacrifice. Sapa Inca and the gods will reward them on Earth and in Hanan Pacha.

When Viramayta meets me at my home beside the lake, I feel shy but am polite, obedient, and in the hands of Viracocha. I know that I'm bringing great honor to my ayllu and family. But I must leave them and Copacati. "Tutanam, ripusaq. In darkness, I forever depart." I whisper to the goddess of my lake before Viramayta and his troops take me from my home.

Along the road to the capital city of Sapa Inca, warriors carry me on a rosewood palanquin decorated with iridescent hummingbird feathers and shining crystals. I'm on my way to becoming the king's chosen maiden. They've dressed me in a new tunic of fine wool with wide colored bands and checkered squares, a new *chumpi* sash, a shawl, and shawl pin made of silver, and adorned me with heavy gold ear studs, a necklace, and bangles. On my head rests a conical crown made of white toucan and blue macaw feathers. My only possession from home is

my feather *chuspas*, a bag containing gifts Father made for me. They include a spondylus llama totem and a wooden spoon and comb.

When my procession arrives at each ayllu, people prostrate themselves along the Inca roads. To them, I'm Chaska Qoyllor, Goddess of Venus, at the time just before sunrise and sunset. Chaska, the planet Venus herself, protects me as a young chosen virgin, as does Chaska Coyllur, the god of flowers. To the people of the Inca Empire, I'm the morning and evening star, the brightest and most beautiful star in heaven. I'm the glorious renewal of spring.

For three years, I'm dwelling in the king's House of Chosen Maidens, the Acclahuasi in the Coricancha temple compound. I haven't had my *quicuchicuy*, and I'm still unnamed. The temples inside Coricancha are dedicated to the Pleiades; to Venus; to Viracocha, the creator of everything; to Illapa, the god of thunder; and to Cuichu, the god of the rainbow bridges into the other worlds. In tribute to Mamakilla, the Incas have lined her temple walls with silver and the walls of Inti's temple with gold, which they called the sweat of the sun. The Golden Temple of Inti is the most sacred *huaca* in the Inca Empire. There are forty-one roads that start from the Golden Temple and lead to all the *huaca* sites on Earth, in hell, and across the Milky Way. During the solstice, Sapa Inca sits on a golden throne inside the Golden Temple, and Inti's rays stream through the windows and illuminate him as the son of Inti and the axel of Tawantinsuya.

Four hundred other pure and sanctified maidens live with me in the House of Chosen Maidens. They come from throughout the Inca kingdom. People call us Virgins of the Sun and Daughters of the Moon. Our lives are dedicated to Sapa Inca, and we weave his garments made of vicuña wool.

During the rainy season, in the tenth year in his reign, Tupac Inca holds court at the Heavenly City, the mountain stronghold of his father, Earth Shaker. Like his father, King Tupac rules his empire with *chaski* runners and mighty Inca warriors.

The king lives in opulence in his palace at the Heavenly City in the mountains. Daily, llama caravans bring his supplies, and Inca soldiers guard the front gate, Inti Punta. Many chosen maidens from the Acllahuasi have accompanied Tupac Inca to the Heavenly City. He requires us to weave his daily garments, cook his sacred meals, sing *icaros*, and light the sacred fires. We reside at a large cloister that Earth Shaker had built for his own chosen maidens.

On days not covered with clouds, Sapa Inca, his brothers, and his astronomer 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, and the chosen maidens and our *mamacunas* sing *icaros* to the setting sun. I'm the king's favorite. He calls me his little flower, and he likes to hear my voice sing praises during his dances to Inti. He tells me I'm a beautiful girl blessed by Mama Alpa, the goddess of many breasts. After my *quicuchicuy*, he promises to take me as his concubine and give me a permanent name. I think he will name me Alpa.

Today, as often happens in the mountains, Illapa brings clouds to the sky. When Inti nears the western mountains, an hour before darkness, Illapa allows Inti to cast long shadows. Tupac Inca is wearing a white tunic with a red *chumpi*, one I have woven, a golden sun pectoral, and a feather headdress. On one hand, he holds a spear, and on the other, he wields a star club, his warrior *macana*.

