

**Zapatista**



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by

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ISBN: 1-58820-332-8

This book is printed on acid free paper

1stBooks - rev. 10/26/00





## CHAPTER 1

Neither passion nor fury accompanied her leaving, only quiet resignation and the hollow sound of her sandals on the worn, wooden floor. Peter knew she would never return. The infinitesimal vortex created by her movement pulled the very air from the room. He sat alone, unable to find a breath. Peter blinked steel grey eyes and shifted his trim body. Wrinkled linen pants and shirt gave him the appearance of a 1940's star playing in an old Bogie movie. The ancient ceiling fan slowly, silently rotated above his table. Nothing else stirred in the Mexican hole-in-the-wall. She left Peter alone but for Remar, the ever-present grizzly bartender, sitting at the far end of the bar. He read the racing news and did what only Remar could do so well: mind his own business.

Peter sat for the few minutes until closing time, then, without conscious decision stood, reached in the front pocket of his trousers and pulled out a handful of crumpled American dollars. His mind could not fully appreciate the events of the evening. Peter experienced the strange sensation of merely being an observer. Every detail of the room became important. The two neon beer signs--one Spanish, one English--the chipped Formica tabletop and wobbly wooden chairs where they sat, the smoky-alcohol smell. How starkly the acrid smells and crude sights of this unlikely place contrasted with the memory of her delicate beauty.

Peter stiffened and his eyes widened into a panicked look, thinking she might fade from his mind. Her subtle sensuous smell, melodic voice, wispy golden hair, and the feminine curve of her body flooded his thoughts. He remembered how her mouth turned down at the corners when she worried, the small mole at the nape of her neck, and surrendered a tired smile.

Without saying goodbye to Remar, Peter walked toward the door. He stopped. Where to go? He turned to say something to the Pancho Villa look-alike bartender, but nothing came. Lights from traffic passed by the window behind the bar, raising and lowering the ambient light of the room. Finally Peter shrugged, turned, and left.

Janet and Peter moved to this Mexican village nestled in the Sierra Madre del Sur ranging through the southern state of Chiapas, below the Trans-Volcanic Cordillera, two months before. They came to paint and write and make love--all of those things people don't have time to do because of jobs or responsibilities noted in their crowded E-mail and prioritized on their calendars. Peter escaped the aggressive, competitive business world, but didn't escape himself. He still felt the need to win a conversation rather than to just have one. Janet said the distinction between good-hearted wit and mean-spirited sarcasm escaped Peter. She demonstrated the natural consequences of such confusion by leaving. Peter tried to wave off her exit with a *good riddance* but it soured in the pit of his stomach. Janet's flaw that caused Peter to drive her away was painfully obvious, even to Peter. He loved her.

Peter wandered down the dirt street in front of the cantina toward his hotel. The dark early morning carried with it a soft cool breeze that gently moved his hair and cooled his sweaty chest. This part of the village was rough like the border towns, contrasting dramatically with the rest of the township and the virgin beauty of the surrounding countryside. The acrid smell of poorly maintained civilization filled Peter's nostrils. Identifying too much with the hawkers and whores of the night, he yearned to get back to the freshness of the mountains.

"Peter!"



Peter turned to see another American dropout, there to write the great American novel. Tonight he had no patience with any other sort.

“Mark, how are you?”

Mark took an unsteady stance and gave an exaggerated wink. “Drunk. Where’s Janet?”

“Finding herself ... I think possibly her search may lead her to another country.”

“Oh, lover’s quarrel, heh? Don’t worry; she’ll get over it; she’s used to putting up with the crap you put out.”

Peter chose not to argue. Mark meant well. Also he was drunk and Peter didn’t have the energy to try to be serious with him.

“Yeah, well, it’s no mean feat to put out the quality and quantity of crap I do. It’s a damn art form! She should’ve been appreciative.”

Mark stopped, swayed slightly, and stared at Peter. Then he smiled, displaying Hollywood-perfect teeth that seemed out of place with his unkept hair and nose twisted from being broken once too often. Sometimes drunks make great audiences.

“That’s good, Peter. I’m going to work that trite statement into my current epic novel.”

Mark often joked that he was working on his third great novel because he gave up on the first two. In truth he wrote first-class short stories and was well into a serious novel.

Peter raised his hand in parting salute, turned, and walked away. Tonight the hotel, tomorrow the abandoned mining cabin in the mountains. When Peter got to his room Janet and her possessions were gone. Had she gotten another room or found transportation away from him? Peter cracked the window giving entrance to the night air, stripped to his shorts, and eased between the sheets and memories of his bed. The alcohol wore off two or three hours later and Peter lost the cloak of sleep. A chemically induced paranoia inspired by dedicated drinking rose like a black apparition from the recesses of his mind. A car crash with his little girl screaming, stupid things he said to Janet, and other scenes ran over and over again. Everything would be copacetic once touched by the first rays of the sun, which gave

little comfort in the dark night. Finally Peter grabbed some clothes, a towel, and shaving gear and stumbled from his room, down the unlit hall to the toilet.

After Peter showered, the first glow of the morning sun beamed through the small window next to the lavatory. Some birds began their ritual of songs as they staked-out their territories. Fresh evidence of life awakening and the morning hue of colors blending across the foothills and eastern sky cheered Peter. He caught his reflection in the dirty mirror hanging at an angle over the faucet that stared back at him, a little swollen and wrinkled from too much drink and not enough sleep. His sad, deep-set eyes betrayed the presence of personal demons. Don't think about the events of the last few hours or the loneliness lurking inside. He stood alone in the public toilet, leaning forward, transfixed, in only his jeans and sandals. The morning light now streamed across his chest causing his face, by contrast, to appear dark and shadowy. Other than the invading sound of the birds, ghostly silence filled the room. Finally Peter's spirit won out over dark-blue depression. Time to pack for the mountains. It was for Janet to decide if she wanted to come. He walked back to his room not happy, but at least resolved.

After stuffing all his worldly possessions in a faded leather suitcase and buckling its straps, he walked down the one flight of stairs to the lobby. Behind the small reception desk sat the old Mexican attendant who ran the hotel. Peter could never remember his name but it did not seem to bother the bent, crusty gentleman. Peter had always found a way to get his thoughts across with what could only charitably be called broken Spanish, but in recent weeks his vocabulary dramatically increased. His passion for words, desire to be the center of attention, and an undeserved talent for being able to pick up foreign language stood him in good stead.

“Señor, I'm checking out.”

“Yes, I hope your stay was pleasant.”

“Have you seen Señorita Travers this morning?” A stupid question, but Peter could not accept the obvious.

“She caught a ride to the train depot early this morning, Señor.”

“Of course.” Peter gave his most casual look. “Did she leave a message?”

The desk manager looked at him with curious eyes. “No Señor.”



## CHAPTER 2

Deep in the rain forest a Subcommandante known only as Marcos spoke to the central council of four Indian tribes known as the Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee. Most of the group, a collection of bizarre-looking revolutionaries, draped red bandannas across their faces. Marcos, a Spanish, ex-college professor from Mexico City, wore a ski mask crowned by a worn beige cap with three faded red stars on the brim, a bandanna loosely tied around his neck. He turned to look back at a Mexican woman in her mid-thirties standing next to the wounded. He nodded at her. She did not move but held his stare. A medical doctor and Marcos' best friend, she absent-mindedly hung her stethoscope over the neck of her white, bloodstained lab coat.

In the shadows of the trees lay four rows of cots laden with injured warriors. Most were bandaged in white gauze, some hooked up to IV bags. An eerie quiet hung over the surgical tent, in contrast to the noise of the helter-skelter activity of a few hours before. Occasionally someone whispered to another in one of the Indian languages: Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Tojolabal, or Chol. The Counsel, however, conducted its meeting in Spanish.

Because of the Indians' oneness with the land and its plants and animals, they felt a mystical reverence for them. For this reason, Shamans ventured into the hospital to join in the struggle

to help the injured. Marcos and his doctor friend approved, if not totally believed in their efforts.

Stoic foot soldiers stationed themselves protectively around the council of Commandantes. Even though these men did not have the advantage of military experience, they wore the hardened look of combat veterans. In mismatched fatigues, each clutched an outdated, small-caliber rifle and wore a machete and a backpack sewn from feed bags. They called themselves the Zapatista National Liberation Army after the hero of the 1910 peasant revolution, Emilio Zapata.

Two bandoliers of ammunition crisscrossed Marcos' chest. A pistol protruded from his belt, and he casually cradled an automatic rifle in the crook of his arm. In an authoritative voice he read Zapatista press releases published immediately after the January first invasion of four towns by one thousand of their soldiers.

Marcos held up a copy of *Vanity Fair* and translated to the soldiers a quote from him: "Here we are, the dead of all times, dying once again, but now with the objective of living."

Marcos cast down that article and brandished a copy of *World Press Review*. "They quote our manifesto!" He meandered through bristling silence of the crowd. Again, he read, "It mattered little to the government that people are dying of hunger and curable diseases, that we have nothing--neither a roof, land, jobs, health, food, education, nor any right to elect our own leaders without interference from foreigners."

Marcos read from *Newsweek*, *The Nation*, and others as members of the Council listened, so engrossed they resembled statues. A prolonged military engagement meant an Indian blood bath, especially for members of the Council. They knew of the slaughter in Ocosingo when their troops were cut off by the Mexican Army. This encounter gave the government its first chance to avenge its embarrassment at being caught off guard by the ragtag Indian army. Mexican soldiers executed captives--their hands tied behind their back-- with a bullet to the brain. In their zeal, the government soldiers killed many innocent civilians. Marcos knew the need for immediate international sympathy. The new NAFTA accord made sentiment from the

United States especially critical. Those in power in Mexico did not want to lose the commerce expected from the new treaty which bridled some of their initial retaliation.

“Ten years of work and organization have gone into our revolution. The time is right and our cause, just. My parents taught me that whatever path I choose, always chose *el camino de la verdad* (the path of truth), no matter how hard it might be, whatever it might cost. I should never value life over truth and it is better to lose your life than to lose the truth. We have all been faithful to this teaching. We expected to be dead by now and concealed our replacement Commandantes in the mountains, yet we still live.”

Hushed voices murmured. Most of the soldiers were to return to the Zapatista’s stronghold in the recently conquered 16th-century colonial town of San Cristobal de las Casas, one hundred and twenty-five kilometers north of the Guatemalan border. They knew of their vulnerability to military attack, yet each possessed fierce bravery and commitment welling from desperation.

“The Institutional Revolutionary Party has ruled Mexico for sixty-five years. Their fraud makes our elections a sick joke. They have embraced the *patrones* (plantation bosses), *ganaderos* (ranchers), oil companies, and anyone else who would exploit Indians or take their land. We have been driven deeper and deeper into the rain forest to slash and burn its underbelly so that we might gain a few years of harvest with which to feed our families. The police, who should protect us, act as our evictors and oppressors. The five hundred years since Cortez has held no alleviation for our plight.”

Marcos didn’t tell this elite clique of leaders anything they did not know. He merely reminded them why they placed themselves so perilously in harm’s way. Also, most of the council did not know of the capture of the former governor of Chiapas whose family ruled this southern state for many years with an iron hand. To most this man represented the evil the revolution was meant to destroy. Marcos dramatically nodded to soldiers waiting out of sight, then waved his arms as if announcing royalty.

“I present to you General Absalon Castellanos Dominguez, former governor of Chiapas.”

The captive, blindfolded and bound, was pushed before the crowd. His expensive military attire looked comical in contrast to his frightened, jerky movements, and perspiring face. He slumped forward, shoulders slouched, belly protruding over a belt dark with sweat, trembling. A shout issued from the group. Two or three lunged forward at the captive. Marcos stepped between them and Dominguez; hand held out toward comrades and his once soft voice now loud and commanding. “I promised Bishop Ruiz no harm would come to this man without a fair and open trial.”

A tense moment passed, then everyone except Dominguez relaxed. His guards drug him away from the crowd and tied him to a tree. Marcos’ voice now resumed its soft, reasoned tone. “We’ll only win this revolution by winning the approval of those watching from the outside. We can’t give Presidente Salinas or his Party any ammunition to paint us as savages.”

Evening descended upon the rain forest. A bitter chill covered the revolutionary band. The Indians thought nothing of the invading cold in their tropical forest for that was the way of the Lacandon winter nights. They made final decisions concerning the deployment of troops, creation of road blocks and the many other issues that had to be addressed. The years of planning paid off, yet much of the war still needed to be played by ear.

Marcos saw a young woman at the edge of the crowd. Even though she wore a bandana, her identity was undeniable. Big, soft eyes pierced over the mask. Marcos, at five foot six towered over most of the Indians, yet this woman stood at least one inch taller. He put his hand on her shoulder and led her away from the others. “*Que pasa?*”

“*Bien.*”

How is your father?

“Mean--ornery.”

Marcos chuckled. “When will he be back?”

“A few days. He’ll dock at Fotera. Are you needing him for another haul?”



“Always.”

“Just let us know what and when.”

“Thanks. Tell your papa thanks for me.”

Marcos walked back to the counsel and, finally, decisions made, the leaders broke up their meeting. Marcos, now masked by the evening grey, turned to the members of the central counsel. “I’ll see you soon, my brothers and sisters. I’ll take our illustrious prisoner to a safe place until he gets the trial he so richly deserves!” Grunts of approval of ghostly Indians emanated from the fading light.

The Zapatistas disappeared into the forest. Other than a few broken blades of grass, no evidence remained that the council meeting ever took place in the clearing. Marcos lingered behind with a small band guarding their political prisoner. They pulled the fat aristocrat to his feet and traveled quickly beside a small rain forest stream. Deep shadows of the trees cloaked them. General Dominguez, still bound and gagged, clumsily kept up with the band. He did not want to discover the consequences of falling behind.

Marcos talked to his followers outside earshot of Dominguez. “Don’t let anything happen to this swine. Injury or death to him will brand us as terrorists. It’ll rob us of world sympathy and give Salinas the excuse he needs to destroy our villages.”

The short, stocky sergeant in charge looked back at Marcos, the whites of his eyes standing out against his black irises and dark skin. “You can rely on us, my Commandante. Our guest won’t be comfortable or happy, but he’ll be unharmed. Where’re you going?”

“I’ll meet with the press tomorrow. Our enemies label us as communists. We can’t be tied to a losing cause. I’ll tell them we seek democracy not communism and argue that free enterprise can’t work if there is no freedom and the marketplace is rigged.”

The shadowy figures sounded approval. The sergeant spoke out. “Yes! Tell them for us.”

Marcos could tell that his men thirsted for news of what would be said to the press. It was the first time in memory that

outsiders wanted to hear what the Chiapas Indians had to say. The voice of a teenage soldier with a slight stutter pierced the dark. “Tellllll us more of what youuuu say, Commandante.”

“I’ll explain that our revolution caused change within our own as well. Ten years ago an Indian woman had no rights even within her own people. She could be bought as a wife from her parents for a pig or a goat. Now there’s a women’s bill of rights honored by the Chiapas Indian government. A third of the Commandantes on the Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee are women. The magic of our movement is that we seek just change wherever it’s needed—even within our own ranks. This will bring us respect from those who watch our struggle. It’ll give Salinas pause for fear of disapproval from the North.”

Marcos knew the change in custom toward women was hard for many. The tradition went back further than recorded history but was now a ritual of the past. They traveled silently for several hours, listening carefully for sounds of the enemy. The small band reached the base of the mountains and started the hard trek up the steep incline. Marcos stopped, bid his friends farewell, and turned back toward the Pacific and the black of the jungle’s night. He traveled alone with dangers around every corner, yet he walked with the confident steps of a man approaching his destiny.

### CHAPTER 3

Peter threw his suitcase into the back of his trusty 1978 Volvo station wagon, *Simone*, and drove. On the main drag through town Mark waved him down. Peter pulled over and dust billowed around his vehicle.

Mark toted a small back pack over his left shoulder. He walked up with a man's confident stride and a little boy expression of unbridled enthusiasm. "How 'bout a ride to the mountains?"

"Where you going, Mark?"

"Rancho la Puerta. Most of the gang 'll be there for a week or two." *The gang* consisted of eight to ten other Americans with varying degrees of liberal arts education who fancied themselves on Bohemian sabbatical. Janet and Peter knew none of them before coming to Realas.

Still young enough to feel immortal, Mark's life was filled with fearless adventure and he with anger and love ... depending upon the moment. Peter, at thirty-two, became the *old man*, saddled with the indecision that comes from perceiving more than one point of view. Peter was of average height, Mark six foot-four. Peter's light blond hair was becoming even lighter with gray. Mark's hair was jet black. His dark eyebrows gave him a perpetual look of serious intent. Although Peter's hair was long, it appeared conservative compared to Mark, whose hair splashed wildly in every direction across his shoulders. Peter

was trim but stocky, Mark sleek and wiry. Peter's face was beginning to show its first signs of wear from sunny days and long nights. Mark possessed wrinkle-free skin except for an unsightly scar across his forehead for which he never gave the same explanation twice. Each story, however, thoroughly entertained Peter.

They roared down the dirt road with their windows lowered and a Mexican station blaring on the AM radio.

Beyond the foreground array of sun-bleached browns and greens rose the dark presence of the mountains, their hazy purples and grays silhouetted against a brilliant cerulean sky. A roadrunner, leaning forward in sleek design, swiftly crossed the road in front of *Simone*.

Mark turned down the radio. "Why don't you go with me to Rancho La Puerta? I foresee a major good time."

Peter appreciated that he did not ask him any questions about Janet. He begged off, not telling Mark that he shamelessly wanted to convert the flood of emotions he felt from his breakup into literary accomplishment. This callous intent to cash in on the loss of his relationship made Peter doubt his ingenuousness and not doubt Janet's wisdom in leaving.

"We'll miss you. I've a check coming from the *New Yorker* which'll convert me into a big spender for a few weeks." In a flamboyant gesture he waved his arms and open hands. "That spectacle alone might be worth your delay."

Peter laughed but declined. "I'm not interested in burning up any generosity credit until you've sold your novel. By the time we get to your big money, you may have tired of picking up my tab."

"Well, Peter, I'm glad someone still thinks my novel will be published. I'll let you off the hook this time, but you better be ready for some serious celebration if those ingrates in New York ever decide their through butchering my book and agree to publish what's left."

Peter laughed and slapped Mark on the back. Their conversation continued over the road and wind noise and a Mexican brass band on the radio, helping Peter's spirit overcome the demons for the moment.

Peter pushed aside his knowledge that such a conquest would be brief.

After four hours of traversing mostly unpaved mountainous roads Mark referred to as *surface challenged*, Peter and his friend reached Rancho la Puerta. Everyone was in high form under the brilliant afternoon sun, drinking Tequila with Chihuahua chasers. Peter was both entertained and relieved he hadn't made a commitment to stay over. Someone suggested in the past that Peter had sulking down to an art.

"Janet not with you?" asked a comely young woman from San Diego dressed in faded jeans, sandals, and a T-shirt sans bra. Peter never really knew if she ever wrote anything or was simply along for the ride. He didn't even know her name.

"No. She finally saw the light and left me."

"All the more reason to stay. I bet I could cheer you up!"

Peter almost relented but reasoned that she couldn't be as good as his imagination just made her, in any event, how could he conjure up remorse and pain for his writing while experiencing a torrid sexual adventure with a new-found nubile friend? He bid goodbye, then ventured across the divide toward the remains of an abandoned mining cabin. His car was laden with canned and dried food, water, a water-purification pump, several bottles of tequila, sleeping bag, pots and pans, writing paper, and his ever-present fly rod.

As Peter coaxed *Simone* over the marginal mountainous roads, he tried, without success, to dial in a radio station. At first, the inability to fill his life with noise annoyed him, but as time passed he found the silence encouraged inner thoughts to tease his consciousness. Three hours into the trip he began to look for a likely location to set up camp. He passed no villages and did not remember any place on the way that offered accommodations from his earlier trip to the cabin.

The sun descended in front of him. Reds and oranges streamed into the valley's hues of green. Hazy low clouds drifted through the hills and mountains, softening the colors. As the panorama of the sky moved away from the sunset and toward the eastern horizon, hues gradually merged becoming a soft blue,

then, by subtle degrees deepened into the darkest midnight. Shadows sharply divided the landscape.

Peter turned on *Simone's* headlights and crept slowly over jagged rocks on narrow paths cut in the side of steep cliffs. The evening air at altitude coursed briskly cool through the open windows, sending a chill through him. Ah, the sensation of being alive.

Spotting level ground he pulled off the road and killed *Simone's* lights. The darkness was so complete he felt disembodied from his surroundings, and, for a brief moment, off-balanced, but soon settled into watching the stars. Each had a *sui generis* color and appearance. Behind them swept the Milky Way with a brilliant extraterrestrial brush of white against indigo ink. Peter could barely catch his breath. Sometime, somewhere he must have witnessed the heavens uninhibited by man-made light, but a lifetime of city dwelling took its magic from his memory. He lay there, realizing why wise men, before electric lights, spent their existence looking for truth in the stars. The clicking, chirping, and croaking from creatures of the night and the symphony of winds cascading about him filled his ears. Sharp coolness touched his face and caused him to appreciate the warmth of his covers, as sleep silently caressed him.

The next morning Peter woke, squinting toward the bright sky. He smelled the dry fragrance of the Terebinth trees and tall thin grass that survived in the mountainous countryside. It was hard for Peter to believe his arid camp lay only a few kilometers from the Lacandon rain forest. After starting a fire for coffee, he leaned up against *Simone* with pencil and pad. It was important for Peter to write every morning and every evening without excuse. Consistency was not his strong suit so he clung to fast rules. After two cups of coffee, three crumpled pieces of paper and two keepers, Peter broke camp and cajoled *Simone* back on the road.

Three hours of travel brought him to a turn onto a narrow trail that followed a small, almost dry stream bed. *Simone* made only a few hundred yards before he abandoned her and hiked two hours to his adopted cabin, a one-room affair with no glass in the windows and missing most of its rotten wooden floor. He

set about cleaning out the cobwebs, fur, and droppings and generally making the place livable. By evening, the abode glowed from the open door of a small pot bellied stove and was, by Peter's standards, presentable.

Stimulated by the enormity of the silence, he wrote with abandon and hunger.

Peter spent his next days setting up a routine, exploring, and writing. He even found a fishing stream. He went to sleep each evening proud of something accomplished and enthusiastically planned for the next day. The outline for his book came along. He yearned for an electrical outlet so he could make a run at his first rough draft on the computer. On occasion he wished to try out his story on his friends and maybe do a little bragging about his adventure in the mountains--ghosts of Walden and Sparta came to mind--yet he decided to stay alone at his retreat as long as possible. Life began to take on a new meaning and he intended to see this quest to its conclusion.





## CHAPTER 4

Culébra stared coldly at a cowering man just outside the fenced Vasquez drug compound. The fat man dropped to his knees, looking up at him. Culébra felt the adrenaline surge through his body. He maintained a calm demeanor but knew the scar on his face would darken to crimson, betraying his excitement. He sat his backpack down on a rock, took off his silk shirt and laid it across the pack. The muscles of his chest and abdomen were lean and tight.

Culébra had been rescued by the Patron of the Vasquez family as an infant, his mother killed by a random act of violence. He was raised to respect loyalty to the Family as a religion. He felt no hesitation in putting his life on the line for his adopted family, or more likely, taking someone else's life. This was such an occasion.

The sweating man held his hands up as if shielding his face from the sun. He spoke in a high, shrill voice. "Please--mercy--I didn't know the man I talked to was a Federale. I told him nothing of importance."

Culébra responded with a low, guttural voice, sounding more like an animal. "He paid you one hundred American dollars for unimportant information?"

The begging man gasped, "It was--I don't." His bulging eyes frantically darted about as if looking for the words he needed to say. "I'm from your village. I knew your mother."

Culébra clenched his teeth, feeling the void where the front two teeth had been. “The Vasquez family is my only family and you are its enemy.”

At the sound of these words the panicky informant clumsily grappled in his pocket for his snubbed nose revolver. In an instantaneous, almost imperceptible motion Culébrea produced a knife and opened the victim’s throat nearly to his spinal cord. As he did, he stepped to the side in matador fashion, avoiding the gush of blood from severed arteries. The victim fell forward, hitting flat on his face and torso, without bracing with his arms. The Vasquez assassin calmly wiped the eight-inch blade and his hands on the tall, dry grass while his victim’s body quivered its last movements.

He walked to his backpack and pulled from it a folded shovel, opened it and dug a shallow grave, then kicked in the body. Culébra carefully covered the body, raked the area with a tree branch and stacked rocks over the buried corpse so that no signs of the burial were noticeable and to discourage scavenging animals. He dug a second hole and pushed in the sticky, blood-soaked sand evidencing the kill.

Culébra looked across the horizon of the Sierra Madre mountains, its beauty lost on him. He merely looked for witnesses. He folded his shovel and carefully put on his shirt, avoiding getting any blood on it.

The Vasquez family never need worry if an assignment given to Culébra would be accomplished without blemish. The fact that they were in the business of supplying drugs to the United States was of no concern to Culébra. The *Norte Americanas* would not take the drugs if they didn’t want them. What was important was the Vasquez family saved him when he was powerless and they provided him with dignity and escape from helpless poverty. In his opinion everyday he lived was a gift for which he owed his undying loyalty. If he died in protecting his benefactor, it merely ended the extended life given him by Vasquez. His sometimes bloody life as a drug soldier was simple and satisfying to Culébra.

The Cartel acted as a weigh station for cocaine and marijuana flown in from Colombia. Their pilots would then fly

at tree-top level at night to deliver the product to a waiting truck in the arid, sparsely populated land in Texas, just north of Big Bend, only five miles from McDonnell's Observatory.