Sapa Tupac Inca is standing before his priests, the *mamacunas*, and the *acllas* as he raises his spear and *macana*. Our chanting stops when our king recites prayers to Inti in a voice that echoes in the mountains. He prays to Earth Shaker, Viracocha, and Manco Capac, and he prays

to his “Creator of Everything whose name is too great to utter.” He invokes the Lord of Thunder, Mother Earth, Mother Moon, and the mountain grandfathers. He says, “I’m your son, Sapa Inca. I command and rule your kingdom on Earth. Giver of life. Bless my vast and mighty empire. Bless my people, the Children of the Sun. Let them eat, drink, and live many years in peace and without illness and pain. Give them many descendants who will not fall into the dark crevices of evil along the lonely road of life.”

The king breaks into song. The priests chant, ring copper bells, beat thundering drums, and shake rattles. The *mamacunas* and *acllas* sing.

Mamakilla is now the new moon. Everyone knows this. But no one has predicted that the black jaguar would bite a chunk of the sun nearing the western mountains. Sapa Inca and his astronomer priests are awestruck. The chanting and music stop. Priests fall to the ground and prostrate themselves. Attendant soldiers reach Sapa Inca to protect him. Everyone falls to the ground and prostrates themselves, including myself and the other *acllas*, the *mamacunas*, and even the king.

No one speaks a word or makes a sound until the eerie darkness passes. Nobody knows what has happened, but we all realize that the world is trembling, and the gods are on the brink of unmerciful spite. The Creator. Mother Earth. Mamakilla. Illapa. They’re vengeful because the new moon overwhelmed Inti at sunset. *Does dragon woman make the earth quake?* everyone silently questions. *Does Pachamama awake a spewing volcano? Does a comet pass before the sun?*

Birds stop flying. Crickets chirp that the world has ended. But the darkness passes in stages until darkness returns as the Inti disappears in the west.

The high priest stands and yells, “Illapa, Inti, and Kon-Tiki Viracocha proclaim their wrath! The moon has overtaken the sun!”

Sapa Inca and his court immediately return to his palace in the capital city. People throughout the kingdom have witnessed the event. In places north of Cusco, the black panther Inti Jiwana consumed the sun entirely, and the world became dark. People throughout the empire are demanding that the king make a *capacocha* sacrifice to the gods. They know that only Tupac Inca can appease the angry gods who have caused this catastrophic omen.

For several days at the *Acllahuasi*, Tupac Inca watches me as I sit against the stone wall with my handheld loom and weave the vicuña cloth he will wear. Light from cloister windows shine upon my face. The king tells me that my dark eyes sparkle as I pass the weft through the warp. That my face is luminous. Precious. That I’m his most perfect child, unblemished and untainted by my first bleeding. Many times, Supa Inca has watched me like this. He says he relishes watching me. We’ve never exchanged words. No one speaks to the king unless asked to. Men don’t talk to the chosen maidens, and no one ever looks directly at Sapa Inca.

Tupac Inca wanted me as his concubine in the Red Palace, but his first duty is to his realm and not to himself. A *capacocha* ceremony is needed, and the king selects me as an offering to the gods.

When the Pleiades returns to the sky and announces the New Year, the *capacocha* ceremony begins in the central plaza, Huakaypata Square, the belly of the puma and the hub of the Inca roads. A stream running through the city divides the plaza. Edging Huakaypata Square are the palaces of Earth Shaker and Viracocha, former Inca kings. In the southeast corner looms Tupac’s Red Palace.

Priests, nobility, and royal attendants gather in Huakaypata Square, before a crowd of four thousand citizens. On a rock throne in the center of the plaza, Tupac Inca sits before his ancestors, the royal mummies called *mallquis*. He wears a pectoral of the sun made of hummingbird feathers and gold. Gold ear plugs pull his earlobes to his shoulder, and he wears a red-feathered cape and a colorful turban with fringes, feathers, and tassels. Red and black paint covers his face so that common people cannot see him, and jewels are sewn onto his purple tunic. His sandals are made of chinchilla with soles of silver.