Heroin was another matter. In this trade they competed with their Columbian brothers. It was manufactured on site by the Family, then smuggled into the States.

Culébra lacked any formal education but was bright. If asked about a subject helpful to his Family, he was a veritable encyclopedia, yet knowledge outside these narrow subjects was almost non-existent.

Culébra knew that heroin was a derivative of morphine which, in turn was a derivative of opium. He did not have the faintest idea, nor did he care, that use of opium dated back to the ancient Sumerians in 4000 B.C. or that the father of modern medicine, Hippocrates prescribed the juice of the white poppy. No teacher taught him about the tragic Opium Wars in the mid-eighteen hundreds in which the British Empire defeated China to assure their ability to sell opium to addicted Chinese.

He didn't know that Bayer pharmaceutical company first discovered the derivative of morphine it named heroin around the turn of the century, to be used as a cough suppressant and, ironically, to combat morphine addiction.

But when it came to the technical expertise necessary to manufacture Mexican brown heroin he was extremely educated. He helped oversee the huge green houses used to grow the poppy plant. The plants now in cultivation were planted forty-five days ago. Each now had grown four large gray-green leaves that resembled a small cabbage. In two more weeks the plants would be two feet tall with one primary stem and several secondary stems. A flower would grow at the end of each stem, quickly falling off, leaving a pod which would eventually grow to look like a green Easter egg. By this time his plants would be five feet tall.

Bright lights in the green houses helped extend already long days of the Sierra Madre to help quick growth and production of his crop planted in long trays of sandy loam soil. The green houses were heated to allow year round production of the annual plant in one hundred and twenty day cycles.

Next to the two green houses stood a lab of equal size. Barrels of ammonium chloride, calcium carbonate, calcium hydroxide, acetic anhydride, sodium carbonate, chloroform, ethyl alcohol, ethyl ether, acetone, and boxes of activated charcoal were stored in the front of the building. In the back, measuring cups, funnels, filter paper, litmus paper, stainless steel pots, glass flasks, propane gas ovens, Bunsen burners, vacuum pumps, autoclaves, electric blenders, centrifuges, reflux condensers, and electric drying ovens littered long tables.

Soon, workers would drain the pods of opium, its nectar taken to the adjoining lab to dry and be converted into bricks, then placed in fifty-five gallon drums with water and lime to be boiled, stirred and filtered, creating morphine. Through a series of heating processes, filtering and introduction of activated charcoal and Sodium carbonate, morphine would be transformed into heroin. Then, depending on whether his order was for smoking or injectable heroin, additional processes took place.

His special process was heating ethyl alcohol and stirring in the heroin base, then filtering through a preheated Büchner into a heated flask, and cooled, created a re-crystallized heroin base. The crystals were then mixed with ethyl alcohol, hydrochloric acid, and ether to create a residue of the highest quality of marketable heroin.

Culébra was proud of his expertise in the processes necessary to make the Family's illegal product. Others could supervise the operations, but not as well. He worked without a recipe or formal understanding but with a feel derived from years of concentrated effort, much like the art-form of making grandma's special cake from scratch--a pinch of this and smidgen of that.

A man of circumstance and pride, Culébra was submissive to his Patron but feared and respected by all others who knew him. The hitman/farmer/chemist stalked two hundred meters back to the compound gates. Two sentries nervously open the gates as he approached as one would for a prince of an iron-fisted monarchy.

## CHAPTER 5

Peter worked throughout the day and words came easily. His writing took on a life of its own and he enjoyed being along for the ride. He developed the habit of stopping in the middle of his last thought to leave excitement and inspiration awaiting his return.

He rose and stretched his stiff back and legs, grabbed his fly rod and gear, and set out to hike the mile to a clear stream. It provided several species of fish, none as finicky or challenging as trout, but they were good to eat and commendable fighters.

Peter intended to fish several pools that lay adjacent to but outside the rush of water. To reach the summit as a fisherman he aspired to think like a fish. Millennia of evolution awarded survival to those fish expert at taking in the most and expending the least calories. His prey lived in these pools to avoid fighting the current but placed their noses at the edge of the rushing water to catch food as it surfed by.

Two hours of sunlight remained as Peter sat on the ledge of an enormous iron-ore rock, as large as a small house, crowning the tallest hill near the stream. It sat about thirty meters from the clear, gurgling water. A few meters upstream lay a pool set off from the stream. An eddy circled at its mouth. The pool's calm surface measured about ten meters in diameter. He wanted to dry fly fish, fooling the fish enough so that it would expend the

calories necessary to rise to the surface for an artificial bait. Ego. He waited and observed.

Occasionally a fish rose to take small, white insects emerging and flying from the surface of the water. Peter had no idea what type of insect would be active in the winter in this part of the country and couldn't identify them from his vantage point. Three or four fish worked the entire shoreline of the pool, not just the eddy. Eventually he carefully maneuvered toward the stream and moved his hands through the dry bushes. Several of the flying critters rose. He decided on a small Caddis fly he used in Colorado, which appeared as similar as any he had to the fare of the day.

He tied his fly to a 7x leader. Then he stripped to his shorts, put on old, worn-out, high-top tennis shoes and waded into the cold, thigh-deep water downstream from the pool. The two-pound-weight bamboo rod extended from his hand. Its light flexibility allowed Peter's heartbeat to rhythmically stir its tip. This wood reed and Peter performed the ballet necessary to propel the weightless fly to its precise destination. Peter loved fly fishing because it was something he could not do if possessed by the type-A personality he sought to escape. Fly casting could not be forced or overcome by sheer will. Mastery visited only when he became part of the act of fly fishing and part of his surroundings, and there were those moments by a stream in which he experienced clarity, even inspiration.

As the fish rose near the eddy, they faced upstream, so he approached from downstream. Within twenty-five meters Peter stood and analyzed his approach. The current would carry his fly away rapidly. Too many trees and bushes inhabited the pool's shoreline to allow him to cast from land to avoid laying part of the line in the current. He waited for the fish rising to venture back toward the mouth of the pool.

As they progressed along the bank, Peter pulled some line from his reel, then with a quick yet gentle movement he shot the line forward in a false cast. He pulled back on the rod just as it straightened, loading tension on the rod once again, then quickly shot the line behind him. This time he didn't let the line completely unfurl, leaving a small amount of slack in the pattern

so when he cast the fly forward to land on the water it fell vertically, leaving a surplus of line snaked on the surface, affording several seconds for the fly to tempt the fish in the calm water before being swept away by the current.

His first cast was too late and fell behind their movement. His second was passable but his quarry passed it up. They slowly swam under protective branches of trees and away from Peter's cast. On the second round he made three respectable casts. No takers. The cold water began to numb his legs and he mentally inventoried what canned food he could avail himself of for the night's meal.

The insects were still flying. They were a little larger and darker than his fly so he searched for a better replica in his small arsenal. The evening light faded and he experienced some trouble tying the hair-thin line.

The fish came around just as Peter finished. His first cast was a little behind the school, but one turned and hit with a fury. It drug off several feet of line, causing a high-pitched buzz in the reel, as Peter palmed it. Excitement shot through him. He feared that the fish might break his leader but the rod was so limber that the fish had little chance of meeting the resistance necessary to do so. Peter worked his way toward the mouth of the pool to avoid catching his leader on a shoreline rock, alternating between letting line play out and frantically reeling. He waited patiently for his catch to pass close enough to catch it by the mouth while holding the bent rod over his head.

For a moment after reaching his cabin Peter wished for someone to share his fish story, then settled into the solace of his isolation. He felt comfortable about being a part of the balance of things, taking only what was necessary to eat, just as the other creatures of this mountain.

Long shadows carried the chill of the night and promise of the indigo darkness soon to follow. A hollow feeling and the presence of the demons sitting at the edge of his mind caused him to remember the paraphrase of an oft quoted oriental Zen Master declaration: "The problem with the Western Culture is no one can sit for any appreciable time in a silent room alone."

In the past Peter had no idea what the expression meant or why wasting time in a room by one's self would be a good idea.

Now he did. He wished now to tell the masters that fly fishing should be added to the ancient arts of archery, flower arrangement and swordsmanship as a vehicle to understanding Zen.

Peter's visits to the stream and its pools became a ritual. He developed an intimacy with the fish, the waters, the insects, and all the subtle characteristics of this place. He became such a part of the surroundings that coyotes and deer would pass closely without giving notice.

Peter made three trips to carry in all the food *Simone* transported into the mountains. No wonder backpackers were willing to pay so much for freeze-dried foods. The cans of vegetables almost broke his back. Fortunately he brought dry food as well.

The fish provided more and more of his diet as weeks past by. He yearned for a real bath in water that didn't chill to the bone, and someone to talk to, but not enough to give up his solitary adventure. Most of his note pads were filled with an outline/rough draft begging for an opportunity to flow through the keyboard of his computer.

Peter confronted, then embraced the pandemonium of silence, his life forever changed.



## CHAPTER 6

Chac, with a small band of Indians holding Absalon Castellanos Dominguez, camped three kilometers upstream from a magnificent red bolder. He and the others considered the rock to be enchanted and called it Mache Puchu. Four soldiers wearing red bandanas across their faces crouched by a small rock-lined fire. A coffee pot perched on a flat rock next to the flames. Their prisoner sat with his back to a tree a meter away. His heavy lip curled up in disgust, but his beady, close-set eyes fearfully darted back and forth. He conjured up his best authoritative Castellan tone. "It is time you quit this charade. Release me and I will assure you that no harm will come to you or your families."

Chac, whirled from near the fire and drew his machete. No one had time to react. Chac froze with the blade of his weapon at Dominguez's neck. The early morning's rays reflected off the steel and danced light across the sweaty face of the former governor.

No one moved or made a sound. Chac's eyes widened, his face wild with fury. The young soldier broke the silence with shrill words exploding from deep inside of his gut. "Shut up, pig! It's time for your death, not your words!" Spittle flew from his mouth. He didn't need to tell Dominguez of the Indian's humiliation when required to walk in the gutter rather than the sidewalk. Everyone knew that the ancestral lands were taken

from his family without any pretense of compensation. These and many other travesties were visited upon each compadre, his family and friends, at the hands of their captive. Hatred of generations now focused its intensity at the razor's edge of the young man's machete. The twisted faces of both men were inches from each other. Chac smelled the bitter odor of Dominguez's fear.

A man in his forties slowly stood and walked toward the confrontation. He carried top rank among the soldiers. He spoke in Chol, then in Spanish in a voice rhythmic and soothing, yet left no question of its authority. "Chac, put down your machete. This revolution is bigger than just you or me. We're here to carry out our orders. This scum's valuable to our people alive. The punishment we wish upon him could hurt our cause. Be a man...restrain your emotion."

He carefully grabbed Chac's hand that gripped the machete, and pulled it away from Dominguez's throat. Chac jerked back and sheathed his weapon but did not retreat from his confrontation.

Dominguez breathed in ragged, gulping breaths. A trickle of blood mingled with sweat slowly snaked down his neck. The others turned back to their fire and coffee. The sergeant who had saved Dominguez's life looked down and smiled. Wrinkles earned from years of toiling in the rocky mountainous earth, beneath the relentless sun, creased the part of his face showing above his bandana. "I *can* save you again if you say something else stupid... but I don't think I will." He fixed his gaze on the frightened man until his point was made, then walked back to his men.

The tension broke when Chac's wife, Ixquic and his eight-year-old child, Hunahpu, appeared. Ixquic wore a traditional loose-fitting, bright red *huipil* covered with an intricately woven design. It was tied at the waist with a cotton belt of beautiful pattern. She wore a headdress known as a *tzute*, consisting of two folds of rectangular red cloth woven on a belt loom. Her child wore a more modest woven dress. They carried food for the men, the only acceptable excuse for them to visit Chac.

Ixquic wore her finest festival clothes for she did not believe she would see her husband alive after the revolt.

She and her daughter received polite greetings from the men. Chac acted reserved for fear of acting inappropriately in front of the older men, but could not hold back a prideful smile. The meal consisted of a stuffed roasted chicken covered with black chili sauce made with red chilies, tomatoes, onions, annatto, and stuffing. The stuffing consisted of the traditional Indian ingredients of hard-boiled egg whites, tomatoes, apazote leaves, pork, lard, more black chili sauce, cooked wrapped in banana leaves.

Ixquic ignored the prisoner until told by the sergeant to take him some food and water. She fed him a few bites and helped him drink since his hands were tied. She made no comment about the blood on his neck and collar of his shirt. Chac wondered if she witnessed his outburst but said nothing. Finished, she returned to sit beside her husband. Their child played with a stick and stone.

“How are you, my husband?”

“Good. I think the government will talk with us soon.” He smiled, showing stained teeth. “It’ll be hard to bargain for a worse position than we now enjoy. Even the risk of death can’t be much worse than what we already share.”

Chac did not mention the death of their son to a disease preventable by a vaccine promised but not delivered to their village. He knew his wife understood.

Suddenly a sentry burst into the clearing. “Government soldiers! Thirty minutes away.”

Panting, the sentry put his hands on his knees and looked up at his comrades. The sergeant rushed toward his prisoner and roughly tied a gag across his mouth. He leaned close to the ear of Dominguez. Words seethed between clenched teeth.

“If you give us any trouble you’ll watch dogs eat your entrails, *comprehende?*”

Dominguez nodded, looking at his captor from the corners of his frightened eyes. He slowly let a distinctive brass button from his military jacket fall to the ground unnoticed. The Indians moved quickly downstream with their prisoner. The woman and

her child traveled with them for a short distance then veered off toward their adobe home nestled on the side of a mountain, surrounded by terraces used for crops of maize, beans, squash, and manioc.

Chac caught her eyes once as she looked back, then she and Hunahpu disappeared in the shadows of night. A sick feeling sunk deep in Chac's stomach as she and Hunahpu left. The love he felt for her had never been put into words. It was not the product of romance but a consequence of the struggle each shared to stay alive and keep their child alive. His need for her was not defined by a Hallmark card or a perfume commercial, but from the ever-present need for the other's strength and effort to make it through each day. He feared death only because the edge of survival on which his family lived would crumble without him. He carried this hollow feeling of desperation stoically, with quiet, unheralded courage, as did generations before him.

## CHAPTER 7

Flashlight beams vectored across the campsite as the Mexican patrol surveyed the clearing.

“Lieutenant, I found something!” A young private rushed toward his leader. He held his flashlight in his left hand and tightly clutched his right hand. As he reached the officer he pointed his flashlight beam on his fisted hand then opened it dramatically. Light flashed off the official brass button. Illumination brushed upward across the private’s face, giving him a macabre appearance. Lieutenant Garcia looked up and smiled.

“I know where they’re heading. Quickly, back to the truck.”

Garcia sensed the excitement of his men. He vainly tried to appear nonchalant as they hurriedly fell in and began the hard march back to their transportation.

The soldiers pushed forward on the wet, slick clay trail. Soon they reached their Army-green, bob-tail truck. Garcia and his driver climbed into the front. The rest of the patrol scampered into the open bed and sat on benches built into its sides.

The young officer checked his side arm and smiled as the possibilities of successfully saving such an important figure became a probability.



## CHAPTER 8

The embers in the old pot-bellied stove Peter renovated weakly glimmered. The black sky carried the iridescent radiance that preludes morning colors. Peter twice ventured from his covers in an attempt to rise and begin preparations for morning, but the floor felt cold and uninviting. His consciousness floated in the never-never land, between awake and asleep. Quiet.

The door of the cabin crashed open, shattering the silence and Peter's illusion of being alone. Four Indians dressed in fatigues and masked with red bandanas exploded into the room. Each pointed a rifle in Peter's direction, their eyes wild. Peter jerked up instinctively and extended his right arm as if to direct them to stop. Everyone froze. Peter's brain struggled to catch up. Who were they? What did they want? He was definitely in favor of a robbery and against devil worshipers looking for a sacrifice.

"Can I help you?" Peter squeaked in English.

He was immediately struck with the absurdity of his words and the embarrassing tone of his voice. Each man stood in a rigid crouch with guns pointed directly at him.

He tried again in Spanish, with a more respectable baritone. "Is there something I can do for you?"

The question still was inappropriate, but Peter spent little time in the past thinking of fitting salutations for armed military-looking invaders. It seemed comical to worry about needing a

prearranged comment, yet the difference between bravery and cowardice sometimes depended upon one's immediate response at the moment of confrontation. Confusion inures to the benefit of cowardice. Peter tried to collect his wits. The masked men slowly moved further into the room. The last man dragged in a bound and gagged captive. Peter recognized him immediately.

"My God!" he mumbled, "I'm in the middle of an Indian uprising."

Peter and his friends had spent many drinking nights discussing the repression of the once-proud, pyramid-building Mayans. The more they drank, the more revolutionary their rhetoric and the more sympathetic they became. But that was drunk talk and the required musings of overeducated liberal Americans seeking adventure and inspiration to write a book. Now the live version of an 8x10 glossy layout from *Life* magazine of the Indian nemesis, Domingez, stumbled into the cabin, captive of his victims.

Peter moved slowly and pulled on his pants, then his socks and boots. No one said anything or tried to stop him. Some words were said in a language he did not understand.

"Coffee?" Peter rose and walked to the stove to build up a fire. "No!" One of the Indian soldiers lunged at Peter and pushed him back with the barrel of his rifle. "No fire!"

The man holding Dominquez pushed him to the floor. An Indian with long, raven hair covered the door and others moved to the two windows. Peter sat in one of his two makeshift chairs and, with open hand, silently offered the other to the remaining invader. The soldier carefully sat down while keeping his gun trained on Peter.

Peter conjured up his best John Wayne version of Castellan Spanish. "There's no need to point your weapon at me, comrade. I've no intent of attacking you and I'm sure you would have grave misgivings if you accidentally shot your host."

They stared at one another. A smile eased into the eyes of the man sitting across from Peter. He pointed his rifle toward the floor without comment. A young, wiry soldier by one of the windows lifted an old two-way radio to the side of his face. It appeared to be an Army surplus, vintage World War II, piece of



equipment. He spoke in quick, erratic Spanish as his hand holding the radio trembled.

“The patrol’s on the trail. They reached the intersection.”

The concussive sound of a grenade or mine jolted Peter’s senses. Firecracker popping sounds of rifle and automatic-weapon fire quickly followed. Men shouted, then came moans and cries. Automatic-weapon fire strafed the flimsy wall of the cabin. Splinters shot through the air, then wafted to the floor like snow. The bullets whistled as they flew through the room, then clinked or thudded into objects. The young radio operator flew backwards, as if jerked by a rope. He hit the floor hard. Dust rose. The hand holding the radio shook, appearing afflicted with palsy. His terrified eyes met Peter’s. They held the stare until death dulled those eyes. Peter was standing although he didn’t remember rising.

Blood had splattered across his face and chest. Fear worked its way through his numbness. He thought he was shot, and maybe dying, then realized the blood covering him came from the man on the floor. He should at least know the man’s name since he shared his death but he could only identify him as the *man on the floor*. Somehow the stove tumbled on its side and the embers began to flame on the rotten boards.

One of the revolutionaries grabbed Peter and pulled him down. “Follow me and you may live, gringo.”

They crawled into the bushes outside. Around them men ran and yelled. Sounds of more sporadic gunfire. Fifty meters, sixty meters...oh, shit! Peter’s manuscript lay in the burning cabin.

“No!”

Peter stood without thinking but was jerked back. When he hit the ground, his face inches from that of the man who clutched him.

Through clinched teeth the man growled. “Try that again and I’ll save the federales the trouble and kill you myself.”

Peter felt the moist warmth of his breath against his cheek, chilled by the night air. Light from the fire caused the Indian’s forehead and eyes to flicker a hellish yellow. In contrast, the horizon behind him bloomed in early morning colors. Peter

nodded and crawled away from danger, his manuscript, and his old life.

When far enough away from the firefight, they stood and began a jogging cadence across the ridge of the mountain. A soldier followed behind Dominguez, machete drawn. He explained to his prisoner what he would do if Dominguez fell behind. The description was exhaustive and Peter was impressed with the knowledge of anatomy the soldier demonstrated in his explanation. At such high altitude, the pace consumed Peter's oxygen supply. He wanted to ask for a break but was unsure of the way the young anatomist would react.

They scrambled at breakneck speed down the treacherous mountain side until reaching the valley at the edge of the rain forest. The point man turned off the narrow trail and stopped in a small clearing in which a large tree had recently fallen. The perpetually wet environment was already reclaiming its own. Dead plants and animals so quickly decomposed, they never have an opportunity to be absorbed into the soil. So, the floor of the rain forest remained virtually sterile. Because of this, the forest took decades to reclaim the areas slashed and burned for planting by the Indians banished from their highland homes. The natural fertilizer covering the land from ashes of burned trees supported only three or four years of crops, then the family would move, this time banished by nature.

Without saying anything, the point man sat on the trunk of the fallen tree and pulled food from his pouch. The others followed suit. A soldier untied Dominguez' hands and gave him some food and water. He hungrily devoured the morsel and gulped down water. The men shared their supplies with Peter as well. Peter attempted more restraint than the other outsider, but devoured his allotment nonetheless.

A balding soldier approached Peter. His heart raced as the soldier drew near. All still wore bandanas over their faces, but he could make out a fierce, determined glint in the older man's eyes.

"You can go no further...no one can know where we're holding Dominguez. A patrol, they will be by soon to take you

to a town...several hours...maybe a day before they'll be by, but it's better than shooting you."

Peter thought he saw his dark eyes soften into a smile, but decided it was just wishful thinking.

"On balance I agree with your decision. I don't handle being killed as gracefully as one might hope."

Peter noticed with pride that his voice did not quiver. The man laughed. It was an honest, friendly laugh, with no sign of bitterness or evil. Others looked their way. Peter took his response as a good sign and smiled.

The soldier put his hand on Peter's shoulder and told him to stay in the clearing. Without a sound the revolutionaries disappeared into the trees, leaving Peter alone in the embrace of the canopy. But for a family of Howler monkeys, he was isolated for the rest of the day and the following night.

He felt the heart beat of the jungle and the soul of its people.



## CHAPTER 9

The night mist disappeared as warm shafts of light from the morning sun pierced its gray body at an angle. In surrealistic fashion, four Indians came forth from the evaporating haze. Each wore mismatched fatigues and either a bandana or ski mask. Three carried rifles and all wore machetes lashed to their waists. On closer inspection Peter noticed that one of the soldiers' rifles was only a wooden, carved replica. What overwhelming poverty and commitment this revolution exhibited. One of the Indians, a dark, stocky man, approached him. Peter was wet and shivering and the tough-looking soldier pulled a faded, red serape from his back and handed it to him. Peter started to refuse, but was too miserable for the luxury of pride.

“Thank you. The night was cold and wet and I did a poor job of packing.”

Peter accompanied his bravado wit with a smile. The man signaled to the other three to move out and then turned back to Peter. “Maybe so, but you're in better shape than the clothes you left behind in the burning shack.”

He made his comment with such solemnity Peter chuckled. It felt good and it came from deep inside. The men stopped and looked at Peter, then began to laugh. Their levity contrasted sharply with recent events and came as a profound relief. These

men probably found little reason to be jovial. There they stood, four masked men and Peter, in the Lacandon forest, laughing.

In a moment the catharsis was over and the man addressed Peter again. “My name’s Kuk. I’m the leader of this patrol. We’ve been ordered to take you to safety. We’ll be moving quickly through the rain forest. You must keep up...do as we say...without question. Agreed?”

Peter nodded and told him his name. The others introduced themselves, but the names were soon forgotten. Why did they wear masks and still tell him their names? Did they give him aliases? The brief moment of cordiality ended and they concentrated on the job of moving through the canopied jungle. Peter’s escorts set a fast pace and the aches and weariness from the day and night before settled in. The Indians, shorter than Peter, exhibited the grace of dancers as they moved in and out of the vines and underbrush. Soon his calf muscles burned and his lungs heaved. They did not seem to notice his difficulties and pride stopped him from complaining. Instead, he concentrated outward and away from his pain, practicing the rhythm and balance he saw the Indians display. Each stretch of trail or tangled vines occupied his attention. Where were they going? How long? If Peter could see an end, endurance of the interim was tolerable. He checked his watch. They probably had traveled for more than two hours. Sweat streamed down his body that only a few hours before was chilled to the bone. He thought of pulling off his borrowed serape and carrying it but needed both hands to negotiate the obstacles in his path. These men were not outperforming him because they were in *that* much better shape and certainly not better nourished. Their minds just didn’t consider this burden on their bodies worthy of complaint. Living such a hard life, the Chiapas Indians endured a great deal of punishment before their brains registered pain or suffering. He resolved that it was a matter of a soft mind rather than a soft body and cerebrally worked on this challenge.

The lead man threw his hand up. Everyone stopped and crouched low. Peter followed their example. No one moved nor breathed. Peter did not hear or see anything. The arteries in his neck pounded. Only one of the three men close to him possessed

a real rifle. The other two silently drew their machetes. A fearful act, but how formidable would they be against the modern firepower of the Mexican army?

Without explanation the point man moved forward. Everyone followed. Adrenalin coursed through Peter's blood without a mission. He resisted the power surge. His mind felt relief but his body wanted to fight or flee. He did not know if they barely missed an encounter with a Mexican patrol or experienced a false alarm. Time passed before he remembered to worry about his aches or weariness.

The rays of light streamed vertically through the trees' foliage before they stopped again--this time for a rest. Two of Peter's chaperones rolled and lit cigarettes. The air hung heavy and still, causing smoke to curl lazily about their heads, as if an invisible force prevented the white fumes from rising and dissipating in the air.

Kuk watched the others smoke for a moment then approached Peter. "We'll get you to San Cristobal de Las Casas. A produce truck's leaving Tenosique tomorrow. The driver is a friend...won't mind taking you with him. There's no commercial flights now, but a room and telephone."

Peter opened his mouth and words came out that surprised him more than anyone else. "I want to stay with you. Your revolution is for a worthy cause. Listen...I'm a writer and can write articles...help get North American support." He was drawn to these rugged Indians and addicted to the life-and-death excitement. The purity of their cause gave his life essence.

Kuk furrowed his brow and slowly shook his brown head. "No, it's too dangerous. Our leaders would never allow an outsider among us."

Peter began pushing his argument when a message screeched over an old, battered two-way radio strapped to Kuk's side. Kuk turned his back to Peter and talked over the radio, then barked some orders in a dialect Peter did not understand. Then he whirled back toward Peter, his eyes shone with excitement.

"You get your way for now. We must help stop a raid on our munition supply."

The soldiers turned north and moved quickly. Within minutes they reached a river. The soldier next to Peter pointed to the slow-moving water. "*Usumacinta*." He smiled.

Odd that this man would casually point out the name of a river, as if on a tour, while faced with an imminent deadly encounter. The unmistakable popping sound of rifle and machine gunfire traveled across the water. Peter's heart raced again and his clammy hands shook. He continued creeping forward with the soldiers. He did not think being left in the jungle was all that much safer than moving toward the violence. They waded in thigh-deep water, ducking overhanging branches, moving closer to the sounds of struggle. The shockingly cool water seemed out of place with the warm, musty smell of leaves and plants piled up on the cut-bank.

"Stay here!"

Peter nodded to Kuk. The four men leaped from the water and crashed through the underbrush. More gunfire. Peter felt shame for hiding in the water and brush but decided that preferable to the feeling of stupidity for charging into battle unarmed and without an understanding of what to do once there. The man once beside him had leaped into battle with a wooden gun. Why would he do such a thing? Where was the sense in it? Tears welled in Peter's eyes and he fought back a lump in his throat. Without receiving a mental command his muscles sprang into action and he found himself on the bank running toward the sounds of battle. Horrified. No clear, or even vague strategy came to mind as he rushed forward.

He rounded a line of trees and ran into a Mexican soldier running the other way. Considerably smaller, the soldier propelled backwards. Peter instinctively grabbed his automatic rifle. He looked into the wide eyes of the young man. Terror contorted the private's face. He was a child--not over sixteen or seventeen. Peter held the boy's life in his hands and felt both surprised and repulsed by excitement. All other sights, sounds, and smells disappeared for that moment.

"Get out of here. And don't shoot me in the back later."

The teenager leaped up and ran into the forest. Now Peter faced the dilemma of holding a weapon. He did not like the idea



of being in a battle unarmed, yet by holding this weapon the rules changed. He was an armed combatant and any pretense of being a civilian was stripped away. Weapon in hand, he crept forward.

The popping of gun fire became sporadic. Automatic weapons seemed to be moving to Peter's left. The Mexican soldiers must be withdrawing in that direction. Peter moved toward the sound of single shot, small caliber fire in front of him. As he approached a clearing he discovered one of the men in his patrol. The soldier still held his wooden rifle. His body, riddled with bullet holes lay twisted on the ground, his machete stuck in the clay beside him. Vomit welled up in Peter's throat and he fought it back. He checked for any sign of life that he might revive. None.

Orange spotter smoke emanated from the top of a knoll two hundred meters ahead. Peter thought he saw movement above the hill. The high-pitched scream of a jet fighter plane crashed through the ravine. He crouched. The plane reflected sunlight as it banked to the left. Still crouched, he moved toward a nearby tree. In less than a second a whine screamed overhead, but rather than the plane, small rockets trailing white smoke sped by. An instant later the knoll exploded. The concussion hit Peter and he fell back on his butt, dropping the rifle. He crawled over to a tree and leaned against it for a considerable time, trying to decide what to do next. The sound of fighting stopped. Quiet.

Peter realized something about himself. Deep in his gut lay the ability to handle life-and-death struggle. Much like the untrained pheasant soldiers.

"The fight's over," Kuk said in a low, soft, guttural voice.

Peter leaped to his feet and stumbled over the rifle. He pivoted toward the sound. "My God, Kuk! Don't you knock?"

Kuk smiled. Others came up behind him. Black smoke from the burning munitions bunker co-mingled with orange spotter smoke and rose through browns and greens of the trees, into the blue sky. The collage of colors created a bizarre, surrealistic background.

Kuk spoke in a casual voice, "We stored a shipment of arms from friends in Guatemala here. Somehow the federales

discovered it. It doesn't matter. We'll never have enough weapons to overpower the government but we can't be defeated because there's no threat left to throw at us. We're isolated in Chiapas. No amount of firepower can root us out of the mountains and rain forest that protect us. We've no other place to go and nothing left for the government to take from us."

*Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose,...* Peter thought, admiring the rebels. Another from the patrol without a rifle approached. Peter felt relief that this man still lived. He reached down and picked up his newly acquired rifle and handed it to the unarmed soldier.

"Here, I think this one might fire better than your machete."

The small, muscular man laughed, took the rifle and thanked Peter. A burial detail gathered the dead. The three wounded soldiers were able to walk to the medical headquarters. Kuk talked with the others for a moment, then gathered the two other surviving members of their patrol.

"We need to leave quickly before the federales return. We'll spend the night at the ruins of Palenque. We can all ride in the produce truck from Tenosique to Palenque so we won't be near when the Army comes back with more men."

He then turned to Peter. "You'll keep going on the truck to San Cristobal."

They moved north only a few kilometers to a small village next to a railroad track. A paved road dead-ended in the town. At the outskirts sat an old delivery truck with wooden sideboards, its running motor vibrating flimsy sideboards. When the driver saw them, he jumped out and beckoned for them to hurry. Kuk told the driver all would be riding as far as Palenque.

"Yes, yes that's fine. Let's go quickly."

The bent, old man helped the men crawl under boxes of beans in the back, which was no mean feat. He put his back to the crates, then straightened his legs. The load creaked upward. Then the driver gestured and each man scampered onto the bed of the truck. He slowly lowered the load and placed wooden blocks under it to accommodate the spaces they needed to hide.

A flash of panic knotted Peter's gut as the cargo squeezed off his space, but he wiggled and determined he could get out.

His claustrophobia subsided. The driver slammed the tail gate closed and coaxed the antique truck down the road. Peter lay there, amazed at the ingenuity and Herculean strength of this small, old man. Musty smelling dirt swirled around Peter in his chamber as his transportation gained speed.

In spite of his new-found courage, Peter knew his spirit fell far short of the everyday ruggedness of these people.



## CHAPTER 10

The old man helped Peter crawl backwards from under the crates. Too bruised and stiff to move, he needed the help. The ancient truck had long since lost its last shocks and the crates over him shifted so that their weight rested squarely on his left shoulder. Once out of the truck he limped around looking more like a crippled old man rather than an adventurer with a band of revolutionaries. His companions fared no better.

As they hobbled, trying to work blood back into their legs, Peter spoke to the driver. "Tell me when you are ready to go on to San Cristobal."

"You can relax, Señor. I'll spend the night here...we leave at first light."

Enough light from the setting sun cascaded about to reveal the lush green of the countryside. Trees were cut away from Mayan ruins on the hills, but grass and underbrush covered the soil. The stark gray stones of the structures stood out against the rich green. The rain forest survived in all its splendor at the edge of the clearing of more than thirty-five acres. Peter stood in awe. The largest structure looked like a platform. It was almost as long and wider than a football field. It stood six or seven times taller than him and supported fifteen or so structures arranged around three courtyards.

Peter climbed three flights of stairs to the top. Perched at different levels of hilltops around him stood various-sized

structures that he guessed to be temples. The most impressive was a pyramid with long, steep stairs leading to an enclosed structure on top with large open walkways. All he learned from his Indian companions about the pyramid was its name: *Temple of the Inscriptions*. This surprised him. He teased his new friends that, had his ancestors built such monuments, one would have trouble getting him to shut up about any and all minutia concerning them "...that I could discover or make up."

In the past Peter pontificated about the existence of *spiritual hot spots* but had no illusions about this or other geological excavations. In his experience, ostentatious monuments were usually built on the backs of the oppressed, with spiritual explanations a mere veil for the less-admirable motivation of a few ambitious, secular humans. In spite of that, he felt a mystical aura enveloping their campsite, as if centuries-old ghosts joined their midst.

Kuk and his men no longer wore masks. This seemed to Peter to be a bad sign. Why would it be important to hide identity from everyone but was now okay for him to know what they looked like? The logical reason caused his heart to stop. He scanned the area for possible escape routes. He worked his way toward the edge of the structure and looked down the steep stairs to the ground far below. The vision made him dizzy. Why kill him now? What had he done causing this reversal in plans? Anger. He whirled around and came face to face with Kuk. Both men took a step back in surprise. Kuk smiled and shrugged.

With heart pounding, Peter forced a smile and said, "I hope seeing your faces doesn't mean I must be eliminated." Kuk was not carrying his rifle, but his machete was within Peter's grasp.

Kuk laughed. "I don't think so...little chance you will know enough to be able to betray us. We hide our faces, even in our own meetings, if all aren't known well by us. We're from the same family and trust each other to the death. Anyway, putting masks on cousins and brothers does little to hide identity."

Peter appreciated Kuk's logic, but mostly he appreciated not being on the agenda to be shot.

Kuk hesitated, then looked at Peter with hard eyes. “You’ve given me no reason to kill you--and you could be of value to us because you’re American. You’d be dead if I thought you would betray our patrol.”

His words were as matter-of-fact as if he had just asked for change for the newspaper. The deadly sincerity of his comment left an icy cold knot in the pit of Peter’s stomach. Yet, in a twisted way he felt closer to the man than before.

Kuk ordered his men to build a small campfire next to a stone wall in one of the courtyards. Peter was amazed that this site was not guarded or fenced off by the authorities. No one else was in sight and they had the run of the place. The sun reddened and sank below the horizon. Yellow light flickered on them and the wall as they squatted next to the fire, sharing some corn pancakes and sweet potatoes. One of the soldiers took his food and eased into the dark to stand first watch. The moon shone brightly, illuminating the structures in the courtyard and the temples spaced in the darkness of the foothills’ foliage. The air was charged with energy. Subdued voices and ordinary activities contrasted with the knife’s edge of excitement.

“Kuk, what’s your revolutionary army call itself?” Peter asked.

“Zapatista Army of National Liberation.”

“From Emiliano Zapata--perfect.”

Kuk nodded. The campfire light caused his eyes to glint and phantoms flickered across his rugged features. Probably in his early thirties, years of toiling in the sun and wind cut wrinkles in his dark face. He wore the look of someone who lived a hard life, yet did not look broken or worn out.

“What are you’re demands?”

“Democracy.”

“That seems quite esoteric for a people on the edge of survival.”

Kuk looked up and held Peter’s gaze. Had he made him mad? Not a very healthy thing to do for a man in his position. When Kuk began to talk, Peter was relieved to hear no trace of anger.

“Democracy gives power to the people. Then we make our own opportunity...stop injustice visited upon us by outsiders. You know these fancy words better, but to me it means getting our land back--food--medicine--dignity. Power lasts after gifts to the poor are only memories.”

He spoke clearly, deliberately, and with measured response. His simple words carried a brilliance lacking in the more complicated rhetoric Peter was accustomed to hearing in political discussions.

“You gonna win a military victory?”

“We have already. But it is...how you say, to live short. Our leaders talk with the press. They feel Mexico City cannot stand other countries knowing about massacre. They worry about American NAFTA.”

“What if your leaders are wrong?”

He smiled. “Then I die.”

“You and many others. Is your cause worth such a risk?”

“It is the nature of things to die. The question is...you know, living...how much living we do before death. I feel alive now. I have a cause worth dying or killing for. I weep for my friends and family killed in this fight, but they died with passion in their belly...the word ‘freedom’ on their lips.”

Kuk spoke with the same thoughtful cadence. He must be more sophisticated than the average Indian in Chiapas but Peter couldn’t think of a way to say so without sounding like an ass, so he let it go. Sometimes it was hard for the educated to understand that wisdom is not in their exclusive province. Rather than discussing some hypothetical wrong or course of action, he sat with an armed man, in the jungle, ready to suffer the ultimate sacrifice and render the ultimate retribution for his cause. Kuk did not brag or make a show. He was a short, poor, ragtag man, yet his resolution took him beyond fear of death and, in doing so, made him the most formidable person Peter had ever known. A shiver ran through Peter as they sat next to the fire. Understated elegance cloaked this man and his comrades in the most beautiful fashion.



## CHAPTER 11

Peter awoke to the deep, rich smell of coffee brewing. Faint light of morning invaded the grey sky, illuminating the night's lingering mist. His bed consisted of a blanket over smooth stones in the plaza. Uneven hardness left his bones and muscles stiff and painful. He stood and stretched. The soldiers wore their bandanas again this morning. A new soldier conversed with Kuk, who then gathered his small band together for a discussion. Peter wandered over to the flame-blackened coffee pot sitting on a stone next to the fire and poured himself some of the brew. Although strong and bitter, its opulent, deep flavor pleased him.

Peter walked around the ruins. What mysterious rituals had the Mayans practiced there? Strange singing, clicking and moaning sounds from the forest stimulated these thoughts as the jungle woke from its slumber. Peter could not identify the source of the noises--not even whether from insects, birds, or animals. A black, yellow, and red bird with a large bill landed close to him and piercingly shrieked. Now there is one sound he will be able to identify from now on.

Kuk broke from his group and walked toward Peter. Peter moved back to the coffee pot and poured another steamy cup then turned to Kuk. They met next to a four-story tower, the tallest structure on the huge platform. Kuk sat on a large stone.

“You will enjoy our company a little longer. We’ll set up a roadblock on route 199 between San Cristobal and Palenque. We’ll ride the produce truck there. After the blockade’s made, you’ll go on to San Cristobal--probably tomorrow.”

Peter nodded. “Maybe I can help you set up the roadblock.”

Kuk opened his mouth but then shook his head. “Maybe.” He left to prepare his troops for the ride.

Once again they sequestered themselves in the back of the truck under the crates, this time with an additional soldier. The starter slowly turned over the weary motor. After several tries, the engine caught and came to life. Its rhythmic vibrations emanated through the bed. The truck jolted several times as it traversed ruts, then settled into its familiar swaying and bouncing as it traveled the road.

After thirty minutes or so of driving, brakes issued a high-pitched squeal. The truck swayed to the right pulling off the road. They came to a stop. Dust bellowed from the shoulder of the road, invading Peter’s hiding place. For one horrifying moment Peter thought he might sneeze. He held his hand to his mouth and nose. The urge receded. He lay on his stomach with his face turned toward the sideboards. Through a crack in the wood he could see at an angle, toward the ground. Military boots approached, close enough to block the light that streamed in through the crack.

*A Mexican Army roadblock! I thought we, I mean the Indians, were supposed to be setting up the roadblock!*

“Show me your papers.”

The window creaked down and papers shuffled.

The driver spoke with a slight quiver in his voice. “I’m going to San Cristobel with this produce. Can I...is there some way I can help you?”

“I will ask the questions and you will answer them.”

“Yes sir, I’m sorry.”

“Come to the back with me. I wish to inspect your cargo.”

“Yes, sir.”

The door to the truck creaked open. The boots and the shoes of the old driver stepped toward the back of the truck. Light from the crack reappeared. Peter’s right eye adjusted to the new

light. Helpless and claustrophobic, he didn't know what reaction to expect if discovered. Would he be shot even before he could snake out of his hiding place? What would he say if allowed to explain? Arguing he didn't know the armed revolutionaries hiding under the vegetables with him would be a hard sell. He held his breath. Sweat dripped off the end of his nose. Peter's entire body knotted. A desire to scream and fight to get out of his small enclosure swept through his mind.

Someone lowered the tail gate and Peter twisted his neck so he could see toward the rear of the truck. His feet and ankles were exposed enough to be discovered with close inspection. He braced. Sounds of quick movements and groaning of a muted but violent struggle shattered the tension. Blood sprayed across the bed of the truck and the cuffs of Peter's pants. The limp legs of the Mexican soldier sank toward the ground.

In a harsh whisper the driver said, "Three other federales...twenty meters in front of the truck. They smoke and pay no attention to us."

Two men slid out, the metallic scrape of their weapons sending chills up Peter's spine. The legs of one rebel moved around Peter's side of the truck. Peter assumed the other was on the opposite side. Silence. An eternity passed. More sweat slowly dripped from his nose. *In for a penny ...in for a pound.* He almost laughed out loud. The very thought that he might make such a sound terrified him. Just as he assured himself that he was under control, his sneeze came irretrievably back. He slapped both hands over his nose and mouth.

Two rifle shots rang out in rapid succession. A soldier at the roadblock returned fire with a quick burst from an automatic weapon. One round went through the cab and ricocheted around the side walls and bed. Two more rifle shots rang out from the sides of the truck. Again, silence.

Peter made a mental inventory of his body. Not hit, he scrambled out of the truck. Although wiser to stay put until he received some sort of all-clear signal, a panic-need to be out of the confines took over. He had to get out of there and get out immediately.

As soon as Peter's feet hit the ground, he stumbled over the dead Mexican soldier, his throat cut. The man lay face down, one leg twisted under him. Blood splattered across the side of his face and soaked the soil below his chin. The muddy patch of red soil slowly increased in diameter.

The sweet, heavy scent of blood filled Peter's nostrils. His stomach churned. Would he finally see enough violent deaths so that it would not make him sick? The ashen face of his dead daughter flashed through his mind.

All of the rebels climbed out of the truck and inched toward the front. The two who fired at the roadblock were already inspecting the scene. Three other Mexican soldiers lay dead by their jeep. One of them could not have been more than fifteen. The cast of death suppressed his youthful appearance. He reminded Peter of the young soldier who lost his rifle to him near the *Usumacinta* river. As many kids fought this little, obscure war as men. Only one of the dead soldiers at the road block clutched a weapon. Three spilled cups of coffee lay close to their bodies, a cigarette smoldered next to the hand of one.

Peter stood by the truck while the others stepped toward their kill, guns ready. An overwhelming desire to run clutched Peter's very soul. He leaned against the fender for support and spent all of his energy keeping a calm appearance.

One of the rebels got in and started the Mexican jeep. He backed it next to the truck. They were close to the mountains and at the edge of the lush tropics. Four bodies were quickly buried in a shallow grave. No one asked Peter to help and he did not volunteer. Peter's mind spun. *Control...take one thing at a time...*

Kuk barked off some orders. Two of his men jumped in the jeep and sped off, throwing gravel as they steered back onto the road. Kuk and the driver got into the cab of the truck and the remaining soldier and Peter climbed into the bed. No one worried about hiding any longer. The unexpected roadblock spoiled whatever clandestine plans the group envisioned. They wove back on the road in chase of the army jeep. In spite of the roar of the engine and grating of gears, they picked up speed

sluggishly. Peter faced the rear, watching the grave and bloodstained soil shrink smaller and smaller until out of sight.

Peter's traveling companion in the bed of the truck still wore his bandana. His black eyes held a steely, determined stare on the road behind them.

"Where's most of the fighting taking place?" Peter asked.

"Rancho Nuevo...About ten kilometers from San Cristobal in the direction of Comitán. I hear the army has many tanks around San Cristobal now. We'll join other patrols to set up roadblocks of our own. We can fight many guns and many soldiers because..." He looked for the words in his second tongue, Spanish. "...we are one with the mountains and the forest. To fight us is to fight the mist. The soldiers and the politicians can become...what is the word? Without heart."

"Disheartened?"

"*Sí*, without heart and leave. We have no heart left to lose and we are in the...last place and cannot leave."

The wind whistled around the bed of the truck and Peter listened with difficulty to the soft spoken words of this man having trouble converting the point of view of his language to Spanish. Peter wished that he could understand his tongue. Scientists from the United States and Europe named a lizard in the Chiapas forest by category, for instance, the number of scales behind its front leg. The Indian language named the same lizard by the way it fits into the world in which it lives: the color it turns in the fall and how it matches the broad leaf of one of the rainforest trees. This language spawned from an intimacy with surrounding nature allowed--demanded--a different perspective. Peter's European ancestors were good at categorizing but not so good at an intimate understanding. Did language create the culture or the culture create the language? He finally decided that the culture created the language but the language kept its people from ever significantly deviating from its original choice of destiny.

"How long's the resistance prepared to hold out?"

"Resistance?"

"Yes, you know, the revolution."

“Our resistance began before the memory of my people...beyond the stories told by our elders. This is just the first time we catch the attention of others. But now we’re visible to the guns of the government, yet not big enough to stand against them. Resistance will live after our death...no decision to resist pain others bring you.”

They sat quietly for several moments.

“Our army will soon be destroyed and we will become invisible again unless our leaders can reach a ... what is the word?”

“Treaty?”

“Sí, pact.” His eyes focused far away. “Many will die.”

They sat in silence, traveling through the mountains. The canopy of the rainforest in the distance spread its designs of greens, then beyond, the halo blue of the Gulf of Mexico touched the cerulean blue of the sky. Peter nervously searched the sky for fighter planes and the road for tanks. Everyone else seemed unconcerned. The truck’s tires squealed as it slowed and pulled off the road. The now-familiar icy feeling gripped Peter’s gut. The soldier and Peter peeked over the cab. Both relaxed. About thirty Indians in fatigues stood around another old truck and the army jeep. Some large rocks and bags of concrete lay across the road.

When Peter got out, Kuk was already talking to the other leader. He explained Peter’s presence to the officer who appeared less than pleased. The officer looked at Peter with humorless eyes, told him to stay out of the way, and left with Kuk to oversee the construction of the roadblock. A rock ledge towered on both sides of the road where the roadblock was being constructed. Peter climbed on top of the ledge to watch. There he discovered rocks piled high for gun emplacements. Trails led from these positions for fast escape. As Peter watched, the soldiers built an obstruction across the road high enough to stop even a tank. He hoped that was not what they had in mind.

Rocks crunch under someone’s feet and Peter reeled around. A young girl solemnly watched him. She wore a faded dress of rough cloth, but was clean and well groomed. Her black hair

shone in the late afternoon light. Her big eyes bore a look of innocence.

“My God, you scared me,” Peter stammered.

He smiled. She said nothing, but then Peter had not asked a question. “My name’s Peter, what’s your name?”

“Hunahpu.”

*Good start, Peter thought, I’m glad she isn’t my first guest on a new TV talk show.*

“What’re you doing here?”

“My mother told me to play up here. She’s helping Papa stack rocks.”

“Oh, I see. Well, do you want someone to play with?”

She beamed. “Oh yes! I like to play. I’ll be the merchant in the market...you buy from me. I wove a pretty dress I will sell you. I’ll bargain very hard with you!”

“That’ll be grand fun. I had a little girl but she was lost in a car accident. I miss playing make believe. Tell me what you have there to sell, madam.”

It shocked Peter that he told her about the death of his only child. Maybe he let it slip out because death had been so common for the past few days. In any event she seemed to take his revelation matter-of-factly and went about her game. Hunahpu proudly held up before Peter small woven material about the size of a pot holder. It was quite pretty although obviously done by a child’s hand. Red, blue, and white interlaced the fabric.

“It’s a dress for the Carnival of Chamula. I cannot let you have this treasure for less than one hundred pesos!”

“One hundred pesos? I’m sorry but that’s too extravagant. You must be reasonable.”

Hunahpu furrowed her brow. She held up her diminutive creation and admired it.

“But Señor, this dress was made with love. Maybe you have a goat you can trade and just a little money?”

She made her plea with such sincerity Peter was taken aback. He looked into her soulful eyes. “Yes, maybe I can spare a goat and a small amount of money. This is a thing of beauty.”

Peter held the tapestry in his hands and admired it. She beamed as he talked of its quality. They finally struck a deal, then played the game over again. After a while they lost interest and talked about the mountains and forests. They discussed how she and her parents farmed the terraces around their house and about her brother dying of the measles last year. Hunahpu manifested the innocence of childhood mingled with courage and savvy beyond her years.

As the day grew old, the others finished their work on the roadblock and climbed the hills on both sides of the road. Hunahpu's mother and father came up with them. Her father approached Peter.

"I see you have met my daughter. Careful. She'll trade you out of your home."

Peter laughed with him. The young man introduced Hunahpu's mother, Ixquic. Then the soldiers started a small fire and Kuk filled Peter in on the plans for the road block.

"We'll be able to stop any convoy...to or from San Cristobal. We'll stop them as long as we can, then run into the hills. See the far mountain to the east? If we're separated that is where we will meet. The soldiers won't follow us there. The terrain...too rough and they know we will cut them into pieces with ambushes. We'll be hard to see from the air and the federales will not risk the embarrassment of losing a helicopter to one of the shoulder-mounted rockets they think we have. They will wait for a better chance to take us if we escape to that region. Also, there will be a field hospital on the far ridge of the mountain."

Peter listened intently and mentally mapped a course in case the need arose. He was surprised and grateful that Kuk trusted him with secret information that could save his life. After the orientation, Peter meandered over to an overhang to watch the colors of the setting sun. Hunahpu approached him. She still proudly clung to her woven piece of material. They talked of the sunset and such things then, out of the blue, she said, "I'm sorry about your daughter."

"It happened a long time ago."



Peter didn't tell her about the nightmare that followed him since Debra and her mother crashed through the guard railing of the Mason bridge. Could he have saved her if he had been with them rather than drinking at some local pub? He shook the ever-present contemplation back to its lair in the recesses of his mind. Hunahpu examined him with innocent and adoring eyes. She said nothing but reached up and hugged his neck. Peter instinctively resisted, then accepted the simple gesture and hugged her back. Surprisingly tears welled in his eyes. He released her and quickly wiped his eyes. "Why, thank you Hunahpu."