The ceremony opens when Tupac Inca consults his ancestors, the *mallquis*. These mummies communicate between the living and the dead and are closely linked to the gods. They still reign and serve Tawantinsuyu and reside in a sanctuary in the Coricancha, where their weapons and treasures surround them. Noble families called *Awkapacas* dress the royal *mallquis* in fine textiles, feathered headdresses, and gold, turquoise, crystals, and emeralds. The *mallquis* are sitting before the king on their golden palanquins, with their knees to their chests and their arms crossed, faces ashen, and eyes looking downward. The *Awkapacas* have arranged them in a semicircle by age. During the ceremony, the *Awkapacas* interpret the *mallquis*' advice to Sapa Inca.

On a golden throne beside the king, before the *mallquis* council, I'm sitting as the chosen maiden for the *capacocha*. *Mamacunas* have adorned me in a tunic and belt of vicuña wool, and a red woven cape held together at my nape with a silver llama pin and silver jewelry, the sweat of the Moon Mamakilla. A white- and blue-feathered headdress tops my head, and my long black hair tumbles down my back in many tiny beaded braids.

Sapa Inca sings about the accomplishments of his predecessors since the time of Manco Capac and Mama Ocllo. "My father, Earth Shaker, son of Viracocha, conquered the world

beyond the Cusco valley. He established the Heavenly City in the mountains.” The king then implores the *mallquis* to stand before the gods and appease their anger. “I have brought before you my greatest offering: a *capacocha* child. An unblemished *acla* who has not yet bled. For three years, she has woven my royal cloth. At my father’s retreat, she witnessed Inti Jiwana take a bite of the sun. She knows the wrath of Kon Tiki. She was twice chosen. I’m sending her to a mountain peak where Illapa flashes his shiny cloak and the Apus erupt in fury and cover the skies with darkness. I select Huaynaputina Mountain due west of Lake Copacati. It is near the ayllu of my *capacocha*, where the procession will pass and honor her village, her mother and father, and the goddess of the lake, Copacati.”

The mummified kings and queens are watching me, I’m thinking, as I quietly sit and listen to my Inca king before the crowd of cheering people. *Sapa Inca honors me. Again, I’m stolen away. I’ve been twice chosen. First as a chosen maiden, and now as a capacocha child.*

From Huakaypata Square, my *capacocha* procession begins its month-long journey along the Inca roads to a sacred platform high on the mountain peak. In the procession, elite centurions of Sapa Inca carry me on a rosewood palanquin. Priests and *mamacunas* follow me. People cheer as we pass through farms and villages; they praise the king for his retribution to the gods. Everyone has seen the puma bite Inti the sun.

After I pay honor to my ayllu, my parents, and to Copacati, my goddess of the lake, the procession proceeds to the base of Huaynaputina, where it disbands. A few priests and elite imperial soldiers climb up the mountain carrying offerings and food. One soldier carries me, the *capacocha*, on his back. To keep me passive and calm and warm in the chill of the mountain, priests give me chichi beer to drink and coca leaves to chew. They don’t want me to become fearful. I must be a brave and sturdy sacrifice to the gods, with no signs of weakness. I cannot

cry for my mama or my goddess of the lake, but in truth, this is something I learned to do nearly three years before, when I was first chosen.

We arrive at the *tambo* halfway up Huaynaputina when the hues of twilight begin to blend with smoky ash from the neighboring volcano, Ubinas. The spewing mountain is always in sight during our climb up the mountain. Apu Ubinas could erupt at any moment and darken the skies for a century. I haven't spoken during this trek because I'm forbidden to do so, and I don't speak the language of the Inca. But I often dream and wonder about my fate in the language of my Tiwanaku ancestors. I think about how the Apu gods will receive me. If my journey into their world will be as pleasant as my life had been when I lived with my family at the lakeside of Copacati. Now, I'm wondering if this mountain Huaynaputina will one day erupt, and if it does, I'm hoping it will happen soon after my sacrifice, and that it will be the most cataclysmic eruption ever to occur in these mountains.

After sleeping one night at the first *tambo*, the soldiers carry me farther up the mountain, into thin air, making it difficult to breathe. The intense sun burns my exposed face and my hands as the freezing chill of Apu Huaynaputina stings and bites me.