She smiled, turned, and ran back to her mother. Peter sat alone as the sun surrendered itself once more to the force of darkness. Kuk walked over. Peter shook off the melancholy fog around him and gave Kuk his best disingenuous grin.

"Kuk, how are the preparations going?"

"Very well. We're complete. I see you met Hunahpu. She and her mother brought us food. It makes me nervous for the child to be here...It is against regulations...but she and her mother work hard for us and it is difficult to turn them away once their work is done."

"She's angelic. Her father's familiar. How do I know him?"

"Yes, Chac. He just joined us. You know him from the firefight at the mining hut."

"He was there?"

Kuk's tired eyes sparkled even in the dark as he spoke of their coup. "Yes, his patrol was in charge of Dominguez. Dominguez is now turned over to a people's court far in the mountains. He'll be tried for many crimes...including murder."

Peter guessed Dominguez to be a poor insurance risk. But, on the other hand, he would have lost money on the Indians exercising enough control for Dominguez to still be alive for a trial. The night brought with it a breeze that swept up the mountain.

"How's this roadblock fit in with your strategy?" Peter asked.

"There's much fighting at the outskirts of San Cristobal. The Mexican Army overpowers us with numbers of men and big

guns. If the Army comes down this road, we will radio our report and stop them as long as we can.”

“You don’t expect to win a fight if a large force comes through?”

“No.” He hesitated, then his lips parted and curled into a smile, showing his crooked teeth. “But they *will* feel our sting.”

Soon the men bid each other goodnight. Peter looked for Hunahpu and her mother to say goodnight but they were gone. Had they left to go home? A loneliness filled him. Once he found a reasonably flat spot next to the fire, he wrapped himself in a borrowed blanket and put his hands in the pockets of his serape. He felt something in the pocket and pulled out the woven art made by Hunahpu. She evidently slipped her only possession in his pocket when she hugged him. Peter lay in his blanket and wept silently.

## CHAPTER 12

Peter woke to the sound of activity. Hunahpu and her mother worked over a large cauldron of corn mush hung over the campfire, preparing breakfast. Several pots of coffee sat close to the fire. A dirty rag lay in the dirt for the men to wrap around the hot handles of the coffee pots when pouring the steamy brew into their tin cups. Soldiers carried out their assignments throughout the camp. Having no assignment except to stay out of the way, Peter poured himself some coffee and watched Hunahpu who dutifully stirred the pot.

“Good morning. Thanks for my gift.”

She smiled and bid Peter good morning, then looked away and shyly lowered her head. Peter poured some coffee, held the hot tin cup carefully and took a drink. He didn't know what else to do or say. He vowed to give her mother the small amount of money he had so that she could purchase something for her daughter.

“You know. It's hard to volunteer for another assignment without violating my previous assignment to stay out of the way.”

Hunahpu looked at Peter quizzically. “Pardon?”

“Never mind. It didn't make sense to me either.”

She giggled and cut her eyes over at Peter, but never stopped stirring the heavy concoction in the pot. She was a strange combination of little girl giggles and grownup accountability.

Peter doggedly repeated offers to help until he eventually became the chef's helper for Ixquic and Hunahpu. His tasks didn't provide all that much career opportunity, but they kept him busy and feeling useful. Chac came by a couple of times to see his family. He was a friendly sort and tolerated Peter's questions even though he seemed guarded and unsure of what to make of him.

Peter was finally eating his breakfast when Kuk rushed into the camp area.

"A convoy approaches the roadblock from the direction of Palenque--six trucks of men and supplies. They pull with them three canons. Everyone to their stations." He turned to the woman and her daughter. "Leave now."

Ixquic nodded, grabbed Hunahpu and took one of the trails away from camp. Hunahpu looked back to see her father but he had already left for his station; then she looked at Peter. He smiled, she smiled back. Then they disappeared. Men scurried to their positions and locked and loaded their weapons. Peter moved to a position on the far left-hand side of the wall affording him a slit between the rocks so he could see the action. The once-noisy camp now became paralyzed with tense silence. Peter heard only the wind, and the wild beating of his heart.

The convoy rounded the bend. The front drivers noticed the roadblock too late. The first truck driver slammed on his brakes, then the second and on down the line. The last truck did not stop in time and ran into the back of the truck in front of it. Rebels on both hills opened fire. More Indians scurried across the road behind the convoy. Mexican soldiers returned fire of the Zapatistas that flanked them. Others poured from the trucks and scrambled behind the rocks to fire into the rock strongholds of the towering cliffs. Many died on the roadside. Bullets peppered the vehicles and ground as the Mexicans chaotically tried to retaliate. At the cost of more lives, some carried two canons and several machine guns into the protection of the rocks. A young Mexican officer barked orders and brought organization to his troops. Soon massive amounts of return fire hit the hillsides. The cannon blasted rocks into dust. The rebels along the rock wall on Peter's hill fired their clumsy weapons.

Mounds of brass casings piled up at their feet. Peter rushed to bring the dwindling boxes of ammunition to them. A cannon shell hit the wall. Broken rocks and dust sprayed over Peter. The explosive sound left a numbing ringing in his ears. He stumbled to the wall and, to his horror he watched Mexican soldiers crawl and snake through the crevices of the rocks as they moved up the hill.

Ixquic and Hunahpu burst back into the camp. Wide-eyed and out of breath, Ixquic spoke but she could not be heard over the noise. She yelled.

“Soldiers from San Cristobal are but a mile down the road! They enter the mountains to get behind you!”

Kuk ordered half of his tiny force to retreat and the others to provide cover fire. The first group reached the next level of rocks and stopped to provide cover for their comrades below. In the second group to leave, Chac stood. A bullet struck him in the back. He collapsed. Still. Ixquic rushed back. She knelt beside him and put his head in her lap. His eyes stared at nothing. Hunahpu stood frozen where her mother left her.

A cannon shell exploded at the very spot Ixquic knelt by her husband. One second they were there, then the next they disappeared in a cloud of red. The impact knocked Peter down. Where the young couple had been was nothing but a shallow, blackened crater. Shrieking coursed through Peter’s head. He could hear nothing else. It was as if he were watching a silent movie. A haze of smoke and dust drifted through the now-empty campsite.

Peter leaped to his feet. A sick dizziness filled his head. He sank to one knee. He buried his face in the palms of his hands until his head cleared. Again he rose and searched for Hunahpu. He grabbed her up into his arms as she wandered aimlessly through the haze. Dazed. Her skin cold and clammy. Peter checked her for injury. His hand sank deep into a hole in her belly. He pulled back. Blood. He wanted to scream.

“You’re gonna be fine, sweetie. I’ll put a bandage on your tummy and get you to the doctor. Okay?”

She began to tremble and she stared at Peter. Her eyes did not focus and a dullness coated them. She jerked her gaze to

different parts of his face with a confused, bewildered look. He clumsily ripped off the tail of his shirt with shaking hands, cursing himself for being so weak. He forced himself to look closely to find any severed vessel needing to be squeezed shut. No pulsating blood. He tied the bandage around her wound, took off his serape and folded it, then carefully laid Hunahpu on it.

“Señor Peter... I die?”

Tears filled his eyes. “No, my love...I will take care of you...stay close to me...pull strength from me...I have enough for both of us...I won’t let you die.”

Peter was babbling. He choked over his words as he forced them past the hard lump in his throat, gathered Hunahpu in his arms, and stood. A Mexican soldier came over the wall. He leveled his weapon at Peter, then hesitated. Peter froze, staring at a man in his late thirties, with a large black mustache and hardened look, his sleeves carried the stripes of a sergeant. Peter stood in the middle of the clearing, no place to hide, no weapon. His face and hands were blackened from the explosion and his chest and arms stained with Hunahpu’s blood. The soldier’s eyes moved down to the limp child Peter held close. A second soldier scaled the wall. Before he could point his weapon at Peter the sergeant, without turning, extended his left hand, ordering him to stop. The three men stood still, looking at each other. Finally the sergeant spoke. “In the name of Jesus, run.”

What he said finally registered. Peter started to say thank you, but merely nodded, turned, and dead-out ran.

Energy akin to rage exploded inside him. Surprised by the rush of power, he knew he should worry about the loose rocks and uneven ground, but bounded past the obstacles. After gaining enough distance from the camp to feel safe, he stopped and looked back. He was elated at how far he climbed; but his heart sank when he looked forward and realized that the mountain with the field hospital looked no closer.

“My parents?”

“They are separated from us but I’m sure you will see them soon,” he lied.

“Will I live to see them?”

Peter fought crying out. A wave of anguish washed through him, causing his knees to buckle. Instead he looked back into her dark eyes, giving her his most confident smile. “You will live to see your grandchildren, Hunahpu. You must believe what I say and stay strong. I won’t let you down.”

Peter began to run again but his gait more resembled a stagger. His arms burned from Hunahpu’s weight and his lungs heaved hungrily for more air. He could not bear to look at the impossibly distant mountain that promised help for Hunahpu. Instead he picked out a rock or tree as his goal, then, reaching it, set another. An hour went by, then two. His brain still commanded his body to run but his legs moved at a slow walk. He stumbled and fell to his knees but held Hunahpu. She woke from a trembling sleep. “It hurts. I’m scared.”

“Don’t be afraid. I’m with you. It is a good sign that you have pain. It is your body telling you it’s fighting.”

Her weak voice spurred Peter on. Pain knifed through his low back and between his shoulder blades. He had little feeling in his rubbery legs. Tears streaked his blackened face. Raw emotion filled the void caused by exhaustion.

Another hour passed, then Peter lost all concept of time. He shifted Hunahpu’s weight from one arm to the other so that he could stretch out the cramps. His coherence began to break down. Peter clumsily blundered through a thorn bush, cutting his face and arms. He fell off a large stone but managed to keep Hunahpu from injury. He whispered encouragement. Her responses became less lucid, then stopped. He kept on putting one leg in front of the other.

Reaching a large overhang, Peter stopped to see if they were being followed. No one. The cool, sweet wind blew through his hair and he breathed in as deeply as he could. Still limp, Hunahpu groaned. Her bandage had worked loose and she bled again. Peter searched for something to press against the gaping wound. His hand came across the woven cloth she had slipped into his pocket. He sobbed like a child. He removed the bandage around her waist and pressed the woven material against the bloody tear, then rewrapped the bandage around it.

“You will be fine, Hunahpu. Do not give up on me. You must live for your sake and I must save you for mine.”

Her hand squeezed Peter’s finger with the faintest pressure. He looked up the side of the mountain harboring Hunahpu’s salvation. He had not only reached the butte, but made half the distance up its side. This surprised him since he had not been looking up toward his destination. He gathered Hunahpu in his arms and tried to rise. His aching, rubbery legs almost failed him.

“God, please don’t let me fail this child...fail myself.”

Peter tried to run. His steps came laboriously. His heart pounded. His lungs heaved. A hazy, slow-motion cloak covered him. Peter found a trail leading up the mountain, allowing him to move faster. He saw the end of his flight and energy surged from deep down inside. His child lost her weak grip and her arm fell limp.

“You can’t give up now, Debra! We are almost there, for God’s sake. Stay with me. I’m trying as hard as I can. Please don’t leave me!”

He pushed her body close to his pounding chest as he picked up his faltering pace.

“Pull your strength from me! I have plenty to spare, don’t you see?”

Two rebel soldiers appeared from nowhere and approached them. Peter rushed toward them, holding his child out.

“Please get her to the hospital!”

One took Hunahpu. Peter fell to his knees, then to his hands. Waves of nausea and exhaustion pulsated through him as he struggled to keep from passing out.

A third soldier walked up. “What is this?”

The soldier not holding Hunahpu turned and casually reported. “The white man from our roadblock and a dead child.”

Peter burst from his position on hands and knees like a tiger and rammed into him. His momentum carried them to the ground. The soldier lay on his back as Peter straddled him, still holding tightly to his collar, Peter’s face inches from his. He fixed his wild, crazed eyes on the man, his blackened face blotched from sweat, tears, and spital. He shook uncontrollably.



He shrieked, "She is not dead! She is alive! Now take her to the fucking hospital!"

Time stood still in shocked silence. The soldier Peter attacked finally spoke. He spoke calmly although his voice was raspy from the hold Peter still had on his throat.

"Sí, Señor. We will have the doctor tend to the little girl. Now you must let me up or my comrades will have to shoot you and that will do the child no good."

Peter let go. "Thank you. I'm sorry I hit you. Please take her to the hospital quickly."

Peter stood but the surroundings began to swirl around him. His mouth moved but no words came out. He reached out to brace himself but his hand merely waived helplessly through the air. Darkness.

Peter did not wake for several days. His first memory was of voices floating through a sea of confusion.

"Peter. Peter. Someone wishes to say goodbye to you."

His eyes slowly opened. As they focused, he saw a weak, pale Hunahpu in the arms of an Indian nurse. His heart burst. He spoke to her but his croaking voice was inaudible. He tried again. "I told you...I knew you would survive."

Peter reached out to touch her hand and she reached to touch him. Her pale lips curved to form a smile and lipid brown eyes stared at him with a feeble but warm expression. A small tear escaped her right eye and trailed down her cheek. She spoke with words too soft for him to hear.

"Speak to me again. I can't hear you."

"I live...with...your strength...inside me."

Peter smiled. "It was your strength all along."

She clutched his fingers with trembling effort.

"I live with...your strength inside of me."

He embraced her trembling hand that clutched him.

"Maybe so, my love, but it's your strength now. Use it to get well and get from life what you deserve."

The middle-aged nurse pulled her from his grasp and put her in the arms of a waiting relative. The woman held the child against her short, stout body. She said something in an Indian dialect, smiled, then left.

“She is leaving now to be tended by her people. She would not leave without saying goodbye.”

Peter drifted off after that and would think his talk with Hunahpu only a dream if it were not for the repeated reassurances from the nurses.

Debra’s soul embraced him and lifted the pain from his heart.

## CHAPTER 13

Hours after talking with Hunahpu, Peter woke and decided to rise from his cot. His legs were bandaged because of shrapnel wounds. It was his first awareness of being hit. His wounds were painful, but not serious and he got around with the use of a cane. The Indian peasant women tending to the wounded allowed him free reign of the camp. A fiery Spanish woman doctor ran the camp with an iron hand, and paid little attention to him. He learned later that she was a close comrade of Marcos and that she, Marcos, and a handful of other friends spent the past ten years working with the Chiapas Indians and planning this revolution. Ironic--the repression of these Indians came about by the interference of outsiders, yet their revolt against the repression was organized, in large part, by outsiders.

On the second day after Peter rose from his hospital cot and wandered the camp, the wiry doctor approached him without introduction. Her voice carried an unusually hard tone. "Your name Peter?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. The young girl you brought in gained consciousness for a few minutes when I pulled this from her wound. Her eyes widened; she pointed at it and said your name. I washed it as best I could... saved it for you because it seemed important to her. So... here it is."

She bruskiy held out the small gift. Her close-set eyes glistened, betraying her. Peter collected himself in order to respond with a manly voice.

“Thank you.”

She nodded and quickly turned to leave.

“Wait. Will she live? How is she now?”

The doctor turned to face Peter, then stared at the sky as if envisioning the little girl. It impressed him that she reflected so carefully before speaking and he felt confident her answer would be brutally honest.

“She has a chance. That’s the best I can say for her. More than I could say when I first saw her. She’s accustomed to beating the odds...so I have hope.” She hesitated, looked away, then back. “Her second chance is because of you.”

For one brief moment her lip quivered. She quickly threw off the emotion with a shake of her head. Then she walked away. Peter slowly put Hunahpu’s art in his pocket. She’s not the only one who received a second chance, good doctor, he thought as she left.

Later Peter found some chores he could do to help out around the hospital. Fourteen cots held seriously injured patients. Another six soldiers were well enough to be out of bed but not able to go back to duty. A canvas roof stretched between poles sheltered the cots, but wind blew in dust through the open sides of the sanctuary. The doctor doled out the rare anesthetic medicines with tedious calculation. As soon as those too injured to help out at the hospital could travel, they were taken by stretcher to their homes to be cared for by their families. Short supplies and the ever-present chance of being detected kept pressure on the doctor and her staff to shut down the temporary hospital as soon as possible. Peter wondered, only with mild curiosity, what plans they had for him. San Cristobal seemed a million miles away and every time he ventured toward it he fell deeper into the revolution. He felt too helpless to seriously consider the direction he should take next.

On the evening of the third day after Peter left his hospital bed an American came into the camp under escort of two Indian soldiers. He was a reporter from *Newsweek* on assignment to

interview Marcos. Unexpected movements of the Mexican army forced him to abandon his plans and flee for safety. Rebels brought him to this field hospital until other arrangements could be made. Exposing the reporter to wounded rebel soldiers was probably an extra bonus reckoned by Marcos or his lieutenants.

Peter walked outside the camp as was his recent custom. Each time he extended the length of his jaunt. His wounds still hurt and he could not walk without a cane. With some difficulty, he climbed to the crest of a large rock overlooking the valley and nestled against its concave shape. Peter sat alone, staring at an empty writing pad when the lanky, curly-headed reporter approached him.

“My God, I never thought I’d run into an American here. Name’s Tom Paddet. How ya doing?” He extended his bony hand.

He took Peter by surprise, but Peter regained his composure. “Fine thanks. I’m Peter. I saw you come into camp earlier.” They shook hands.

“I understand you were wounded in a firefight on the road into San Cristobal. You must have quite a story to tell. Do you mind talking to me about it?”

“The Indians wanted to report military movement to the rebels fighting at Rancho Nuevo and slow down the troops and armament...allow their comrades to react. They accomplished their task but were quickly overrun.”

“How did you end up in this insurrection?”

“Wrong place--wrong time. I found out about the revolution when it appeared in a cabin I was using.”

“Remind me not to rely on you for great luck.”

“Actually I think I must still have my allotted good luck left...might want to stick close to me if a situation arises.”

Tom let out a deep, uninhibited laugh and plopped down. Far from satisfied with Peter’s succinct, guarded answers, Tom talked with him until he gained Peter’s confidence. Peter enjoyed Tom’s banter and speaking English again. Soon he found himself telling Tom, in intimate details, what he knew of the Indians, the battles. Tom cross-examined details out of him Peter didn’t know he had. Eventually they walked back to the

camp to share dinner. They ate with two soldiers and Tom continued to garner accounts of the revolution in such a pleasant way no one minded the continual interview. As a matter of fact, the men seemed relieved to know that their story was getting out to the world beyond Chiapas. After dinner Tom and Peter settled in with a cup of coffee, next to a small campfire, away from the others.

Tom stretched and scratched his head. "You've told me about your observations but nothing of your adventures. You must have some hair-raising tales to tell. From what I've been told, you were somewhat of a hero at the barricade. Why don't you fill me in?"

Peter thought of Janet and his friends, his demons, a young man's death he shared in his cabin, his lost novel, the firefights, and mostly of Hunahpu. The meaning of the past days lay beyond the words at his command.

"I've been hanging out with the Indians since my cabin became the center point of a battle, trying to get to San Cristobal and a hot bath. As far as the roadblock, when the Mexicans came over the wall, I ran as fast as I could, as long as I could until I ended up here."

Tom gave Peter a disbelieving smirk that promised the issue would be brought up again. Peter thought of a story that could help Tom and get him off the hook.

"The important item I can give you is that the Indians had Dominguez with them when they broke into my cabin."

Tom's ice blue eyes widened and thin lips fell open. "You're kidding! I knew he was kidnaped. What condition was he in? What do they intend to do with him?"

"He was in good shape, considering. The skirmish seemed to be the result of an unsuccessful attempt to rescue him. My understanding is that they intend to convene a peoples' court and try him for various crimes."

They went on into the evening discussing the Dominguez trial and the chances of the revolution. For a time Peter's feelings were safe from any more investigation. He slept well that night.

Morning at the hospital started before daylight. He rose with the others to help tend to the soldiers and start breakfast. To his surprise, Tom was already pitching in. Around midmorning Tom and Peter wandered away. White clouds floated in from the gulf as the sun brightened them against cerulean background.

“So Peter, the angle I see to this story is that the fighting is only another chapter in five centuries of racial discrimination against the Indians. Whatcha think?”

“Sure, I think that’ll sell.”

Tom brushed off Peter’s comment with open hand. “I’ll let my publisher worry about what will sell. I really want your opinion.”

Peter thought for a moment, trying to organize his feelings into words. Tom waited patiently. Peter sipped his coffee and finally began. “Look, racism is always around to motivate violence. Mexico is no exception. Race, even the shade of color in someone’s skin, is a big deal throughout Mexico. I see...well... Do you play chess?”

“Yes”

“The pawns act as fodder for the powerful knights, queens, bishops, and so forth. These more powerful pieces lash out from behind the protection of their pawns. There are many strategies in chess and many motivations for playing, but only one underlying goal: protect the king at all costs. The Mexican soldier and the Indian soldier may not like each other because of race, but they’ve a striking similarity. They’re pawns in a game run by the powerful. The plight of the Indian is more compelling because they don’t have powerful aristocracy to take advantage of the masses as they did when the structures at Palenque were built--yet I can’t help feeling for the pawns on both sides of this conflict.”

Peter’s voice trailed off. He never put these feelings into structure before so it was as if he heard the argument for the first time.

Tom leaned back and put his hands behind his angular head. Then he abruptly leaned forward. “So you feel if the Indians win then they’ll act as bad as the Mexican government has to them?”

“No. The most these Indian pawns can hope for is to mitigate the violation of their rights. If they win some concession for a form of local democracy, then the opportunities for abuse of power are lessened and ability to correct abuses nonviolently is increased. If you’re asking me if I feel unchecked power in Indian leaders would lead to the same level of abuse as that suffered now, I think so. Why should the Indians be different from the rest of mankind?”

“So, what do you think’s gonna happen?”

“I think if you and the rest of the press cover this, the Mexican government won’t be able to roar in here and crush the revolt with mass, indiscriminate killing. I’m sure Clinton’s folks are screaming at President Carlos Salinas de Gortari and his cronies since they’re out on the limb with this NAFTA thing. I imagine there’ll be some sort of negotiated truce. Whether anything really comes of the agreement depends on how smart and dedicated the Indian negotiators are. Many good ideas and intentions die a natural death in the Mexican bureaucratic maze.”

“Gosh Peter, I had no idea you were such a Pollyanna!”

They laughed. Then Peter told Tom he had actually caught him on an *up day*.

Back at the hospital they helped feed lunch to the patients. One of the nurses said that the doctor prescribed some stretching exercises and walking for Peter. She gave him some bandages and ointment and asked that he change his dressing. He took the gauze, fresh water, soap and a rag to a nearby rock and sat down. How angry his wounds looked. Careful cleaning with the rag made his legs look better, but with the price of stinging pain. Rubbing the ointment into each cut provided some relief. Peter tried the stretching exercises. How stiff his legs were.

That evening, with Tom’s help, Peter procured a bottle of tequila. His demons seemed to have given him a vacation, but he had no intention of meeting them again in that twilight time between asleep and awake. Passing out seemed a reasonable solution and moderately successful in past.

Tom, Peter, and two Indian soldiers passed the bottle deep into the evening, telling stories. Tom never stopped being a reporter and pressed each anecdote the soldiers told. Peter took



great delight in the discourse and spent his time being irreverent and sarcastic. The distinction that Tom and Peter had with the Indians was that they expected to remedy their hardship with a good hotel and room service in the foreseeable future.

Around twelve Peter stumbled to his cot and managed to go directly from awake to asleep without an intervening time of silence and thought. Unfortunately his returning sobriety woke him around three. Anguish and helplessness filled his mind. He jumped from his cot in a moment of panic and stumbled into the night as if trying to find something, or run away from something.

He came unexpectedly upon an old Indian woman squatting next to a small fire. She shielded the glow of the small blaze from him. He had no idea she or the fire existed until he was upon them and she turned, exposing the flames to his eyes. The yellow light of the fire filled his dilated eyes and painted a glow across her face and shawl.

“Good God!” Peter stumbled backwards and almost fell. She stared at him with an expression of mild amusement and calm demeanor.

“I’m sorry I disturbed you, Señora. I didn’t see you until it was too late.”

“You didn’t frighten me. I was expecting you...could hear you sleep fitfully.”

“I see.”

Peter wondered if he sounded too patronizing. He didn’t know this woman from Eve and it seemed unlikely that she should be expecting him. Her old eyes glimmered in the pulsating light, emanating an expression of interest and curiosity as if waiting for a long conversation to continue. She continued to squat comfortably next to her fire with the faintest hint of a crooked smile on her wrinkled face.

Finally Peter felt compelled to break the silence. “I don’t think I’ve seen you here before.”

“I am a shaman from a nearby village. The families of some of the wounded asked me to come.”

Peter knew little of shamans except that even those Indians who converted to Christianity and studied Western science in the government-financed village schools still believed in the power

of the shaman. Many of the sick or wounded insisted on the treatment of a shaman, even if they were under the care of a medical doctor.

“I’m glad to meet you. I’m Peter.”

“My name--Itzamana.”

Peter endured another silence as they stared at each other. She seemed content to just look at him. The fire behind her crackled. Bright red cinders swirled upward with the smoke. Peter shifted from one foot to the other and glanced into the dark surroundings. Eventually he shrugged and said, “It was nice to meet you. Have a good night.” He turned to leave.

“You cannot run away from yourself.”

“Pardon me?”

“The energy inside you is part of the energy of the universe. It is the energy of the trees and the animals--the sun and the wind. Quit fighting your pain. It is too big to conquer. Be at one with the night; listen to your breath and the enemy within will become your strength.”

Her crooked smile grew ever so slightly. She held her gnarled hand out toward Peter and into the glow of the fire. She opened her bent fingers, displaying the clear brilliance of a crystal. Reflected colors vectored from its angles. Peter opened his hand and she placed the crystal in it.