When we reach the mountaintop, I can barely breathe. It's so cold that my vicuña blanket is stiff. The priests bundle me in a tunic and cape and adorn me with silver pins, broad silver bracelets, and a white- and blue-feathered headdress. At the edge of the mountaintop, soldiers have built the stone pit and platform in preparation for me, the *capacocha*. I'm shivering, and the beer and coca are making my mind stir like a blizzard. The soldiers place me inside my tomb, while the priests prepare their ritual fire and recite the names of all the Apu mountain gods, the names of Inti, Illapa, Pachamama, and the Creator god whose name they cannot say. I hear them

sing, and I hear them saying that they expect me to die when Inti reaches his zenith and lassoes my soul.

For warmth, I'm holding my knees to my chest and crossing my feet tethered with embroidered leather moccasins. I feel like a royal mummy. Offerings surround me. Some are for the gods; others are to benefit me and help my soul live on. Among these offerings is my own feather *chuspas* with the spondylus llama, wooden spoon, and comb that my father carved. There are statues of llamas, birds, toads, and snakes made of gold, silver, and spondylus shell. In my hand is a gold image of the sun with the face of Viracocha, Father of the universe, Creator of the sun and all that exists. He's the god who's so great that he hides his name from view. The god who will return one day with an army of warriors. Like the Pleiades, which returns after forty days.

I faintly hear the soldiers blowing trumpets and pounding drums while the priests are singing *icaros*. I'm numb inside and out from the cold, coca, and maize beer. In my little mountain room, my tomb, I'm not hungry because the priests have fed me. I'm weak but still very much alive.

Above me in my open room, I can see the high priest holding up a concave mirror. He's waiting for the rays of Inti to burst his ceremonial wood into flames.

When the sun approaches its zenith, everyone descends the mountain except me, the *capacocha*, and two imperial guards. They're Apu Inca captains and are wearing bronze helmets, llama wool tunics and wrappings, and gold pectorals of Inti's face to show their ranks and allegiance to Supa Inca, the son of Inti. They're holding star-headed *manacas* and standing guard at the edge of the mountaintop, at the rim of my little tomb, where they will remain until Inti has passed his zenith. If Inti doesn't take me by then, the king has ordered these men to kill me with

their *manacas* at the back of my head. Then they will cover the sacrificial pit, my tomb, and descend the mountain for the last time. By then, I will not notice their departure, and I will no longer be shivering from the freezing cold.

But now I'm still alive, and the winds are beginning to whip snow upon the platform and into my little room. Cumulonimbus clouds are rolling in and gathering in the sky straight over me. *Or has Ubinas erupted?* I wonder in my hazy thoughts. Quickly, Illapa enshrouds Huaynaputina with veils of white snow and charges the thin, dry air with the force of the Creator. He opens his silver cape and, in a flash, shoots his silver arrows onto Huaynaputina. His voice thunders behind his flashing arrows.

From my little room, I hear the elite soldiers talking at the edge of the platform. They decide to kill me and descend the mountain at once. Illapa has stopped them from seeing when Inti reaches his zenith and lassoes my soul.

"The pure-hearted do not steal, lie; they're not lazy. You must live by helping each other," I hear the voice of Viracocha, and I say to him in my mind, *The gods have twice chosen me to travel the dark road to Hanan Pacha. My guide is a black dog who sees in the dark. My kawsay, a beautiful lifeforce, is fading.*

Suddenly, before the soldiers can kill me and descend the mountaintop, I watch Illapa's bolting arrow strike a soldier's golden pectoral, then recoil and strike the other soldier. Together, they tumble down the mountainside as Pachamama absorbs the bolting arrows. But the charge is so great that it passes through the mound of stone and reaches me in my little room. At once, my fading body fills with Illapa's powers and those of the Creator of All Worlds and All Things, the god who makes Earth tremble.

“Tutanam, ripusaq,” I whisper. “In darkness, I forever depart.” Then I see the rainbow jaguar bridge between Kay Pacha—this world—and Hanan Pacha—the world of the sun, moon, planets, and constellations, where Inti rules by day and Mamakilla by night. “It’s a good thing,” I hear the Creator say to me, “the world of infinite wisdom and peace.”



Chapter 19: Rainbow Jaguar Bridge

January 6

Muriel

Pakuq Kuntur ends the ceremony by closing the accounts and recognizing all the objects on his *mesa*.