“I, well, thanks. But I really don’t know what I’m suppose to do with this.”

A tingling sensation swept through him. He shuddered trying to shrug it off.

“It is a gift. Do with it as you see fit.”

“Well, thanks...very much.”

She nodded and turned back to the fire. Peter stood in the dark for a moment, then walked to his cot. He felt better. He put the crystal in his pocket and laid down. Trying the old woman’s advice he concentrated on his breathing. He did not struggle with his contemplation, but just relaxed and paid attention. Soon he drifted away from his dark thoughts and off to sleep.

## CHAPTER 14

“You will never guess who I ran into last night,” Peter said to Tom as he ate breakfast. Peter woke late and had not helped with the morning chores. Tom and two Indian women sat, enjoying their morning meal after feeding the patients. Only two remained in the hospital--two of the patients died the previous day and several left for their villages--so Peter’s early morning presence was not sorely missed. Peter spoke in Spanish so as not to be rude to the two sitting with Tom. The scene seemed so normal and tranquil in the midst of this desperate struggle.

“I give up. Who?”

“A woman shaman from a nearby village. She damn nigh scared the life out of me in the dark. I couldn’t sleep and took a walk. There she was; next to a small fire that I couldn’t see until I was on top of it--Hollywood could not have made her look more like a spirit-woman from the jungle. She gave me this crystal and some advice about how to control a runaway mind...major convincing. As a matter of fact, I enjoyed the best night’s sleep I’ve had in years.”

Peter held out his gift. Tom examined the crystal then attempted to pass it to the women. Neither would take it. They spoke to each other in some Indian dialect. The older of the two looked first at Tom, then Peter. “There are no women shaman in local village...no shaman would give you her crystal.”

“I bet someone around here knows her. She seemed too old to travel far. She said her name was Itzamana.”

Both women looked at Peter wide-eyed. “God of the sky!”

“I’m sorry. What?”

“It is not for us to discuss.”

Both women stood, looked at each other with worried expressions, and spoke in hushed tones in their native dialect. Neither would talk to Tom or Peter about the matter further and scurried off to camp. The two men looked at each other, then shrugged.

Peter took Tom to the spot where he remembered seeing the antediluvian woman. He could not find the scorched remains of her campsite, or any other evidence of her presence. Tom looked at Peter askance, but Peter held the otherwise inexplicable crystal in his hand.

Later Kuk appeared at the hospital in command of two other soldiers. He ordered the able-bodied to break camp and relocate the remaining patients. By midday the canopy came down, patients carried off, and medical supplies packed. When the majority of the work was done, Kuk sat down with Tom and Peter for a scanty meal.

Tom, as usual, took the opportunity to gather information. “How’s the revolution going? What’s your next mission?”

Kuk gave guarded answers that parroted the revolutionary line, but seemed honest about the state of the military actions. “The towns we captured are back in the hands of the Mexican army. Too many machine guns...too many soldiers. We have no weapons to fight planes and tanks. Now they face the problem. They cannot use these weapons in the jungle. They fear destroying our villages--people like Tom will write about it. We are to them what the Orientals...How do you say?”

“Viet Nam?”

Kuk furrowed his forehead, then raised his eyebrows in recognition. “*Sí*, Viet Nam was to your country, only more, we are part of their people. The government must come to the Counsel to discuss terms. Marcos and Father Ruiz talk to them now.”

Tom perked up and leaned forward. “Where’re they meeting? What’s been said?”

“I do not know but a soldier will take you to a meeting with Marcos. You can learn of such matters.”

Tom leaped up and grabbed his duffel bag. “When do we leave?”

“I’ll order a man to take you to him in an hour.” Then Kuk spoke in a soft but commanding voice, “I now need to talk to Peter alone.”

Tom hesitated and glanced at each man with an expression of disbelief. He started to say something, then shrugged his shoulders and stalked off.

Kuk put his hand on Peter’s shoulder and they walked in silence down a narrow mountain trail. Peter said nothing, but waited for Kuk to speak first. The circumstances of war accelerated Peter’s respect and affection for Kuk. Peter desperately hoped he could be of some help to him. Finally Kuk stopped and crouched down. He broke off a piece of straw from a clump of dry grass and scratched the dirt. “The Vasquez family runs a drug cartel. Their mansion and labs are at the top of a mountain ten kilometers from here. The local officials they pay off are helpless because of the large numbers of army troops and commanders now here. No one knows who to bribe--or who can be bribed. Many cartel guards are gone because of the revolution. Some are afraid of being caught for past crimes...some have joined the revolution. Two of the guards that remain at the largest drug operation--they are friends of the Zapatistas.”

Kuk stared across the valley and toward the rain forest. He ran his fingers through his thick, black hair while he took time to collect his thoughts. Peter leaned against a rock, reached into his pocket, and touched his crystal. It felt warm, almost hot.

Finally Kuk looked back at him. “In the mansion is drug money...money for the revolution...money for the poor. Photographs of drugs and planes to fly them north can help us with the Norte Americana opinion. I have no time to seek permission. The raid must take place now. Discussions, they

risk a leak. What do you think the American people would think of this thing?"

Peter's face beamed. The adventure of it all! The poetic justice!

"Kuk, this is fantastic", Peter said. "I don't know how difficult the raid will be or the consequences to you for taking this on without clearing it, but it is a great idea. You'll need Tom to go with you to write a credible story and take quality pictures that a major magazine will publish. Just having fuzzy pictures of drugs doesn't prove anything. You need me to go in case Tom doesn't make it and because I need the adventure for my book."

Kuk stared at Peter with his dark eyes, tempting Peter to explain that he was trying to be humorous, but before he could do so Kuk said, "I know you are brave in battle. Are you prepared to kill?"

The question knifed Peter with an icy chill. He was prepared to risk getting shot, but was he ready to kill? An answer came from his lips, as if someone else answered for him. "Yes, I'm ready. Let's talk to Tom." His voice sounded so calm and strong, yet he shook inside as the gravity of his words sunk into his very soul.

Tom busily prepared for his rendezvous with Marcos as Kuk and Peter approached him. He faced away from them but turned when he heard Peter's voice.

"Tom. I've got a better idea."

"It better be a great idea."

"Look. Everyone's getting an interview with Marcos. Do you think he's going to think of something new to say to you? I just don't see a Pulitzer coming out of this."

Tom curled up one corner of his mouth and looked at Peter as if he had just been asked to eat a peanut butter and sardine sandwich. He cautiously asked, "So, what is it you two have in mind?"

Kuk casually leaned his rifle against a rock and surveyed the horizon. His silent demeanor commanded a feeling of respect. Peter quietly admired his stoic presence. A man of strength

many times exhibited his control by not attempting to entice others. Peter told Tom of Kuk's plan.

Tom's skeptical look broadened into a grin as Peter talked. He glanced over at Kuk. "What kind of drugs?"

Kuk spoke for the first time. "Heroin."

"Distribution or labs?"

"Both. We'll find a warehouse, two full labs and an airport for planes to fly into the United States."

Peter added, "It will be a heavy-duty exclusive and you can have an interview later with Marcos if you still want it."

The grin continued to grow Tom's face, parting his scrubby beard. "Lets do it!"

The soldiers under Kuk's command and three others--five in all--spent the day gathering supplies and making plans. Counting Kuk and Peter, their patrol consisted of seven armed men and Tom, with his camera and note pad. The plan was simple. The two guards, friendly to their cause, would leave a gate on the perimeter fence unlocked. Peter could not pick up from the briefing whether the guards would help in the fight. He suspected no one knew. Once inside they would overpower the skeleton crew, take pictures of the labs and dope, then torch them and confiscate the money from the safe in the mansion. They did not have the combination to the safe but Kuk held three sticks of dynamite and, what looked to be an extremely short fuse.

That evening they ate a cold meal and each checked their equipment. Kuk gave Peter a lever action 30-30 rifle and twenty-three rounds of ammunition. One of the injured soldiers gave Peter his machete. Peter strayed from the group to privately inspect his injuries, needing the assurance he would not prove to be a hindrance. He felt little pain and did not limp. Once alone, he lowered his pants and discovered that his wounds were remarkably healed. He pulled the crystal from his pocket and stared at it. He raised up his trousers and sat for a while, aware of his breathing and trying to feel the energy around him. If anyone had asked him what he was doing Peter would have lied.

From the darkness Kuk said, "Peter, Peter. It's time to go." Peter grabbed his rifle and strapped on his machete and backpack.

Soldiers moved like ghosts in the dark. They were a motley crew, but steely tough. Peter surveyed the group to assure himself each man held a gun of some sort. Without any comment Kuk set a treacherous pace. An almost full moon brightened the night, which helped them to negotiate the rocky trail.

A cool wind brought Peter the now-familiar subtle scents of the Sierra Madre--light, dry smells of arid plants and minerals of the earth. As he inhaled the night with deep breaths, the old woman's words came to him over and over. He envisioned the oxygen he breathed in as energy filling him and the carbon dioxide he breathed out as waste leaving him, only to turn into energy as it mingled with the air. He inwardly laughed at himself, but reluctantly admitted it helped.

Only a short time seemed to pass when Kuk gave the signal to slow down. Peter felt no fatigue. Instead he tingled. He absentmindedly moved his finger across the cold metal of his rifle's barrel. The once-pleasant wind now sent a shiver through his sweaty body. Following Kuk's lead, they crawled the last fifty meters to the rim of a butte. The moonlight illuminated an adobe mansion, three long, flat, metal buildings, and an airstrip. Two small, twin-engine planes sat on the flight line. Three men wandered around inside the compound. No guard towers or spotlights. A ten-foot stockade fence topped with three strands of razor wire surrounded the ten-acre estate.

Peter braced for the attack, yet Kuk settled down behind a small tree and the men followed suit. Trying to relax, Peter surveyed the patrol. Tom furiously scribbled in his notepad. Two cameras, hanging from his neck were strapped to his chest. He wore a canvas vest, holding film, lenses, and other photography equipment, khaki pants and shirt, hiking boots and a stylish, Banana Republic safari hat. *Ready for a New Yorker ad,* Peter thought. The others' attire consisted mostly of mismatched camouflage. But for Kuk's automatic weapon, Peter carried the best of the rifles. Some of the guns were truly



antiques. Two appeared to be single-shot rifles. Duct tape held the stock of one together. Tom pondered how he merited the privilege of holding the 30-30, then he was struck by the obvious. The others were embarrassed to give him one of the pieces of junk they were carrying into battle. The responsibility that accompanied possessing the second-best protection for the little group of unsung heroes gripped his throat.

They sat in the rocks for more than thirty minutes before Peter realized why they were waiting. The moon moved relentlessly toward the horizon. The loss of its brilliance transformed the sky into indigo dark, with only the pinpoint radiance of the stars.

Peter quickly memorized paths to the compound as the moonlight faded. Just as the moon escaped behind the horizon, a shadowy figure lumbered along the fence line close to their position. The slightest metallic click floated through the night once the figure reached a gate. The shape disappeared into the dark.

Kuk calmly checked his weapon and rose to a crouched position. Everyone did the same. He turned and whispered in a confident voice, "They have grown soft because of the years of protection. I think we will only find three or four guards on the grounds. The patrons are gone for the night. Their bodyguards are with them. Those who are left are well-armed. We must be swift before we lose the surprise. Do not hesitate when you hear their automatic weapons or we will be lost."

The men all gave a grim nod. Tom and Peter exchanged quick glances. Then the adventurers fell in single file behind Kuk and stalked down a gully toward the dope, money, and armed mercenaries.



## CHAPTER 15

Peter struggled not to make noise but kept stumbling over rocks or brush. It seemed to him that he was the only one making a sound, but no one said anything. After an eternity or two they reached the unlocked gate. Kuk slowly opened it. To Peter's horror the hinges made a shrill creak which he imagined was loud enough to wake up the original Mayans, although apparently raising no interest in the compound.

Kuk silently signaled three of the commandos to move toward the metal buildings and flight line. He whispered to Peter to stay behind a fountain in front of the house and cover their flank and instructed Tom to stay with him. Kuk and the other two crept toward the mansion.

The night was as quiet as it was dark. Just before Kuk reached the porch a pack of coyotes pierced the tension with their lonely, high-pitched howls. Peter jumped straight into the air and landed in the same spot. He thanked God no one saw him other than Tom and that he didn't accidentally fire his weapon.

"How much will it cost me for you to keep that little scene out of the article you are writing?"

"I'll let it go if you promise not to notice that the crotch of my pants is wet."

"Deal."

Both groups almost reached their destinations. A man moved out of the dark recesses behind one of the tin buildings and followed the patrol heading toward the flight line. Peter started to yell a warning then remembered the rifle entrusted to him. He grew up in Texas hunting with his father and friends. Shooting was not a new thing. Shooting at another human or suffering return fire was. Panic struck to his very soul. He felt paralyzed. The thought of failing his comrades scared him more and forced him into action.

He threw the rifle to his shoulders. In the darkness he could not see the sights as he tried to take aim across the top of the barrel. He desperately fired in the general direction of his target.

Flash from the muzzle blinded him. The guard's automatic weapon clattered as bullets hit the rock fountain Peter hid behind. Adrenaline surged. The sound of his heart pounding drowned out other noises. He wanted to leap behind the fountain and put his hands over his head. He squatted, frozen, unable to decide what to do. Fear of cowardice and failure overcame terror of death or injury. He placed the rifle next to his cheek, pointed in the direction of the last flash of gunfire, and fired three into the gloom.

Muzzle blasts from Peter's comrades flashed in the night. Grunting. Thuds of men running. Someone calling out. Confusion. If Peter fired again he was just as likely to hit a comrade. Suddenly, from the buildings he heard an excited, "Tom...Peter!" They rushed toward the sound.

When Tom and Peter reached the others a man slapped Peter on the back. "Great job. You saved our asses."

Peter had no idea what he did that deserved such acclaim but enjoyed the credit. He could tell now that two of the large buildings were green houses filled with long rows of poppy plants illuminated under an eerie florescent glow. Tom stepped inside the first building and took pictures. Quickly. Methodically. Every few snaps he stopped to take notes with the aid of a small flashlight held in his teeth. Peter stood outside to guard Tom's efforts as he went from one building to the next. One of the three Indians slumped and held his hand on his side but all carried out their assignments. They discovered a can of

gasoline and doused the front of each building, then set fire to the labs and storehouse. Tom, watching, rapidly finished his fourth roll of film and raced from the burning building.

The flames shot up and lit the front grounds, making visible two lifeless bodies laying in the dirt. One man's chest glistened with the red, sticky evidence of a bullet hole, the other almost decapitated from a machete. For a moment Peter wondered if any of his bullets caused the first man's death. No difference. They all fired a hail of bullets with the intent to kill.

They rushed to the mansion to join Kuk and the others. Inside laid three bodies, one a young member of their squad. Kuk did not seem injured but the man with him leaned against the wall, both hands grasping his thigh. How had the carnage come? Peter had no memory of sounds of a struggle at the villa. He looked for the friendly sentries, but they commandeered the abode without the guards' help. Oversized Mexican-style furniture filled the forty-by-thirty foot room. Kuk leaned over and pointed a flashlight at the base of the far wall. The glow of the fire outside pervaded the room through tall windows. The dark flickering specter disoriented Peter. His head spun.

Shit! Kuk lit the fuse of the dynamite at the base of the safe, recessed into the wall. Peter leaped behind the couch close to the front door. As he fell to the floor, he rammed heads with Tom. The explosives went off. The couch slammed them against the wall. The concussive sound set off a ringing in Peter's ears.

When they looked back at the safe, Peter almost laughed out loud. The entire wall around the safe was gone. Only a dusty cloud remained. But the door of the safe stood unharmed. Everyone, even Kuk stared in dumbfounded amazement. The furniture lay cluttered against the walls.

An old expose Peter read years ago about the vulnerability of safes flashed in his mind.

"The back of the safe!" Peter yelled.

Everyone looked at him as if he had lost his mind. Peter ignored the incredulous stares.

"Find an axe or crowbar. The back of the safe isn't designed to stop entry, only the front."

The men slowly gathered at the safe and Kuk pointed his light at the side of the metal structure. To Peter's delight and relief it was constructed of thin sheet metal. They dragged the safe into the room, turning it sideways. Peter pulled his machete from his belt. The men jumped away as he wheeled the weapon over his head. He lunged forward with all his weight as the blade hit the side of the vault but ricocheted off. Dumbfounded, Peter stared at the blade as if it were to blame. He raised his weapon for a second strike, but Kuk put his hand on his arm. Peter stepped back. Kuk smiled at him and welded his own machete with expert skill. The blow left a cavernous gash. He reached back and struck again with equal success, leaving an X incision. Without hesitation he kicked the compromised metal and opened a hole three times the size of his fist. The soldiers looked at each other for a moment then Kuk sank to his knees and reached inside. He pulled out a bundle. American one hundred dollar bills. Each of the men let out an involuntary whoop. Kuk furiously reached in again and again, pulling out bundles of money and handing them to his comrades to put in their homemade backpacks. The money filled all the backpacks. Peter yielded to curiosity and explored the safe once the money had been liberated by Kuk. He found jewelry in the bottom of the strongbox and stuffed it into his pockets. Kuk threw his backpack across his shoulders and stoically pronounced, "We must go."

In spite of the barbarous events of the night Peter felt almost giddy as they rushed from the house and toward the front gate. The ringing in his ears subsided and all of his senses perked. Two of the remaining seven used their fellow soldiers for support because of their wounds, yet everyone seemed exalted.

Kuk reached the twenty-foot-wide gate first. He blasted the lock and chain with his assault weapon. The noise and flash caused everyone to jump. Just as they reached the road two pickup trucks filled with armed men careened into sight. They crossed the gravel road in a gangster slide. Men leaped off the still-moving trucks, firing. One of the wounded and the man helping him went down immediately. Peter could not count the number of drug soldiers attacking them, but knew they were out

numbered at least three to one. The assailants fired automatic weapons.

Back inside the compound the Zapatistas took refuge. Their attackers hesitated to follow them in. They did not know the raiding party's number or how well armed and did not want to end up like those guarding the compound. They doubtlessly thought a small force wouldn't consider such a project. Kuk organized the retreat with military discipline. Peter and another covered while Tom and the other two soldiers withdrew, then Peter's group retreated under cover of fire. They avoided the light from the burning buildings and soon found themselves in the darkness of the flight line, next to one of the light twin airplanes, a Cessna 310.

The drug soldiers carefully entered the compound and systematically checked the mansion. They criss-crossed the acreage toward the Zapatista position. Although they moved slowly, only minutes separated Peter, Tom, and the Indians from certain death. Kuk ordered his charge to quit firing as soon as they reached cover of the flight line's darkness to avoid exposing their position. Chilling silence cloaked the battle scene.

Peter turned to Kuk. "I'm a pilot. I used to own a 310 like this one. I'll get us out of here. Just set up a barricade and keep those gorillas off of me until I can crank up the plane."

Kuk nodded grimly. Peter did not tell him that the last time he flew a 310, or any other plane was five years ago, or that before he could possibly get the plane started the drug goons could be all over them. Pretty unimportant anyway, since even a good pilot probably could not clear the fence, starting in the middle of the field where this plane sat. With everyone aboard and at the altitude of this air strip they needed extra runway, not less.

Inside the plane, he discovered that all of the seats were removed except the pilot's. A large cargo door replaced the standard-sized door on the side of the plane. This was good news. Taking away the weight of the seats helped their chances of actually taking off. The large cargo door allowed a quick entrance for the Indians if Peter got things started. Behind the controls, strapped in, he found the avionics switch and flipped it

on. The dash lit up. Keys hung from the ignition. He stared at the panel, feeling overwhelmed. Airspeed indicator. Altimeter. RPM. EGT. Radios. Good--artificial horizon. He checked to be sure the fuel selector valve indicated "both"; pushed mixture, props and power full forward; selected the right engine and twisted the key. The engine groaned as it turned over. He watched the props slowly rotate.

The sound drew gunfire. Kuk's men returned fire. Returning such little fire, gave the appearance of setting up a trap so the enemy was slow to rush in. The right engine did not start. Peter smelled av gas. Shit. Flooded. Switching to the left, he pulled power back to half, then pulled mixture all the way back and began to crank the engine. As it cranked he slowly pushed the mixture forward. Everything felt clumsy and slow. He envisioned the enemy getting closer and closer.

The engine caught, its high-torque roar music to Peter's ears. He pulled back the power on the left engine and repeated the process for the right. It came to life. Kuk looked back at him and Peter frantically waved everyone in through the cargo door. Kuk jerked open the oversized door and men dove or were thrown in. Blood sprayed from the wounded, leaving patterns of red on its interior.

Figures ran rapidly across the compound toward the plane. The engines needed to warm up, but the Zapatista's welcome was definitely worn out. Even if they did not clear the fence, maybe some would end up on the other side of the razor wire with a fighting chance to escape. Damn--what was the wind direction? If he did not take off into the wind, they lost their slim chance of getting enough lift to clear the fence. Peter cursed his stupidity. He kicked the left rudder to turn the plane away from the gunfire, eased back the fuel mixtures in hopes of adjusting for the air strip's altitude, and pushed the props and power to the wall.

The plane slowly started rolling. Peter did not turn on the lights. He saw little out the windshield but black. As the plane picked up speed, however, a soft reflection of the fire on the perimeter fence sent the gut wrenching feeling of fear through him. The obstacle became clearer and larger. He glanced at the



air speed indicator. Fifty knots. Far too slow to rotate. His comrades lay around him in a quiet choking tenseness. Sixty knots. Still too slow. The barbed nemesis now loomed in front of them like an evil grin. Sixty-four. Sixty-six. Not enough time. He pulled up the landing gear switch. The gear ground into the recesses of the wings and fuselage. Peter had heard that a low wing plane on takeoff would not crash to earth if the gear was raised below stall speed because of the cushion of air created from the ground effect. It worked. Without the drag of the landing gear the plane gathered speed quicker. More speed--more lift; more lift--more altitude; more altitude--survival. Seventy-six. Seventy-seven. Rotate! The fence rose in front of them. They were too low.

“Brace yourself! We’re going in!”

In a last desperate attempt Peter threw down the flaps. Their movement caused a jolt of lift that hopped them over the barricade. The fence disappeared leaving dark hills and sky in front of him. The props cut through the razor wire causing an uncanny, rapid clicking and twanging. The plane yawed but stayed on course. Everyone still strained as they braced for a crash.

An ear-to-ear grin broke out across Peter’s face. “Never mind.”

Kuk grabbed Peter’s shoulder. “Never mind?”

“Yeah. I’m better than I thought.”

A collective sigh emanated through the cockpit. Peter checked to be sure his air speed was above stall and raised the flaps. He pulled the nose of their getaway vehicle up toward the heavens. The next time he thought to check, the air speed indicator needle crept passed one hundred and ten knots. They entered a cloud. He focused on the artificial horizon and concentrated on climbing straight and level and not slowing below one hundred and ten knots. A thought shot through him. *Mountains!*

“Kuk--which way are the mountains?”

“What?”

“Damn it, man! Are there mountains I need to avoid? Which direction is safe? I’m flying blind here.”

The engines droned as they pulled the small plane through the charcoal grey clouds. Kuk looked at Peter with a dumbfounded expression, then his eyes widened and his mouth opened. Peter turned on the landing lights and strobe but they only made the cloud visible. Were they miles away or above the mountains or ten feet from a granite face? His mind overloaded and could not calculate what little information he possessed to determine their location or where the range might be.

Kuk grabbed Peter's shoulder. "North."

"North?"

"Yes. North will take you over the ocean."

Peter banked to the left. But the idea of being lost at sea did not have a good ring to it either. The plane broke through six thousand feet and the ceiling of the cloud cover. The cool, moonless night allowed the stars to display their finest brilliance. Peter never appreciated their beauty more than now. He set a course for 360<sup>0</sup> and marked the time so he could find his way back. Although the ground below contained hostile forces, it seemed more desirable than treading water somewhere in the Gulf. He discovered a three-axis auto-pilot and locked in their course and altitude at sixty-five hundred feet. He pulled the prop and power settings to nineteen, then adjusted fuel mixture. The fuel gauges indicated the tanks were half full. He played with the navigational equipment for a few minutes but didn't pick up VOR or ADF signals. He didn't know how to work the Loran guidance system. Finally he leaned back and looked at Kuk, who just finished bandaging his men's wounds.

"How bad are they hurt?"

"The wounds are minor."

"Thank God. You hurt?"

"No."

Peter pushed back his seat and stretched. He looked at Kuk with an almost goofy grin. "Let me tell you where we are with this airplane so you can start making some management decisions. We're heading out to sea. I see no future in this course of action unless you know the location of a friendly cruise ship. If I'm lucky enough to find an airport in Mexico we will be ill received. We have about two hours of fuel. We might

reach an airport in Belize or Guatemala, but I don't think I can find one in time. As a matter of fact, I've no earthly idea where we are. I think the best wounded Indian rebels with drug money in a stolen plane could hope for, even in a neighboring country, is prison."

He decided not to mention the cloud cover that prevented him from seeing the ground--or mountains--if they descended for a landing, or the Mexican Air Force that might be looking for them. After all, he wanted to keep a positive front.

Kuk contemplated his words for a good while. Peter kept a watchful eye on the fuel gauges to assure himself they weren't losing fuel faster than his estimate. The tanks could have a leak from a stray bullet. The needles seemed to be going down at a reasonable rate. About thirty minutes later Kuk spoke up. "It'll be light in forty-five minutes. Stay at sea till then. We'll be safer out here from air patrols. If you reach land at first light, I can guide you to the highway close to the mining shack where you stayed. That is a remote stretch of road. We can land there."

"What about the cloud cover?"

"It may still be on the rain forest, but it will be gone from the mountains. You must have driven to that place...right?"

"Yes. Tell me again how you know the cloud cover will be gone."

"I know because I am a Chiapas Indian. Is your car still there?"

"I guess so."

"Good. Then we will make our escape."

"I didn't say it would start."

"It will start."



## CHAPTER 16

Forty-five minutes after his first clock check, Peter banked 180 degrees to track the same radial back to their beginning point. Soon the pink evidence of sunrise penetrated the morning sky. To his relief, the new light revealed only scattered clouds below. The day slowly transformed before his eyes, but he did not appreciate its beauty. The acrid smell of sweat and fear permeated the cramped quarters of the plane. No one spoke.

Peter worried about radar detection and the danger of being intercepted by military fighters, but wouldn't give up altitude to avoid detection. The more distance between them and the ground, the more security against any emergencies. Clouds dissipated and the Gulf lay out before them. Soon Chiapas coastline interrupted the saltwater blue.

Kuk studied the land as it came into sight. Above the beach, he pointed about fifteen degrees to the left. "That way."

Peter banked to the left, then leveled off. He glanced at Kuk who merely nodded. In a few minutes Peter witnessed the grey-blue, craggy spectacle of the Sierra Madre ascending from the dark-green canopy of the rainforest.

Tom came to life in the back of the plane. He talked to each of the soldiers then flashed several pictures, and broke out in laughter when his flash scared Peter. The hilarity spread through the plane. Once pierced, the silent tension transformed into cathartic giddiness.

Peter craned his head around and said, “When’s the last time you flew upside down, Tom?”

Everyone immediately stopped laughing. They stared at Peter with wide eyes and shocked expressions. Only Tom enjoyed Peter’s humor. He turned to him with an insincere plaintive expression.

“Peter! I’m sorry.”

“Okay. How about a spin then?”

“Look. Fly straight and level and I’ll use the word heroic somewhere close to your name.”

Tom, then Peter laughed. It felt good to banter with a friend. The others did not join in their gaiety. This harrowing flight was probably the first time any had flown. Floating a mile and a half in the air surely tested the courage of these brave warriors. Joking about flying upside down or diving in a spin went beyond the pale. Peter looked back over his shoulder to his passengers.

“Tom and I were joking. I’ve no intention of doing anything with this plane except flying straight and level and getting us home safe.”

Kuk winked at his soldiers and said, “I guess that means we won’t need to show you the special little ceremony we have for pilots who fly upside down when we get back to the jungle.”

Everyone cackled and slapped each other’s backs. The men smiled in spite of their pain and broke out into chatter in their native dialect. Kuk pointed to the left another ten degrees and Peter adjusted. Conversations moved to the victory and miraculous escape and everyone speculated about what good could be done with the money. No one suffered from serious wounds; no bones broken or organs perforated, but they looked horrible. Blood pulsed from gunshot wounds and cuts. Their clothes hung in tatters, torn from running wildly through the brush.

The mountains rose up to greet them. Although flying at seventy-five hundred feet M.S.L., they passed within two thousand feet of mountain peaks. The buttes, a few kilometers in front of them, rose two thousand feet above their altitude.

Kuk grabbed Peter's arm. "There! See the burned remains of your cabin? Follow the trail toward the highway. That your car?"

"Yes. There's *Simone*."

"Who?"

"I call my car *Simone*."

"I see."

Tom crawled to the front and the three peered out the windshield at the side of the mountain. Peter pulled back the power to fifteen inches and lowered the flaps twenty degrees. He dropped the nose of the plane and lost altitude to five hundred feet over the highway. His altimeter indicated six thousand feet M.S.L. He flew slowly over the road to examine it as a potential landing strip.

Tom and Kuk looked at Peter expectantly. Everyone in the back quietly waited.

"The stretch of road close to my car is too short. Also the road is too narrow and there are trees and boulders next to the road. We need to find somewhere else to land."

Tom and Kuk leaned back, shoulders slumped. Peter mentally calculated their fuel--maybe another thirty minutes. A silvery glint caught his peripheral vision. In the time it took to turn his head, two Mexican fighter planes flashed by. They banked and flew back by in slow flight. Peter lowered flaps and slowed his plane below their stall speed so they could not stay beside the 310. As they went by, the pilot in the first plane pointed down signaling for Peter to follow them for a landing at the airport. Peter merely shrugged as though he didn't know what the military pilot was talking about.

Peter's head spun. Think strategy. He raised the flaps and pushed in some power. He pulled back on the controls to gain altitude. The fighters flew along beside them. One of the pilots signaled numbers with his fingers--one--two--two--eight. Peter turned to that radio frequency but didn't think he would be able to communicate since the military used frequencies not found on civilian radios. To his surprise he heard the crackled voice of one of the fighter pilots.

"You are in restricted air space."

“I’m sorry. We are lost.”

“You must follow us back to our airbase.”

“I...I can’t.”

“If you do not follow us back to base, you will be shot down.”

Before Peter pushed the mike button he said, “Yeah, well we’ll be shot on the ground if we follow you in.” Then he pushed the mike button and replied, “I’m out of fuel and must make an emergency landing on the road.”

“You must follow us in or you will be shot.”

Peter turned to the men with him. “We have to bluff these guys or we’re dead. I’m going to take us in.”

Tom whispered. “You said we couldn’t land there.”

“Yeah, I know, but that was before the situation was properly explained to me. Upon further reflection, it looks do-able.”

Peter gave everyone his best brave smile and shut down the fuel flow to the right engine. He grabbed the mike and looked out the window at the pilot flying next to him.

“Please don’t shoot me. We are in an emergency. My gauges indicate empty tanks.”

Just as Peter said this his right engine quit and the plane yawed to the right. The fighters banked away to a safe distance. Peter pulled the fuel mixture on the left engine and it soon quit. He pushed the nose down and feathered the props to keep up airspeed as the plane silently slipped through the atmosphere.

He told his terror-stricken passengers not to worry. The plane was easily capable of gliding to a safe landing and that he practiced this maneuver many times in the past. It didn’t seem like a good idea to tell them in just how distant a past that practice took place. In a normal landing Peter could push in power if he was coming in too low and pull back if he’s too high. Those adjustments weren’t available to him. His guess on the proper glide slope needed to be exactly right. Even if he pulled off hitting the road at the beginning of the straight stretch, the rocks and trees looked too close to accommodate his plane’s wingspan. He reached into his pocket and felt the intensely hot presence of his crystal.



Blinking sweat out of his eyes he watched his airspeed--120--117--110. He pushed down the nose a little more to stop loss of airspeed. The tree branches swaying gently in the breeze indicated a right quartering headwind. He pushed in some right rudder to compensate, then nudged the nose down again, and lowered the flaps a notch. The deafening roar of the jets filled his head as they screamed over. The 310 jostled about as it glided through the jets' vortex. Peter relaxed his white-knuckled grip once he realized they didn't fire at his plane. The fighters climbed, then circled to watch the risky landing.

Now Peter's plane glided close enough to the road that he knew he would not fall short. He lowered the landing gear. The struts buzzed to a click and three green lights appeared on the panel. He put in more flaps then watched his airspeed--90--84--80. The plane slipped over the threshold like a mute phantom.

They were too high; airspeed--78--74--70. The stall speed indicator shrieked in Peter's ear and the plane shuddered. It stalled and dropped as if shot from the sky the last fifteen feet and landed hard on the pavement. The plane bounced into the air then hit the road a second time. Peter slammed on the brakes. Everyone hit the roof then tumbled forward. The left wingtip fuel tank scraped a large boulder, swinging around the nose of the plane. Peter pushed in the right rudder to compensate. The plane tipped over on its right wingtip and nose and skidded sideways. The tail section caught a tree and ripped loose from the fuselage.

As quickly as it began the crash-landing was over. Black smoke filled the air. Absolute quiet replaced the deafening sounds of brakes screeching and metal tearing and scraping. Peter smelled fuel. Panic rose in his throat. He fumbled with his seat belt, then turned to the mangled men scattered in the plane and hysterically shouted, "Get out! The plane's going to go up in flames! For God's sake get out!"

Everyone struggled to crawl out the back, helping one another. Kuk grabbed the backpacks containing the money and helped those who were hurt. Peter was the last to leave. The astringent smell of fuel completely infiltrated the plane. Wildly, he shoved, pushed, and prodded the man before him into the

arms of his friends. Peter made no more than two steps from the plane when an explosion knocked away his consciousness.

His next comprehension was of cold water splashing on his face, bringing him back to reality. As he focused, he saw Kuk's face beaming down on him. "We must go quickly. The fighter pilots will report this... troops will come. Can you walk?"

Peter nodded. "How's everyone else?"

"One must be carried...serious condition. All of the rest of us can walk."

"How's Tom?"

"Tom can walk and ask questions and write on his pad at the same time."

"That doesn't tell me much. I suspect Tom will be able to do those things three days after his death."

Kuk chuckled and patted Peter on the shoulder. "I see your point. I guess we'll just have to wait three days to see if Tom is okay or just not able to stop asking those damn questions in spite of a fatal wound."

Peter stood up on shaky legs and reached into his pocket to fondle his crystal. Tom, still in safari hat, walked up to him. Dirt, burns, and blood stained his ripped clothes. The rest of the crew looked as if some Hollywood director ordered makeup to create the illusion that each had been dipped in Hell then allowed to escape. Some wore makeshift splints to protect broken bones. Cuts and bruises covered everyone. One of the two remaining soldiers under Kuk's command lay unconscious on a cot made from tree branches and vines. The rest walked with the same spryness as the extras in *Night of the Living Dead*. In spite of their beat-up condition, an aura of relief and happiness clothed them. Peter felt electrified even though his gait proved slow and painful.

Tom took Peter's picture. A grin broke out over his dirt-encrusted face. "God, you look awful."

"Sure I do. You weren't taking a picture of my good side."

"I wish you would quit saying witty things. I intended to only quote myself for the witty part of my article."

"Well, I plan to be more morose later on, if that's any comfort."

Tom and a soldier picked up the stretcher. They walked down the path toward the general direction of *Simone*. Behind them flame lapped around the fuselage and engines. Parts thrown by the explosion lay strewn across the road. Thick black smoke rose toward the sky. He marveled at their luck.

The trail they followed soon played out, yielding to rough terrain. They took turns carrying the stretcher. In spite of his injuries, Kuk kept a tough pace. Pride forced the rest to keep up. Twice they backtracked and once pulled up brush to drag behind them to avoid leaving tracks. They did not see any planes after their crash so Peter finally quit craning his neck to search the sky as he tripped over rocks and bushes. Kuk did not share his confidence. He continually checked behind them and each time they reached a crest, he carefully checked the terrain before they passed over.

The sun burned off the remaining clouds to reveal a effulgent sky. Peter found it difficult to look at the surrounding mountains and sky and maintain the appropriate concern for their circumstance. Atop another crest Kuk ordered the men to stop so he could check out the valley. He scrambled back.

“What’s wrong?” Peter asked.

“What is her name?”

“Whose name?”

“Your car.”

“Oh.” He relaxed. “*Simone*.”

“She’s over the hill.”

“Great! Let’s get to her.”

“Not yet...when I think it safe.”

Kuk ordered his remaining ambulatory charge to scout the other ridges that overlooked their transportation. The soldier solemnly accepted his orders and disappeared into the landscape. Kuk carefully moved to the high point of the ridge and began his vigil. Tom gave the wounded soldier some water then leaned against a large rock and checked his notes. Peter walked over to the suffering man to see how he was doing. He suffered a head injury. A bloody rag covered his head. A tree branch splinted a fracture of his left femur. He drifted in and out of consciousness, moaning.

“How are you doing?”

“I...I will overcome,” he whispered, sounding more like a question than a statement.

Peter wanted to do something but didn't know what. Then it came to him. “I've a crystal given to me by a shaman. It healed me and kept me safe. It's your's now.”

The soldier searched Peter's eyes. His strained face melted into a hopeful smile; then he held out his hand. Peter put the crystal in his palm and the young warrior pulled it to his chest. Though refusing to admit to believing in the power of the crystal, Peter held a deep-seated fear that the confidence, luck, and healing power he enjoyed might leave with it. But instead a surge of energy pulsed through his very being. Peter's friend on the stretcher reached out and touched his hand.

Their scout scampered back into camp and reported to Kuk. Both of them walked quickly down to talk to the rest. Kuk said, “We must hurry. No one's around your car but a truck full of armed men is approaching.”

“Mexican army?” Tom asked in a voice a little higher than usual.

“Worse. Drug soldiers. They must be investigating the plane crash.”

## CHAPTER 17

Dust rose and rocks tumbled in front of them as they hurriedly descended the knoll toward *Simone*. The thought of drug mercenaries provoked more dread in Peter than the threat posed by the vast resources of the Mexican army. Trepidation. Peter held the downside of the stretcher. Sweat poured down his face as he slipped and slid down the incline. The wounded warrior clutched dutifully to the crystal.

Peter looked over at Kuk next to him. “How much time do we have?”

“Thirty, maybe thirty-five minutes. They must climb a very steep road and we helped a large stone to fall in their path. They must remove.”

“Fifteen or twenty minutes? Great. I was hoping we would have an extra few seconds--in case things don’t go just right.”

Kuk smiled and nodded. Their lungs heaved. The muscles in Peter’s arms and shoulders burned. His knees trembled. Without slowing down, Kuk bumped Peter out of the way and took over his position on the stretcher. Peter jogged along beside Kuk. After several more minutes they reached the basin and continued on more level ground. *Simone* grew bigger and bigger as Peter concentrated on his goal.

More than twenty minutes passed before Peter threw his arms across her hood, then frantically groped through his

trousers but found only a hole in his pocket. “No keys!” Everyone stopped and looked at Peter.

“Wait. I have an emergency set under the wheel well, maybe.”

“Okay, that maybe remark is going in the article,” Tom snorted.

Peter was too involved in searching under his car for a small metal box, magnetically attached to the car, to pay any attention to his sarcastic friend. Its metallic feel gave him a rush of joy and relief. Unlocking the door, he leaped inside, put the key in the ignition and turned it. He got only a faint click for his efforts. He tried again. Nothing. Kuk greeted Peter with a blank stare.

Peter snapped my fingers. “Get the battery out of the back!”

Tom threw junk around as he frantically searched. Peter grabbed a pair of pliers from the glove box, opened the hood and attacked the nuts holding the dead battery in place. Kuk reached around him to disconnect the cables. They hurled the lifeless battery out and shoved in its substitute. Kuk attached the cables as Peter jumped behind the steering wheel. Peter turned the key and produced a slow-motion grind of the motor. The battery contained barely enough energy to turn it over, but before Peter could let out a groan the engine caught and came to life. Everyone gave a spontaneous cheer. They slid their injured confederate in the back then leaped inside.

Tom said to Kuk as soon as they slammed the doors, “Maybe we shouldn’t try to beat the druggies to the road. We’re so far off the highway I don’t think they can see us. Even if they did, they might not check us out.”

Kuk answered with an emotionless but commanding voice, “We’re helpless if they catch us here. Even if they don’t see us from the road, one of their planes may have checked out this area and spotted the car. If I were hunting us, I’d first make sure there was no get-away car. Only then would I take my time looking for survivors and the money.”

Tom piped up, “Hey, that’s why they pay you the big bucks to make these critical decisions.”

Kuk stared at Tom, then at Peter for some clue about what Tom was talking about. Peter passed the chance to explain and merely obeyed Kuk's instruction. He turned *Simone* around and negotiated the tortured course to the highway. Then he looked to Kuk for further instructions. "I see the road. Which way do I go?"

Kuk looked at Peter, with raised eyebrows, then a small shake of the head. "Turn right. We will stay in front of the drug mercenaries until they turn off to see the plane wreckage."

Peter nodded and began his turn when a truck of heavily armed men lurched around the curve in the road. They caught the Zapatistas in the open. Outgunned and no where to run. Everyone froze. The nose of *Simone* trespassed into the lane of traffic the drug mercenaries traveled. They impotently braced for the inevitable.

To Peter's shock, the truck did not slow down. The driver waved, signaling Peter out of his way. Peter pulled back as quickly as he could. The driver and others snarled at him when the truck sped by. One of the men in the back shot Peter the finger. As quickly as they appeared they vanished. No one spoke.

Finally Tom said, "If I get out of this alive I'm going to write the local drug lords and complain about the terminal stupidity of their hatchet men."

Kuk and Peter looked at each other and shook their heads. Peter didn't know if he was more impressed with their luck or Tom's ability to be scintillating in the face of death.

Kuk commanded, "Turn left. We can't risk the chance that the drug soldiers might realize their mistake and double back."

Peter ventured onto the highway. He checked the fuel gauge to assure that *Simone* held enough gas to get them to *Rancho la Puerta* if Kuk let them continue the direction they were headed. The only sound was the purring and clatter of *Simone's* familiar road noise.

After several minutes of silence, Kuk said, as if to himself. "When hiding something from someone who knows it will be hidden, put it in the open. The best camouflage is the unexpected." Kuk silently stared at the dash of the car as he

contemplated his words, then smiled, turned to Tom, and added, “The mark of a good leader is good luck. The mark of a great leader is one who explains his lucky success in terms of his own brilliance.”

Peter laughed. He silently admitted his prejudice against those without the benefit of formal education being capable of such adroit commentary. Each day revealed to him another dimension of this quiet, hardened man. If Peter had passed Kuk on the street before this adventure, nothing about him would have drawn Peter’s attention. Kuk, and others like him went about their wise and brave lives unknown and unheralded by those who hurried about them, too busy and important to notice. He shared with Kuk and his men the purity of effort only obscurity can give.

The road switched back 180 degrees on the face of an adjoining cliff. The truck of drug soldiers burst into sight on the other side. One man hanging on the back railing of the bed triggered a barrage of automatic gun fire. They were too far away for the rounds to hit *Simone*, but close enough to scare the hell out of Peter. Tom looked over at Peter after the shots were fired. “Take the complaint letter to the drug lords off my to-do list.”

Peter continued to gaze out the windshield and hold the steering wheel with white knuckles. “I thought it in bad taste anyway.”

Kuk watched the truck as it went out of sight, then said in a calm, authoritative voice, “We will be all right if they can’t radio in some sort of air support. Their truck won’t catch us. We will turn off the main road in a few kilometers and meet with Zapatistas who can tend to our wounded and help us deliver this money to the Counsel.”

Tom and Peter craned their necks to search the sky. Small, white fluffy clouds floated across blue sky and a few birds glided on the wind currents, but no airplanes. The muscles in Peter’s neck relaxed and the tension in Tom’s face eased.

About fifteen minutes later Peter negotiated a sharp turn around the face of the mountain. The rock wall hid the curve from his view as they traveled down a steep grade. The rain



forest laid out in all its splendor two thousand feet below. Kuk shouted for Peter to stop. He hit the brakes and *Simone* ground to a halt.

Kuk ordered the four still ambulatory out of the vehicle. He quickly climbed up the side of the rock ledge and wedged loose boulders that fell on the road at a point blind to traffic making the turn they just accomplished. The others immediately scampered up the incline to help. Within seconds they covered the road with a boulder blockade, got back in *Simone* and sped off. Would the ominous pile of rocks merely slow down their pursuers or force the speeding truck off the road and into a fatal fall? Peter did not voice his question for fear of sounding weak.

After an hour of travel and two thousand feet of descent, Kuk told Peter to pull over. A sandy road veered off to the left, toward the rain forest. Kuk gestured toward the lane. Peter pulled onto the steep, rocky trail and inched off the main thoroughfare. They eased into the cavernous dark of the forest.

Limbs, laden with foliage, reached out over *Simone* in botanical embrace. The temperature cooled as they entered the dark sanctum of the jungle. Peter couldn't help but feel extradited from the world of light and scenic panoramas. He felt simultaneously unnerved and protected.

*Simone* bumped and wobbled over giant roots lying across the shrinking narrow path as they penetrated the jungle. The wounded soldier in the back groaned as they shifted from side to side. His young, scarred friend spoke up, breaking his hours of silence, "Please be careful. He begins to bleed."

Peter looked back. The one who spoke kneeled beside his fallen friend, trying to hold him still. The wounded soldier grimaced. Sweat poured from his face.

"Sorry. I'll try to do better," Peter said in a low voice.

He had no concept of how many hours passed as they inched down the trail, but eventually they reached the end at a wide river.

The soldier in the back exclaimed, "*Grijalva!*" Peter assumed he referred to the river. Not much information, but Peter considered it to be one of the longer conversations he had with the man. No one gave Peter instructions. He and Tom

exchanged glances, but everyone else seemed content to casually watch the current of the river curl past. An object floated downstream that looked like a crocodile. Peter said nothing about it to the others, concerned he might reveal his naivete.

After it moved out of sight, Kuk casually turned to his soldiers in the back. "See the croc?"

"Si."

Movement in his peripheral vision caused Peter to turn in time to see Indians materialize from the deep colors of the forest. They were half clothed and wore a collection of traditional Indian and Western clothes. Their ability to hide so completely until they were close rattled him. Mouth open, he stared at the men as they walked the few steps to the car. Each wore a machete. A few carried rifles. Kuk and his one healthy soldier climbed from *Simone* and hugged them. The display of affection gave Peter some comfort but he chose to remain in the car until summoned. Tom crawled to the back to check on their wounded friend.

After a lengthy conversation with the Zapatistas of the river, Kuk returned. Peter and Tom crawled out of *Simone* as he approached. "Tom, if you wish to travel with us, Marcos will meet with you. You can have your adventure story and your interview as well, if you wish."

Tom let out a whoop and grabbed his gear from the back of *Simone*. "That's great. I'm ready to go."

"Peter, you will be guided to a port town called Foterá. A friend will take you by boat to Belize City. His name is José. His boat is called *Sea Queen*. In Belize City there is air service."

Kuk put his hand on Peter's arm. Peter pitied his new-found comrades future but lusted after the fervor the revolution bestowed upon their lives. He looked at his faithful transportation, *Simone*. When he abandoned her in the solitude of the forest, he left the last vestige of his previous life behind. He could never be a Zapatista but neither could he ever be what he was before.

Several men opened the back of *Simone* and lifted the wounded man from its confines. His eyes met Peter's. He said,

“Señor Peter!” He beamed as he held up a blooded hand, clasping the crystal. “I am better. I will live.”

Peter started to say the strength is in you, but he knew better than to argue with such faith and held his tongue. Kuk introduced a young man named Chaacal as Peter’s guide.

Tom said, “Goodbye my friend. Take a bath and drink a scotch for me. I won’t be far behind.” He gave Peter a bear hug.

Kuk turned to lead the others away and Peter remembered the jewelry in his pockets. “Wait. I still have some of our loot from the drug lords.” He pulled out the jewelry from his pocket and held it out to Kuk.

Kuk stood still and looked off in the distance, then walked back to where Peter stood. “Keep the jewelry. We have no way to fence it and it is instant death for any of us to be caught with such a fine possession... by the federales *or* the drug families. They may be of some good in your hands. If the opportunity to help my people arises, use them. Otherwise I wish you well with the fortune.”

Then Kuk turned, signaled his men, and they left. Peter stood alone with the wiry, tough Chaacal who spoke little Spanish, but made himself understood and soon they were jogging down a trail that ran by the river. Chaacal kept a mean pace and, although now capable of long runs, Peter felt a wave of relief when the evening’s darkness and cool fog finally set in and they stopped for the night.

The guide efficiently and quickly set up camp, pulled a fishing line from his pouch and entered the darkness toward the river. Peter gathered some kindling and started a small fire. By the time he got the blaze going Chaacal walked back into the campsite holding a large cleaned catfish, which Peter praised.

Chaacal smiled politely then skewered the fish on a thin green branch from a nearby tree and placed it over the fire. He pulled from his pouch the Indian version of two tortillas and handed Peter one. Soon the lapping flames of the fire cooked their fish to a golden brown. Chaacal sprinkled some herbs across the catch of the day, filleted one side and put it on the remainder of Peter’s tortilla. Peter gobbled his meal and washed it down with cool water from his canteen. Chaacal and Peter

crouched Indian-style in the circle of the campfire's illumination, eating food harvested from the womb of Chiapas.

They wrapped themselves in blankets and lay close to their fire. Its lapping flame and red embers warmed his face and the cool, wet night chilled his back. Soon he heard the heavy breathing of sleep coming from Chaacal. He quietly reached into his pockets and pulled out the jewelry. Because of the events following the break-in he had not thought to examine the bounty. Now curiosity burned in him.

The flickering light of the fire curiously sparkled on the gems. He held two necklaces, one of diamonds and one of pearls. Piled next to them were three diamond pendants and several gold chains. These were handsome pieces with respectable-sized stones; however, the presence of a man's ring overwhelmed the glitter of everything else. It was not the prettiest piece. It was actually quite gaudy, but impressive. A two or three carat diamond rose in the center mount, surrounded by three circles of smaller diamonds and rubies. Golden images of eagles in flight ascended on each side of the ring. Peter chuckled. This was exactly what he would expect to see in a Mexican drug lord ring catalog.

He slipped off to sleep that night imagining situations in which it would be fun to wear his ostentatious phallic symbol before he converted it to cash. Its value, his value was of no consequence to the spirits of the ancient Chiapas rain forest.

## CHAPTER 18

At dawn Peter and Chaacal ate a meager breakfast of corn mush pancakes. Chaacal soon set them a rapid cadence toward Fotera. Peter took pride and satisfaction at how well his body responded. It seemed a lifetime ago when he first struggled to keep up with the Indian pace through the jungle. His morning and afternoon filled with snapshots of the river and forest as he ran from scene to scene. They stopped briefly for a bite of fruit at midday.

“How much longer before we reach Fotera?”

Chaachal’s brown, deer-like eyes cut over to Peter. “We are very close. We must be careful. A militia stationed there suppresses the Indian. It is led by a vicious man who owes his loyalty to those who take our land. The revolution scares him and makes him even more cruel. We must be as a shadow until you can enter the boat.”