Raulito is at my side. He helps me sit and drink cool, soothing water. But my mind is far away. The *curandero* sings of the mountains. I feel so at rest that I don't want to move. Ever. Maybe I can't move. My mind and body have separated.

When I wake up again, I'm parched.

"A cup of cool water," Raulito says. He's sitting on a stool beside my cot. "A gift from the mountains, Arizona." He helps me rise and drink.

After a long, dreamless sleep, I'm feeling fine. Good, in fact, because of the jungle brew. "How many hours have I slept?" I ask Raulito. He tells me two days, and I lie back down on the cot and close my eyes while recalling the dimly lit house with a thatched roof, sooty rafters, pictures of saints on the stone walls, one cot, one stool, a bench outside, and a *pachamanca* oven. Horses and llamas are corralled by rock fences on the grassy terraced mountain slope of the Andes. I remember that 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 beside my bed on the tramped earth; his hair is disheveled, he has a beard, and he's wearing a Brooks Brothers pullover. He's lost weight since I last saw him. And I know he's carelessly keeping a wallet full of cash in his back pocket.

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? And . . . Is it really you, Steve?"

"Yes, it's me," Steve replies and sits on the cot beside me. Raulito places a bottle of water on the stool beside the bed and walks outside the open front door.

"But how?" I ask when my mind becomes clear.

"A woman called me," Steve says. "A foreign woman named Whitney."

I close my eyes and shake my head. That woman. I can't believe she robbed me of everything, including my last request.

"Muriel," Steve continues. "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," he admits humorously, as if to cheer me up. "No one around the village knows you as Muriel. But Arizona struck a bell."

I laugh and say, "My name has been Arizona for a long time now." I reach out and touch his hand. He takes hold of mine, and I feel a deep affection for him—a kind of pity that I had never felt before. Steve had tried to be good to me, I reflect, but it wasn't what I needed. *Poor man, innocent, and yet guilty of trying too hard.*

"Muriel," Steve awakens me from my drifting thoughts; I probably still have traces of the jungle brew clouding my mind. "Whitney told me that you were sick. But I already knew

something was wrong. I got the Cigna invoice and then a mysterious call from Mayo Clinic.” He squeezes my hand. “You needed me. The kids needed you.”

“Damn her,” I say, and my mood suddenly shifts. I had tried to forget Whitney’s theft, but 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 coca. I just want to sleep peacefully.”

“Here.” He hands me some Motrin from his fanny pack. “Please, Muriel. Why didn’t you tell me that 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 own feelings. Not now. Not ever.”

I look at his eyes, welling with tears. I know the truth. He wouldn’t have let me go. No one would; no one could. “You must hate me for what I did. Leaving you with Kevin and Kristen,” I say and take a deep breath of the cool, thin air. “Can you understand?”

“I knew for several months,” Steve continues, “before that foreign woman even called me. 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 had traveled into Latin America. The embassy in Mexico said they issued you a passport. Then Ivet called about the Explorer in Panama. You’ve really been leaving a trail behind.” Steve begins to chuckle, and 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 I need 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 and say, “Stop it. I’m all right, and I’m where I want to be.”

“I’m with Betsy now,” Steve admits. “I have to tell you this, but I was never unfaithful until long after you left.”

In the dim light of the hut, I gaze at Steve and slowly inhale. I hear birds twittering outside and trekkers chatting as they pass by. The hearth crackles, and I can smell cuy roasting on the *pachamanca* outside. I’m warm and numb, and my thoughts are hazy. “Everything’s like a blending of time,” I tell Steve. “Of what’s real and what’s not. 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.”

Raulito stands at the door, his soft boyish face shimmering in the afternoon sunshine. He wants to give me some tea with cocaine. Steve nods, as if giving him permission to approach me.

“I want to take you home,” Steve declares as he now stands in the light shining through the doorway. “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.”