“That’s not very encouraging, Chaacal. Will we have trouble making contact?”

“No. My orders are to leave you at the cantina. Either the owner of the boat or his daughter will meet you there. I cannot stay...I’m known to the militia. You’ll be in good hands with these people. They can be trusted.”

“Is there anything else I need to know?”

“Yes. The daughter does not speak much Spanish. She speaks Tzotzil. I will teach you two or three sentences in case she is the one who picks you up.”

Peter started to ask why anyone would send someone to pick him up who spoke only an obscure Indian tongue, but decided a complaint would be futile. Also, this was not the time nor the place to display ingratitude. Chaacal dutifully worked with Peter so he could communicate: *My name is Peter. Please take me to the Sea Queen. I do not speak much Tzotzil. I speak English and Spanish. Thank you.*

They traveled further down the river, but at a slow pace. Occasionally Chaacal scouted ahead. The militia in this small village obviously posed a malevolent threat. They set up camp early.

“We’re only an hour from Fotera. We will wait until late in the evening before we go in. Sleep if you can. I’ll fix a meal. It is hard to know when the next time to eat and sleep will offer itself.”

“Can I help you?”

Chaachal surrendered a shy smile and waived his small hands as if calling a runner safe. “No. Please rest. I go to catch a fish for us. I will wake you when food is ready.”

Peter started to protest, uncomfortable not doing his fair share, but Chaacal was in charge. He knew best as to whether Peter’s help would be of any real benefit. Peter gathered some leaves, fashioned a nest, and laid his sore body down. A light breeze from the river drifted across him. Gurgling sounds from the moving water and chirping from the forest’s life forms infiltrated his awareness. The extent of his weariness surprised him. His muscles twitched and jerked as he relaxed and drifted off to sleep.

Chaacal woke him after dark. Cold and damp, Peter rose to walk over to the fire. None existed. He looked at Chaacal.

“No fire?”

“Shadows make no light.”

“Say again?”

“We must make a cold camp so we will not be discovered.”

Fileted fish lay on a broad leaf on the ground. Chaacal squeezed lime over the white meat. Peter walked over and squatted next to him.

Chaacal looked up and smiled. "The juice cooks the fish."

"If you say so."

Chaacal laughed and rubbed the dry, green leaf of an herb with a spicy-pepper smell between his palms, cascading bits of it on the fish. He gestured to Peter to take a piece. Peter never tasted a more delicious fish than what they ate that night. They talked in low tones. Chaacal unpretentiously educated Peter about his way of life and told him of his adventures as a Zapatista. Finally their conversation waned. While they sat quietly, the night exploded with the death squeals of a wild pig. Peter leaped to his feet, looking left then right.

Chaacal calmly stood and put his hand on Peter's shoulder.

"*El tigre*. Don't worry. He does not want us--anyway--he now has his meal."

"Oh, you must think that scared me. Actually I was thinking about taking the pig away from him."

Chaacal jerked around to face Peter with one eyebrow raised, paused, then broke out in laughter. "Ah, a joke. Very good." He nodded approvingly.

Peter sat back down with as much of a nonchalant flair as he could manage. In the cool darkness Peter strained to make out various black and grey shapes. With the greatest of effort he eventually brought his imagination in check. Twice after the screams a low, rumbling growl floated through the night. The tiger made him too jumpy to relax and get some rest--he suspected the same was true of Chaacal--but neither admitted it.

An hour later, the moon, hidden by the canopy, deserted the Chiapas heavens. Peter did not realize that the moon was out until it left the sky. Once its subtle effect was gone the night became black on black. Rest was over. They started the last leg of their travel to Foterá. Peter awkwardly negotiated the invisible, slippery trail toward his escape. He once again entertained mixed feelings: ready to leave behind the life-threatening dangers but not the passion they brought. Peter then thought it might be a little early to lament over the loss of danger

in his life. With a pig-eating tiger behind him and an evil Commandante and his militia in front of him, on the darkest night of his life, he could conjure up all of the passion he wanted.

“Did you say something?”

“No I was just chuckling to myself.”

Peter couldn't see Chaacal's face, but he imagined an expression compatible with: What am I doing out here with this crazy gringo? They said nothing else as they groped toward the small port village. Peter expected to see the lights of Fotera at a distance, but instead they were abruptly upon unlit huts along the trail. Any less warning and he would have run into the side of one of them. Chaacal crouched at corner of a structure for a good while, observing. Finally he signaled Peter forward.

The buildings were simple concrete-and-wood structures, the roads unpaved. No street lights. As they moved further toward the interior, the road changed from dirt to concrete. Chaacal signaled for Peter to stop. He crossed the street quietly and quickly, to a cantina. Its doors were closed and appeared locked. Wooden shutters covered its windows and wrought-iron bars protected its doors. Chaacal tapped on the far window and rays of the light vectored into the dark street through the cracks in the shutters. Chaacal signaled Peter to follow and moved to the back of the building. Somewhere down the street a dog barked.

A plump man in his night shirt opened a door and they rushed in. The proprietor looked both ways down the street, stepped inside and shut the door.

“Peter, this is José. José this is Peter.”

“Hello. Thank you for shelter.”

José stroked his thick, black mustache then dismissively waived the back of his hand. “It is nothing. You will be safe here until you can leave on the boat. It's a dangerous time. Commandante DeLeon is on a rampage. He's determined to discover who the leaders of the Zapatistas are in this area--something in the air--up to no good, but you will be safe here. Everyone is expecting a tourist to arrive. You only need to tell everyone you will be fishing.”

“Thank you.”



“We all must do what we can do. Now Chaacal, you must go. If you are caught here, it will be the death of us all.”

Chaacal moved gracefully to the door. The whites of his eyes stood out against his dark skin. He hesitated. “I understand. It is good to see you again, José. Peter, I’m glad to know you. Remember us when you are back in your soft, *Norte Americana* life.”

Chaacal smiled at his comment, showing his stained, uneven teeth, separated by dark spaces. Peter shook his hand with both of his. “I promise. It will be impossible to forget this little vacation.”

They both laughed, then Chaacal was gone.

The next morning Peter rose from his first real bed in many days. He walked down a narrow hall to a door that opened into an open-air cantina. Large, handmade Mexican tile covered the floor. Three sides of the room were unpainted wooden walls, but only four posts held the roof up on the street side. A single fan hung from the nine-foot ceiling, wobbling as its three blades slowly turned. The bar stood against the wall opposite the street side. Behind it hung a hand-painted sign listing beers, tequila, and food. Several cheap Formica tables and aluminum and plastic chairs sat empty around the room. An older woman walked down the dirt street with a large basket on her head.

Peter walked to the bar but found no one. He turned around and leaned back, resting his elbows on the rail. After a few more pedestrians, a rooster, and a skinny dog wandered by, a young overweight man came out of the back room, rubbing his eyes.

“Can I help you, Señor?”

“Are you serving breakfast?”

“Sí.”

“Then bring me some coffee and some fried eggs.”

“It will only be a few minutes. Please sit wherever you wish.”

Peter walked over to one of the chairs that did not have a large crack in the seat, turned it so he could watch the street and sat down. An old, rusty jalopy rattled by. Dust rose behind it and floated into the open-air room. In a few minutes José entered carrying a platter of eggs, tomatoes, onions, and an

assortment of other delicacies. He also balanced a pot of coffee, two cups, and a glass of some sort of fruit juice.

“You’re going to spoil me and I won’t want to leave.”

José smiled and put the food and drink on the table. He poured two cups of coffee and sat down across from Peter.

“Stay to yourself and don’t stray too far from the cantina. If anyone asks you, tell them you are waiting on a boat to take you fishing. The man with the boat is delayed but will be here in the next few days, or, if God is smiling on us he will send his beautiful daughter to summon you. It has been a while since my eyes have been blessed with the sight of her.”

“With that description I also hope he will find a need to send his daughter. Who’s the man coming for me?”

José frowned and pulled at his mustache. “It is better that you do not know his name. These are bad times and we must only know what we need to know.”

Peter nodded.

Peter ate voraciously. He hadn’t realized, until that moment, how much he craved a good hot meal. “I don’t know how to thank you...for everything.”

“Kuk says you are a friend and we should help. That is all I need to know.”

Peter put down his coffee and looked solemnly at the heavy man. “Yet I know it is a brave thing you do and I appreciate your courage.”

“It is nothing.”

After breakfast Peter went back to his room and tried to read an old novel he discovered. Later he tried writing but soon gave up. He went in search of the young boy he met that morning to acquire directions to the river. The obliging young man described a way to the river and, also found Peter some soap and a towel. Peter discovered a relatively secluded place, and took his first real bath in several weeks. Having a full belly and clean skin put him in a state of euphoria.

Back at the cantina, he found a razor, comb, toothbrush, and clean attire on his cot. The garments were modest, peasant vestments, but Peter never enjoyed a change of clothes more in his life. He didn’t even try to save his pathetic rags. The

reflection after shaving off his beard was a completely different person from the one who stared back at him from a broken mirror the morning Janet left. Leaner, confident. Hours passed and the sun progressed to the Western sky. He strapped on some sandals also left for him and ventured out to the front room for lunch.

This time customers filled most of the area so Peter eased into a chair by a small table in the corner to eat his meal in relative obscurity. He studied the people. Most were common folks and he imagined them as fishermen or farmers. One matronly lady sitting with two men wore fancy clothes and some jewelry. She laughed and waved her meaty arms as she talked. Peter hoped he would never find out who she was because he was sure his speculation was more colorful than the truth.

A stocky, dark man stalked in alone and took a small table in the corner opposite Peter. He displayed a confident, arrogant manner. He wore an expensive silk shirt and tailored pants, but did not strike Peter as a man of education or status. The rotund boy came over to his table to take his order.

“Can I help you?”

“Tequila.”

He scowled as he mouthed the word, revealing an open space where his two front teeth used to be. The boy scurried off to get his drink. The man kept his back to the wall and his blood-shot eyes darted to any movement in the room. A deep, ugly scar cut through his right eyebrow and cheek. Twice Peter caught a glimpse of a pistol under his shirt as he twisted his muscular body to observe the crowd. A sense of foreboding sent shivers through Peter. He could not explain it, but feared this man from the moment he first saw him. Soon the boy returned with a small glass of amber liquor, which the man downed with one gulp.

“Another.”

The boy rushed off, then returned with a second. The man asked a question. The boy leaned over to hear, then shook his head no. This time he placed the drink on the table and the man let it sit for awhile and surveyed the crowd. Eventually he downed it then left. Who in God’s name was he?



## CHAPTER 19

The next morning José met Peter as he left his room.

“The man you asked about is a drug soldier for the Vasquez family. His name is Culébra--the snake. There is no one more loyal to the family or more dangerous. He’s killed many men and is without fear for his own safety. I don’t know why he’s here, but be careful of him. There are three cantinas in town and he’s going from one to the other asking questions.” José thought for a moment then added, “The man with the boat isn’t here yet, maybe tomorrow.”

“Thank you, José. May I have a cup of your macho coffee?”

José broke out in a wide grin, spreading his mustache across his face. “Of course, Peter. Join me in the cantina.”

They sat at a table close to the bar as the town woke up, spending an hour sipping coffee, eating ranch-style eggs, and swapping stories. José asked Peter not to leave the cantina. Just as they rose to go to the back, a personnel truck roared by in a whirlwind of dust, filled with uniformed militia. When it was gone, José shook his head and muttered “pigs.” An Indian woman of middle age walked into sight, looking back the direction the truck disappeared. Terror filled her eyes. A sick feeling hit the pit of Peter’s stomach.

In his room Peter tried once again to read the bad novel. Soon he sat staring out the small window of his room. The forest was lush green and the distant sound of the river drifted sweetly

through the trees, yet he could not shake a feeling of dread. The air in his room did not stir and the repressive heat caused sweat to bead and travel down his chest. He took off his damp shirt, then hung it over the solitary straight-back chair. He caught himself pacing. Why did he promise not to leave his room? He wrote for a while then feel asleep, more from boredom than weariness.

He awoke with no sense of the time. He found no clock in his chamber and his wrist watch was long since gone. He guessed it to be close to lunch and left his room. In the cantina customers were well into their meals. Culébra sat at a table within arm's reach. Peter froze. He suppressed a compulsion to run. The Culébra's face was scared and pot-marked. His black eyes revealed a cold emptiness like that of a shark. He talked with a short fat man smoking a large cigar. With all the control Peter could muster, he casually walked past and sat at the next table with his back to them. He could hear their conversation.

Culébra leaned forward and spoke with a raspy voice. "I am here on assignment from the Vasquez family . . ."

The young waiter Peter met the day before asked him what he wanted. Peter ordered the special and a beer. Did he want a glass? No, a bottle would do.

"...assholes stole money and jewelry. This cannot go unanswered. I'm to watch the port and see if anyone suspicious tries to leave. I can pay money--you bring me information. These people...we will make an example of them. This thing, it will never happen again."

"Who could have done this thing? It must have been a small army to break into such a compound!"

"True, and well armed. But they will be punished. I promise you that."

Peter's food and beer came. He wasn't hungry but was afraid not to eat. The conversation behind him drifted to other subjects but he heard enough. The federales, a local madman with a militia, and a crazed drug family were after him. His only escape route, anticipated and watched.

Fear momentarily deserted him, replaced by awe, when the most beautiful Indian woman he had ever seen entered the

cantina. The other male customers stopped to watch her. The conversation behind Peter stopped. José came out smiling and, they briefly exchanged words, then he looked around nervously and escorted her to the back. Peter finished his beer and walked to the back to find José and the beautiful woman, still in conversation, standing in the hall. She was tall for an Indian woman, five foot seven, slim and long legged. When she turned to face Peter, her long, straight, black hair cascaded across her shoulders. Her enormous brown eyes looked directly into his, with neither pretense nor timidity. José introduced them. Her name was Lxil.

“My father is delayed--will be here tomorrow morning. Can you be ready?”

“I’ve nothing to get ready, Lxil. I’m at your disposal.”

“Good I’ll be here tomorrow at daybreak. I will meet you at the back door.”

“Thank you for what you and your father are doing for me, but I must tell you--well--a mercenary from the Vasquez drug family is watching the port for the raiders of the Vasquez compound.”

“Who’d do something that stupid?”

They stared at each other for a pregnant moment. Lxil’s eyes widened and she slapped her forehead. “You...you’re that stupid!”

Peter explained that, after all, Kuk thought it was a good idea and they retrieved money for the revolution. Lxil and José stared at each other in silence. Her full lips parted to say something but she shrugged her shoulders and repeated her instructions to Peter. He nodded obediently.

José said, “Let me bring some beer.”

To Peter’s surprise Lxil readily agreed. Her demeanor became light-hearted. José vanished and reappeared with a bucket of iced beer. Peter sat on the wooden floor in his room, José on the bed, and Lxil took the only chair. Peter told of his adventures of the past weeks, carefully avoiding such words as *terrified* or *scared-to-death*. Both José and Lxil seemed interested in stories of the battles. No skirmishes occurred in their region.

José did not talk much but Lxil opened up. Peter was shocked at how articulate she was in Spanish. She laughed and told him she insisted on using her native tongue so many thought she could not speak Spanish. In fact, she spoke it quite elegantly. Peter said the few sentences he knew in her language-badly. She patiently helped him. The stories she told gave him more insight into this man, Marcos. Marcos made arrangements for Lxil to receive some university education in Mexico City. She returned to Chiapas to help in the fight for Indian rights, but also rights of women and she earned a post on the Central Counsel. She referred to this position of power as evidence of the “revolution within the revolution.”

They talked deep into the night. Peter felt an easy and open friendship welling from their conversations. She slipped out in the early morning hours and José and Peter bid each other farewell.

The first rosy hue of morning touched the eastern sky, and Peter sat, fully dressed, on the side of his cot when a faint tapping sounded on the back door of the building. He jumped up and looked out the window. His heart raced at the sight of Lxil’s silhouette in the last greys of morning. He moved quickly through the short hall to the back door and opened it. She smiled. The white of her teeth and eyes shone through the darkness.

“It is time to go, Peter.”

“Let’s get the hell out of Dodge.”

“What?”

“I’m ready to go.”

They slipped quietly toward the docks at the mouth of the Grijalva where it opened into the Gulf of Mexico. A block from the cantina the high-pitched sound of a truck sped toward them. They hid in a doorway. It went by, militia seated in the bed. Peter slowly let out his breath and breathed again. They looked at each other but neither spoke. Then they bolted for the docks. Peter heard other noises but could not make them out as he ran. Three blocks later they turned the corner and the docks were in view. An older Indian man tied his modest fishing boat, with the words *Sea Queen* on its bow, to the pier. Lxil smiled as she saw



him, but her smile vanished as uniformed men approached his boat. The men spoke to the old man. He began to wave his arms and yell. One of the militia spoke again and the man on the boat grabbed a machete and moved toward them. Shots rang out and the man crumbled to the deck.

“Father!”

Lxil ran toward the boat. Peter tried to seize her, but too late. He impotently stood in the shadows as the soldiers grabbed her. They struggled, then the men tied Lxil’s hands behind her and shoved her into the truck. They sped away. Peter climbed on board the boat. Lxil’s father lay on his back, lifeless eyes open. A pool of blood inched from behind his back, staining the deck’s worn, sun-bleached wood. Damn it.

Peter stumbled back to the sanctuary of the cantina. José stood at the back door as he approached, beckoning him to hurry. He burst inside and José hustled him to his room.

“The man with the boat...he’s dead...Lxil is a captive...the whole town is alive with screams and shouts...what the hell is going on?”

José hesitated. The sound of a burst of automatic gunfire made them both jump.

“I’ll send someone to take care of the body. Commandante DeLeon is rounding up Indians. I think he’ll use them as hostages so he can discover the identity of the Zapatista leaders in Foterá.”

Peter paced the floor, running his hand through his hair and muttered, “Kitchen sink...”

“What?”

“Nothing. It was just an expression from the north.

Is there any chance that Marcos and his men will rescue these people?”

“Word will get to him but he must deal with the federales. Even if he can move enough men, it will be too late for many. Also Marcos will be exposing his men to attack by the Mexican government if he fights the militia.”

José spent the rest of the morning receiving information from his operatives. His fears proved true. The militia built two barbed-wire corals in the town square -- one for Indian women

and one for men. DeLeon put out word that he intended to start killing the men in two days if the identity of the Zapatista leaders were not revealed. After he exhausted the men, he intended to start on the women. José and Peter sat numb in Peter's room.

Finally, Peter stood to pace. As he did, he put his hands in his pockets. His right hand touched the jewelry and he stopped. He stared off in the distance and then, slowly, a smile worked its way across his face. He put the large ring in his left pocket and handed the rest of the jewelry to José.

"Please take care of this. If I don't return do with it as you wish."

José's mouth dropped open. He involuntarily looked around the room, then at Peter and laughed. "You are a man of many surprises. But do you have a plan?"

"If I explain, it might not sound so good. Just tell me how I can find this DeLeon character."

José grabbed Peter's arm as Peter attempted to leave. Then sighed and patted him on the back. He gave Peter instructions to DeLeon as well as the cages where Lxil awaited her fate. Peter started out the door, hesitated then came back.

"José, let me have the small pearl necklace back."

The afternoon sun sat low in the sky when Peter approached the cage for women in the town square. A guard stepped forward and told him to get the hell out of there.

"Oh, please. I want to see my friend before I go. Is there no chance?"

The guard moved closer and bristled. "No. What does a Gringo want with an Indian bitch?"

Peter ignored his question. "I have a beautiful necklace that once belonged to my mother. I will give it to you if you will just give me five minutes."

"Let me see this thing."

Peter pulled the necklace from his right pocket and held it in the cup of his palm. The guard tried not to act too excited, but Peter could see his eyes widen. But what if the guard just took the jewelry and sent him on his way?

“I know you could just take this treasure from me, but it would cause a row and then you might have to share this with your comrades, or possibly give it up to your Commandante.”

Peter patiently waited for the sentry’s wheels to slowly turn. Eventually he gruffly told Peter he had “five minutes and no more” as he carefully pocketed his prize.

Peter hurried to the pen. Lxil saw him and rushed to the wire. He moved to her and reached through the wire to hold her hand.

“Father?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Bastards.”

“José’s taking care of...you know, arrangements. Look, I’m going to get you out. You just need to trust me and don’t do anything to get yourself hurt or killed until I can implement my plan. Okay?”

“What’s your plan?”

“I can’t go over it now. I just want you to know I haven’t deserted you. Everything’s going to be okay. You have a friend working on getting you out.”

“I believe you.”

Then the *nouveau riche* guard righteously ordered Peter on his way. Peter walked away, stopping once to look back at Lxil and the others cowed on a dirt floor, behind twisted rows of barbed wire.

As he approached the small cement structure serving as DeLeon’s office, two big, slouching, guards, with bellies hanging over their khaki pants, stopped him and asked what business he had with the Commandante.

“Personal business. Tell him it’s a matter of significant financial concern to him.”

One of the guards went inside with Peter’s message while the other stood by the door and pointed his gun at him.

“Would you please point your gun another direction? I mean you no harm and, if I did, you wouldn’t need the gun to stop me.”

He slowly lowered his weapon but continued to glare at Peter. They stood in awkward silence until the other man emerged from the office.

“Commandante DeLeon will see you.”

Peter opened the door and stepped inside. The two guards followed him into an austere room. A tattered couch and two straight-backed chairs faced a small metal desk. A picture of DeLeon shaking hands with someone and two diplomas of some sort adorned the wall. DeLeon sat behind the desk. His short stature and large round head gave him an almost comical look; yet the evil expression of his pox-marked face and eyes, too small and too close together--dispelled any thought of laughter. Peter guessed him to be in his late forties although his close cropped hair showed no signs of graying. DeLeon gestured for Peter to sit down. Peter sat, saying he had a private matter to take up with him. DeLeon told Peter that his guards could be trusted and would not leave the room.

“Who are you and what do you want?”

“I am an American down here for a fishing trip...or I *was* down here for fishing but this revolution thing has sort of spoiled that idea. Anyway, I can understand your frustration with the rebels and all, but I hope I can talk you out of your plan to kill the Indians.”

DeLeon’s evil face twisted into a smirk. “What are these Indians to you, sir?”

“Well you know how some of us bleeding-heart Americans are. Anyway I have a business proposition for you.”

“I’m listening.”

Peter pulled out the grandiose ring and handed it to him. The guards leaned forward. One gasped. DeLeon shot them a sharp look, then grinned satanically.

“Gringo, very nice--fit for a Commandante. I’ll wear the ring proudly.”

He slipped the ring on and admired it as he held it up to the light. He pulled two glasses and a bottle of Cuervo Especial from a drawer in his desk, poured two drinks and offered Peter one. He accepted.

“Unfortunately, I can’t shrink from my duty to find the Godless communists who threaten our community. You’ve committed treason by asking that I let these people of the devil go. I sentence you to death.”

“But--”

“Oh, you’re right. I’ll show some compassion for one who has given me such a fine gift.” He looked over at the two goons. “Just make him wish I had sentenced him to death.”

The guards drug Peter from the room while DeLeon continued to admire his new ring.

“Wait. What’s your name?”

“Peter.”

“Well Peter, if you’re alive after tonight, don’t let me see you again in my village. I’ll be less merciful next time.”



## CHAPTER 20

By the time the two thugs pulled Peter from their truck, a grim murkiness enveloped the rain forest. Peter worked loose the ties on his hands during the ride and managed to pop one of his captors in the face when he hit the ground. The coup met with bad results. Blood shot from the goon's nostrils and he kept screaming, "You broke my nose!"

After Peter's first and only swing both of the glorified bouncers punched and kicked him to the ground and into a fetal position. One used a blackjack. Fortunately they were in poor shape. They started to breathe harder and their punches slowed down. Peter pulled back one of his arms that covered his face to see how his assailants were faring. One stopped kicking and tried to catch his breath. His chest heaved and sweat streamed down his contorted face. The other kicked again. Pain throbbed through Peter but he couldn't tell if he suffered serious damage. For a moment he thought the beating might be over since these guys obviously had not been attending their aerobic classes. Then he saw the knife. The man resting came upon a more efficient way to hurt him.

Peter bolted from the ground but propelled headlong into the crotch of the one still beating him. The collision knocked Peter back on his butt and his assailant slowly sunk to the ground holding his balls. Peter's action so surprised everyone, including him, that it created a window of opportunity. He bolted again,

through the forest. A guttural scream, "Asshole!", pierced the wet night air, followed closely by the horrifying barks of a pistol and the clicking and hissing of bullets spinning through the underbrush. Peter exploded through the dark as he ran from the sounds then he spun to the ground. Hit. He listened to far away laughter before passing out.

Peter woke to the low rumbling sounds of a tiger. A big cat moved toward him, crouched. She maneuvered gracefully with her head down and her big green eyes fixed on him. What else could go wrong? He passed out again.

When Peter next opened his eyes the old shaman woman sat by his side.

"Itzamana?"

"You will be fine"

"I gave away the crystal."

"You cannot give away power. A gift only increases your strength. You will live."

"I must get back to the village. I had this plan-- "

"I know. You will be back in time."

She reached out with her gnarled hands and held Peter's. Her old weathered face looked beautiful. Peter felt healing comfort in her presence and soon drifted into sleep. Morning broke the night's hold before he next regained consciousness. He lay alone on the ground. Slowly the events of the previous night came back to him. He touched his side. Pain but no serious damage from the bullet. It missed the bones and merely left a neat hole, in and out through the flesh. He got to his feet stiffly and slowly. No evidence of the tiger or Itzamana. His face felt swollen and his clothes were covered in blood and mud. He walked with a bad limp, but walked nonetheless.