I stare at Steve, feeling drained by his remark. Of course, he would do that and go against my last wishes. “You must leave me here, and now you must go,” I say as firmly as I possibly can. “I’ve worked everything out with these people.” I look at the hearth where Pidru sits smoking. His wife is cooking outside, where her boys are playing with the dogs. I see them through the open door. “Let me be,” I say. “Except, please give these people some money. I was robbed by that woman who called you. Please don’t rob me too.” My own words take my breath away. I feel like a small child in bed, huddled up with fever, missing school, trying to get better so she can play with the kids outside. I know I have to rest because I honestly don’t feel well. I envision my mother entering the one-room hut with a glass of Seven-up to help settle my stomach. Mother sits at my bedside, stroking my sweaty brow and telling me that everything will

be all right. I just need to rest. “You must go now,” I tell Steve again. “I’m all right. I have my Inca boy and my *curandero* to see me through this journey.”

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?” I hear him asking Steve. He has an Israeli accent.

“I’m not even hiking the trail,” Steve 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 and probably wonder if he’s being mocked. He slings on his backpack and heads up the trail.

Raulito begins laughing. Steve, 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.”

Steve must be shocked by Raulito’s words, I’m thinking, because he says, “You talk as if the matter is settled when in my mind nothing’s settled.” Steve’s standing by the doorway when he takes out his wallet, removes a wad of hundred dollar bills, and hands it to Raulito, who takes the money, nods, and enters the house.

I can hear Steve telling his guide and porter that he’s ready to return to Kilometer 88 and that he needs to get home. I know in my mind that he’s eager to leave before he does something against my wishes. He’s done what he can. Found me. Helped me with cash. Why disturb me any further? And I know he 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 I know that as he's heading down the trail behind his porter and guide, Steve will be thinking about his return 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, my ayahuasca *curandero*. Tupac Inca is my caretaker and nurse. I mostly sleep on the cot in the dimly lit stone house, which generally smells of the boiling quinoa and potatoes cooking on the *pachamanca* fire outside every day.

In the mornings and evenings, Tupac takes me outside to watch the sunrise and sunset. Side by side, we bundle together under my vicuña blanket from Otavalo and the view of the 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 points out Inca ruins and tells me the names of the mountains.

At twilight on the night of a full moon, we watch Inti descend behind the western peaks as Mamakilla rises. All the while, trekkers are straggling along the trail to the camps, where their porters have already pitched tents and are now cooking their dinners. Probably pasta and tuna fish, and Kool-Aid, I think to myself as they pass. *They will be satisfied with the meal.*

"I will take you to Lake Titicaca," Tupac says because he retains a thread of hope that I will pull through and that the *curandero*'s prayers and medicines will cure me. Tupac has witnessed and heard about many miracles happening in the mountains. And I believe every miracle that he reveals to me.

I rest my head on his shoulder and deeply inhale.

In a moment, Tupac says, “Señorita Arizona, *mi amor, cariño*, you’re tired. It’s time for your Inca Quechua dinner and Pakuq Kuntur’s tea and medicines. Perhaps I’ll give you a little more coca tea tonight. A little more cocaine.”

I say nothing, and we sit a while longer. The Apu gods and Awki spirits of the high Andes 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 the gods. The pain fades. My every penetrating breath is as soothing as sabila infused with nutrients, vitamins, and minerals.

The Apus gave me a vision of a civilization that reigned for only one hundred years, a short history for an empire analogous, in its vast scope, to ancient Egypt, which lasted three thousand years. It’s all so mystifying. “Her name is Sisa,” I tell Tupac.

“Who?”

“The *capacocha* of my ayahuasca journey, the ice maiden Johan Reinhard discovered last year.”

“Sisa means flower,” Tupac tells me. It’s something I already know.

“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.”

“MamaSara, Killa, Pacha, Qucha, Alpa,” Tupac happily recites the names. “Mamakilla is the goddess of the 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.”

My thoughts begin to mystify me as we quietly sit in my mountain ecosphere near Dead Woman’s Pass. I’m living outside the butterfly biodome in a tremendous world. The sky is my

heaven. 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 generational, living year-round where they were born; others migrate and fly, here then there, beginning where they're born, ending where they die. Like my very thoughts, sometimes. "Biospheres 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 and says, "*Me gusta mucho. Munay ki.*" He kisses my hand. I shiver from his touch, even though the bright full moon, Mamakilla, is casting away 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 has 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, my Tupac Inca," I say as we huddle under the vicuña blanket. "It only means that God is calling me one more time. Whoever that god may be."

My little Tupac Inca says nothing, and I feel happy knowing that he's happy just to be with me.