Peter found the trail the truck took into the jungle and slowly followed its tracks, reaching Fotera by mid day. His wounds still ached and stung, but his escape from more serious consequences was nothing short of miraculous. The streets were deserted and silent. He stumbled to the cantina and watched the back door for a good while. Finally, convinced that the way was clear, he sneaked to the door and knocked. Nothing. He knocked again. What if José was gone? He fought back panic.



Suddenly the door flew open. José stepped forward, his face twisted with worry. “Peter, you’re alive.” Peter fell into his arms, smearing blood across José’s white shirt, and gave him a weak hug.

“My God. What happened to you? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. My plan is just working better than I hoped.”

Peter tried to laugh but his effort turned into a coughing jag. José took him back to his room then disappeared. He returned with a pitcher of water, a wash rag, and a bottle of tequila. Peter took off his shirt and cleaned his face, arms, and chest. José examined Peter’s bullet wound.

“You’re lucky. The bullet, it went all the way through and did not hit a bone. I must disinfect this. It’ll hurt some.”

He gave Peter the bottle of tequila for a drink, then retrieved it and poured the liquid on the bullet wound and other wounds on Peter’s face and back. Peter held back a scream and said through clenched teeth, “Oh, I see. It will hurt some? Remind me not to stick around if it’s supposed to hurt a lot.”

José laughed and gave Peter back the bottle, then pulled a can of salve from his medicine box.

“I guess you don’t want to know this will hurt some too.”

“Go ahead. Have your fun.”

José laughed again and shook his curly head. He rubbed the ointment on all of the cuts and scrapes Peter could not reach then gave him the can of medicine to use as he saw fit. Peter took the gift and began applying it.

“Thanks, my friend. Once again I owe you.”

“What happened?”

“I offered DeLeon the ring I stole from the drug compound if he’d release the Indians. He gave me a night’s free adventure with two of his goons instead.”

José paused, then stared at Peter with incredulous eyes. “This was your plan? I-I could have told you it wouldn’t work...lucky he didn’t kill you.”

“That’s what he told me. Actually that was only step one of my plan. I didn’t think he would give up his captives, although I certainly would have appreciated it.”

Peter tried to laugh again but could only conjure up a groan. “Now it’s on to step two. Can you set me up with a meeting with the guy who’s down here spying for the Vasquez family-- what’s his name? Culébra?”

“You didn’t get beat up enough last night?”

“Now that’s funny. No, I really need to see him. I think I can pull this thing off if you’ll help me.”

José scratched and shook his head. “I’ll set up the meeting. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Me too.”

Later José awakened Peter from a fitful nap with news of the meeting, as well as a pan of water and some clean clothes. Peter washed himself as best he could and changed. He told José about his plan and received advice about how to carry it out. Peter’s face felt even more swollen and bruised than the day before. He walked stiffly and painfully. It wasn’t the image he wanted to portray, but it would have to do.

José helped Peter to the door and said, “He will be at the cantina at two. It’s unlikely anyone else will be around. You should have the privacy you need.”

“Perfect. What time is it now?”

“One-thirty.”

Peter went to the front room to wait for Darth Vader. The waiter brought him a tortilla and a coke. Not hungry, he ate anyway, needing the calories to get through the meeting. Only one other person sat in the cantina. A man sat in the street-side corner, nursing a beer. Peter sat in the back, beyond the reach of the sunlight that streamed into the first quarter of the room. Each time someone came into sight on the street he tensed.

Then he appeared. The background light from the street darkened his features, but Peter recognized him. José stood behind the bar. He nodded toward Peter. Culébra walked over and sat down.

“My name is Peter.”

“What do you want with me?”

*So much for introductions.* “I understand you will pay for information about lost jewels and money.”

Culébra lurched forward, displaying a vicious sneer. “What do you know of such things?”

“I haven’t seen any money, but I do know of some jewels.”

“Who has them?”

“I want to talk about the reward.”

“Maybe we should talk of your death.”

“Look, I’m risking my life talking to you about this. I don’t want much. You should be willing to listen to my needs if I’m willing to help you with yours.”

The man leaned back in his chair and chuckled. “So, you do have some balls. Tell me what it is you need.”

“I need a boat to get out of here. You don’t even need to buy me one.” Peter’s eyes gleamed with excitement. “I am told the man who stole from you has a boat. It will do. But I need a signed title and no report of it being stolen.”

The gunman fixed his cold, dark eyes on Peter then circled his flat hand between them, sanctioning the deal. “This will be done. You have the word of the Vasquez family. They take care of those who are their friends. If you are lying to me, they will take care of their enemy as well.”

Peter hoped the man now running his fingers through his slick black hair did not see his involuntary gulp. He nodded and leaned forward on his elbows in conspiratorial fashion.

“Was a man’s ring stolen? One with a big diamond, rows of precious stones and flying eagles raised on both sides?”

Culébra’s eyes widened and the scar on his face reddened. “*Si*.”

“And a pearl necklace?”

“More than one.”

“I only saw one.”

“Who did this thing?”

Peter leaned back and broke into a satisfied smile. “The Commandante wears this ring. One of his soldiers holds a necklace. They try to keep it a secret--but can’t help bragging.”

“Of course. They’re the only ones with the numbers and weapons to do this thing.”

“I have one other favor to ask of you, but I think this will be of benefit to the Vasquez family.”

Culébra shot him a disgusted look. "What is it?"

Peter leaned forward and met the fierce stare of his adversary. "Free the Indians. They have done you no harm--it will cause them to feel a gratitude to your family. Also, when the federales investigate what happens here, they'll blame the Zapatistas for liberating their brothers and sisters. The Indians, who'll know the truth, will lose any ambition concerning your territory if they should win their revolution."

Culébra did not answer but Peter felt he liked the idea and would likely present it as his own to his superiors. The man stood.

"I know of the boat you want. In two days it will be yours. The title will be in the cabin. Do not linger. Leave on the day you enter the boat. I will protect your life only that long. Understand?"

Peter told him not to worry about Peter being slow "gitten the hell out of Dodge." Peter was asked what he was talking about and he said it was just an expression from the United States that meant Peter understood what he wanted him to do. Peter made a mental note not to use that cliché again. Culébra turned and walked toward the street, a black silhouette until he reached the sun drenched avenue. Then he walked out of sight.

Peter slumped in his chair and ordered a beer. The young waiter brought him Corona in a bottle. Peter downed it and ordered another. Eventually José came out and sat with him. Peter filled him in on how the meeting went and thanked him for the idea of DeLeon's boat.

Peter asked, "What are the chances that he will live up to his end of the bargain?"

"Good. The drug families have their own moral code. They deal in poison, it's true. But they pride themselves in living up to their word and taking care of their own. Since there is no court for their disputes, they must rely on their word and swift and sure punishment to those who renege. I think you have a good chance the title will be in the boat and a hundred percent chance DeLeon will not need the boat."

Peter threw the last few dollars he had on the table and asked for more beer for him and José.

“Why don’t you keep the rest of the jewelry I gave you? I don’t have enough money to pay you for the room and board you provided me.”

José laughed. “And what would you have me do with these hot items, Peter? No. I would rather have a ticking bomb as this gift. Believe me, you have more than paid for your stay by turning the Vasquez family against DeLeon. Drink and be merry.”

“Shakespeare had a line similar to that.”

José stopped his bottle as it moved toward his mouth, cocked his head and gave Peter a quizzical look. “I don’t understand.”

“Just kidding. Thanks for your help and friendship.”

Peter held up his beer in salute. José smiled and did the same.

“Here is your jewelry back and the crystal that fell from your pockets this afternoon.”

Peter gasped and stared at José’s hand. “Crystal? I brought this back from the jungle?”

“Sí.”

“José, do you believe in the power of the shaman?”

“We can all be a shaman...good or bad...wise or not.” José gestured with open hands as he struggled with the words. “The power is around us. A great shaman is one that confronts the power and becomes its lover. The shaman knows of the power and becomes one with it. It is not the shaman’s power but the shaman’s marriage with the power...I do not know how to explain...”

Peter nodded. “Well, thanks for trying. I think I have been helped by someone with this marriage.”

“Then just accept what has been given to you.”

“I will do that. Thanks for talking to me about it. Here’s to you and the Zapatistas.”

They lifted their bottles again for what turned out to be the beginning of an afternoon of beer drinking.



## CHAPTER 21

Across town Culébra bumped into Commandante DeLeon as he walked through the market, admiring his new ring. DeLeon whirled around. “Watch where you are going, fool! Or I will have your head.”

Culébra didn’t respond or look at the face of DeLeon. He merely stared at the flashy ring and walked away.

Culébra gathered with grim looking men at the Vasquez mansion in response to an all-out-call for the family’s gunmen the day following his report. Several stood outside, smoking cigarettes and pacing in the hazy light of a lingering sunset. Tension electrified the air as mercenaries fidgeted impatiently for their instructions. No one but Culébra knew what was going down.

Garcia Vasquez, the sixty-year-old patron of the family stepped out on the porch, followed by those who had waited for him inside. A big man, he was six feet tall and two hundred and fifty pounds. The bulky muscles of his youth now lay hidden under a layer of fat. Years of overindulgence compromised his strikingly handsome face. His thin hair, combed straight back, glistened with oil. His big, dark, almond-shaped eyes shone with a ferocious look that came from deep inside.

“There is a local militia in Fotera. It is not part of the Mexican army, but is tolerated by the government because it does its bidding from time to time. Its Commandante is a

bastard named DeLeon. I know now that he and his pack of dogs are the ones who raided our compound.”

Garcia paused to let his words sink in. Murmurs cascaded through the men.

“He wears my father’s ring. His men carry my mother’s jewelry as if they were trinkets. I want them dead and I want the jewelry returned. All of the money that is recovered divide among yourselves.”

His soldiers cheered. The cheer did not carry the uplifting resonance heard at a political rally, or perhaps a football game. Instead it carried the guttural, animalistic sound of jackals over a kill. Culébra took over the meeting and described the number and location of the members of the militia. He assigned each man to a commando squad and a portion of town. Two men passed out pictures of DeLeon and his underlings to the crowd. No matter how wild and unruly, Culébra knew each man would professionally accept his assignment. Supply officers issued hundreds of rounds of ammunition to each fighter who carried his own automatic weapon and traditional machete. Everyone received a pouch of cocaine to enhance their fury in the upcoming frenzy.

A small airstrip lay outside Fotera--perfect for a Blitzkrieg strategy of flying the raiding party in for their attack on the militia. The men boarded the three light twins on the flight line and soon were airborne. They streaked through the sky at two hundred and twenty knots per hour. The pilots kept their aircraft close to the surface to avoid Mexican Air force detection. Culébra sat in the lead plane, the group leader of this patrol. He and his soldiers calmly checked equipment and the map showing the check points under the glow of red interior lights. Within a short time the chief pilot said, “Got the landing strip in sight.”

Culébra watched the landing lights of the other planes streak the dark sky in a curvilinear pattern as they banked in for a landing on the forty-five hundred foot grass runway. A few lights in Fotera illuminated the ground but otherwise, the sky and Earth joined in an indigo void. As soon as the planes touched down gunmen leaped from the aircraft and established a perimeter. When the planes rolled to a stop, their pilots kicked



them into a one hundred and eighty degree turn and taxied back to the other end of the runway, then turned around again to be ready for take off into the wind. Once the aircraft rumbled into position, the squads organized and headed for town.



## CHAPTER 22

DeLeon leaned back in his chair behind his desk and kicked back another tequila shot. An almost empty bottle sat between him and his second in command, Lieutenant Rodriquez. He turned to his lieutenant who sat on the metal desk, holding an empty shot glass and chewing on a slice of lime.

“Bring me an Indian girl from the pen. I feel like fucking tonight.”

Rodriquez laughed and clumsily stood up and staggered to the door.

“Yes, my Commandante. I will pick you out a pretty young virgin.”

He left the office and walked toward the town square and the holding pens for the Indians, his head spinning with liquor. The way was dark, but he could see the pens and walked toward them. Anger rose like acid in Rodriquez’s throat when he did not see the sentry at his post. He considered different punishments for his subordinate as his pace quickened. In mid stride he kicked something on the unlighted path and fell hard, his face buried in mud. A guttural curse seethed from his mouth. Then a sickening smell overwhelmed him. He retched when he tasted the mud on his mouth. *Blood!* Now, as his eyes adjusted to the dark, the horrified officer saw the decapitated body of the missing sentry. He leaped to his feet only to confront Culébra

and one of his soldiers. Both wore fatigues and pointed Uzis at his face. Culébra held out a pearl necklace.

“Your private possessed this treasure. What prize do you hide, my friend?”

“I...don’t...who are you? You have no authority.”

The other man hit the lieutenant across the face with his weapon, knocking him to the ground. He bent over and held its muzzle close to his victim’s eyes.

“This is my authority. Take us to DeLeon or die.”

Rodriquez wiped the blood from his face with the sleeve of his shirt and looked up at his captors, his face contorted with hatred. Culébra pulled his machete and slashed a deep cut through the lieutenant’s upper arm, causing him to yell and pull back in horror.

“I don’t have time to screw with you, dog! Take me to DeLeon or die.”

“*Si. Si.*”

The hatred in his face transformed to terror. He held his arm and struggled to his feet. Sounds of fire fights erupted in different parts of the town. One half-dressed militia soldier raced across the town square. A burst of machine gun fire slammed him to the ground. DeLeon rushed outside to investigate the sounds of gunfire just as the two drug soldiers and their captive reached his office.

The gunmen threw DeLeon to the ground. Out of nowhere Culébra’s machete arched overhead and cut off three of DeLeon’s fingers. The Commandante’s screams echoed throughout the town square. Culébra calmly searched through the dirt and retrieved the finger wearing the infamous ring. He carefully placed that finger in a pouch, then placed the pouch in his pocket. The mercenaries dragged the bloodied men back into the office.

Culébra growled, “Now, scum, tell us where the rest of the jewelry and the money is.”

DeLeon and his lieutenant looked at each other dumbfounded.

## CHAPTER 23

Peter sat in the cantina trying not to get drunk. His stomach ached and head pounded with anticipation. José waited in his room.

Peter walked back to José's room to talk. He asked what José thought would happen to DeLeon.

"Oh, they will torture him and he will eventually give them the money he has hidden from bribes and what he has stolen from us. They will finally believe that he does not have any more of the jewelry or money."

"And?"

"Oh, they will surely kill him then."

"I see."

José's hardened expression changed to one of concern when he heard the tone of Peter's response. He looked carefully at his new friend. "Do you now have regrets? Would you rather see the innocents in the cages killed?"

"No. I, I, no. What if DeLeon tells them I gave him the ring?"

"The drug soldiers will never believe a Norte Americano tourist pulled off that raid. Anyway, the men who visit us tonight will be under orders to attack DeLeon and his militia, not to investigate who stole the jewels. Thanks to you, that decision has already been made by the master of those who are conducting the raid."

Peter walked to his room, wanting the night to be over. Sounds of sporadic gunfire, screams, and yelling continued through the night and early morning hours. At daybreak, lying on his cot, staring at the ceiling, he heard the roar of planes taking off from the airstrip. He ran from the cantina toward the town square. The decapitated soldier covered in flies lay in front of both cages, now gapped open with severed barbed wire curled back upon itself. No prisoners remained inside. The streets of Foterá lay deserted and quiet. He searched frantically for Lxil, but could not find her. He raced to the docks and explored her boat. She was no where in sight. Exhausted, Peter walked back to the cantina, where Lxil and José sat at a table, drinking a beer. José grinned and held his beer bottle up to salute Peter. Lxil smiled politely through the haggard face of a mourner.

“Thank you, Peter, for saving me. José told me about your brilliant plan...your bravery.”

“I’m sorry about your father. I wish he had not paid such a high price for trying to help me.”

“My father would not bow to these bastards and paid the price for his principles. This was not your fault. It was only a matter of time. José took care of his burial and I went to visit the grave. The drug soldiers cut the phone lines, but the federales will soon know of this and will come to investigate. You and I must be gone.”

“I agree. Will you still take me to Belize?”

“Yes. That is the best plan.”

Peter sighed. In spite of her loss, or because of it, Lxil still planned to take him out of Chiapas by boat. Peter’s boating skills and knowledge of the whereabouts of the shallow reefs were nonexistent. He joined them in a morning beer. It tasted good and helped his frayed nerves but he only drank one. The chances of needing a clear head before the day ended ranked high.

Peter spoke heartily, “There’s a chance the drug soldiers kept their bargain and we’ll find a signed title and keys in DeLeon’s boat.”

Lxil responded in a lifeless monotone, “Let us hope so. The militia bastards caused serious damage to my father’s boat when they sprayed it with bullets.”

Peter had been in too much of a panic to notice the damage to the boat when he searched it for Lxil earlier. He decided not to ask what *serious damage* meant until they knew for sure whether they could take DeLeon’s boat.

José led them up a nearby hill to a small cemetery. A mound of freshly turned dirt lay in front of a small makeshift marker. Lxil cast herself down and cried as José said a few words over the grave in an attempt to comfort her.

Peter felt a lump in his throat and could not look at Lxil. He walked a few steps away from the grave and looked down the hill at the streets of Fotera. People ventured out to survey the scene. A cart loaded with bodies pulled by a burro wobbled toward a ravine at the outskirts of town. Two older men walked next to the burro, looking nervously about. Indians made up the vast majority of this little town. Peter saw several run into each other’s arms as loved ones found each other after the night’s escape. The expression of happiness on the faces of the peasants was subdued by confused countenances of shock. More and more ventured into the square. Soon the unearthly silence of the morning gave way to the background noise of people talking, even laughing, as they realized the danger of DeLeon and his militia disappeared in a mysterious and bloody coup during the night.

All his life Peter yearned for the intensity born of adventure. Not the kind of adventure a guy gets going fishing with his buddies, but a life-on-the-edge-fighting-for-a-cause adventure. Now as he witnessed the unfolding of the human drama in Chiapas, he wondered if any adventure could be worth the price of such misery and death. It occurred to him that the Indians’ decision had nothing to do with a need for adventure. They merely made a simple, brave resolution to resist the poverty and repression thrust upon them. This distinction made it impossible for Peter to ever truly fathom the soul of the people’s uprising.

Peter wished he could come up with some words of comfort for Lxil, maybe some reason for the loss of her father.

It struck him that the gallant acts of acumen and courage by the Zapatistas transpired as a result of the evil bestowed upon them. Was this evil necessary to give their valor its importance and relevance? It sounded like a hard sell, so he kept his musings to himself.

The morning grew old and Peter began to worry about lingering in Fotera. He didn't want to appear callous to Lxil's grief, but the Mexican army would surely be upon them during the day. A successful escape depended upon their departure before the army's arrival. Finally he walked back to the grave site. Both Lxil and José sat on the ground, talking in low tones.

"Lxil, it is time."

"You are right. We must go quickly."

She kissed José on the cheek and stood. The three of them walked quickly down the hill. To Peter's surprise and joy, Lxil took his hand and walked with him as if they were long-time friends. In truth, few long-time friendships ever experienced the number of hard core, passionate times Lxil and Peter shared since the moment he met her. Villainy and heroism clashed violently about them, causing their emotions to explode. They clung to each other as if their sanity depended upon it.

As they walked through the town, activity in the streets intensified. Expressions of concern replaced the joy that everyone possessed a short while ago, along with a premonition of doom. Peter listened for the rumble of motorized military transport, but heard nothing.

Finally they reached the port and José took them to DeLeon's slip. A forty-two foot Teakwood, antique Chris Craft boat gently rolled and tugged at its mooring ropes. Its finish evidenced meticulous care. In the cabin a heavy burgundy material covered the seats. All of the fixtures were polished brass. Modern navigational equipment contrasted with the otherwise original interior. The keys and a signed title lay in the captain's chair. Peter turned on the auxiliary power. The fuel gauges read full.

"Great! Come on down."

José and Lxil scrambled down in the cabin. Peter pointed to the keys and gave Lxil a hug. She hugged him back. Then he



slapped José on the back and they all laughed and broke into a Mayan version of the Irish jig. The roar of an Army transport flying over the port stopped their little celebration. Peter looked at José.

“Do you want to go with us?”

“No. Because of my name and because I own a business, they never think of me as Indian. The officers will buy my food and drink and ask me who did this thing.”

Peter gave José a big bear hug. “Thank you, my comrade. I live because of you.”

“Yes, Peter. And many live because of you. Be careful. Many dangers still lie in front of you.”

Lxil put her hand on José’s shoulder. She looked into his eyes. “Take care of my father’s grave.”

“It will be so for as long as I live.”

They both smiled and held each other’s gaze. Peter broke the silence by suggesting that the barbed wire pens on the town square could be repaired for the purpose of holding them. José agreed and climbed out of the cabin. He jumped onto the dock and cast off the lines.

Peter turned the key. The starter turned over the engine but it didn’t kick off. He tried again. The boat slowly drifted out of its slip as he continued to try to get the blasted engine started. He heard José yelling, but couldn’t make out the words so he climbed out of the cabin. José waved and pointed beyond the mouth of the river and into the Gulf. A Mexican patrol boat, about a mile out, cruised toward the harbor. Peter grabbed a small can of fuel sitting on the dock, ran to the back of the boat and opened the hatch to the engine room. He eased himself into the small area housing its twelve-cylinder engine, unfastened the cover from the classic four-barrel carburetor, and poured fuel down its throat. Then he ran back to the cabin and cranked the engine. The flooded engine didn’t start. He waited for a minute, which took about a year, then tried again. It started...then died. Sweaty fingers twisted the key again and this time it started in earnest.

“I’d like just one machine to start right away when the bad guys are breathing down my neck.”

Lxil looked up with a quizzical expression. “What did you say?”

“Nothing. I’m just trying to give a running commentary as we fall deeper into trouble. How close is the patrol boat?”

“It is almost at the mouth of the river.”

“Even if we beat it to the mouth of the river, they can easily run us down and blast us out of the water.”

Lxil turned to Peter and spoke with quiet authority. “Just do what I say. Clear the mouth of the river and turn hard starboard.”

Peter saw her confidence and was ready to obey. “Which way?”

“Right. There is a narrow path through the reef they will not know. I will tell you when to turn. I don’t think they will follow. If we can get out of gun range before they make up their mind to shoot us, we may have a chance, unless...”

“Unless what?”

“I hope they do not have a fighter plane with them.”

“Good God, woman! Don’t even think such a thing.”

Peter pushed the throttle full forward and the nose of the boat rose high enough to block his vision of the patrol boat. As it planed out, he saw the military vessel almost to the river. The Chris Craft picked up speed and the gun boat began to slow down as it approached the narrow waters. He tried to calculate which would reach the turning point first. They closed in near enough to the military craft for him to see the faces of the men on board. The men scrambled around as Peter and Lxil drew near. The captain grabbed the mike to a loud speaker.

“Boat leaving the harbor. Pull back you throttle. Come about.”

Peter barely controlled the brass-and-wood wheel because of the sweat on his palms. The patrol came to a stop in the water and the crew made ready to board. The sailors assumed that their instructions would be obeyed and readied themselves. Peter watched the change of expressions of the men as he did not slow. Only seconds separated the boats and the wide-eyed sailors began to back toward the rear of their craft as a collision seemed eminent. Then Lxil yelled, “Now” and Peter wheeled to

the right for all he was worth. They made a full-speed ninety-degree turn. The sailors in front of them looked both amazed and relieved.

“Halt!”

The boat sped impressively through the water, crashing through the three foot waves.

“Fifteen degrees port--left--now.”

Peter made the turn. Behind them the crew loaded their thirty-millimeter cannon and cranked it toward the escapees. Lxil stared intently out in front of their boat and glanced toward shore to pick up points of reference.

“Ten more degrees to the left.”

Peter turned again. Still, they hit nothing. He heard an explosion in the water behind them. He looked back to see water misting in the air. Then he saw the patrol boat. It did not try to follow them. The crew reloaded and the small cannon belched fire again. The explosion threw water into the boat and rocked them, but caused no damage. Peter looked back again, but saw no evidence of them reloading. The men now looked like tiny stick figures and, as Peter watched, the boat diminished to a spot on the horizon.

“Ten more degrees to the left, damn it. Watch where you are going!”



## CHAPTER 24

Thirty minutes later Peter relaxed and quit searching the sky and horizon behind them. In the relatively calm seas they cruised comfortably at thirty knots. Lxil now steered the boat as they traveled north by northeast, headed for the cape of the Yucatan and then south into the Caribbean.

Peter searched and found just one bedroom and one head. (Head was the only nautical term Peter knew so he used it generously.) The head was a small affair located in the back corner of the cabin. The three-by-three room doubled as a toilet and shower. The bedroom was triangular and located in the extreme front of the boat, completely floored with a mattress. Above the mattress, at the narrowest part of the room a shelf held a bathing suit and some shaving gear. Behind the cabin was an open area with benches and a swivel chair bolted to the deck in the center. Wood railing rising four feet from its decking encompassed the area. A brass pull, flush with the deck allowed a wooden cover to be withdrawn up, revealing the engine room. Next to the benches one deep sea fishing rod and reel stood up like an antenna. In the cabin, a tiny kitchen consisted of an icebox with no ice, a hotplate, and two cabinets containing plastic forks, spoons and knives, three cans of Campbell's soup and three bottles of Cuervo Especial. A small foldout table provided a place to prepare food and eat meals.

Peter walked to Lxil who stood next to the wheel, and gazed at the horizon in front of them. "I've made a survey of the provisions and I think, if we don't want to eat much, we are in good shape."

Without turning she pointed to cabinets under the control panel. "Check out under here."

Peter grabbed another brass pull and opened the door, turned on a light switch and discovered an automatic rifle and six banana clips, a flare gun, a large bag of marijuana, and Mexican pesos equaling about one hundred and sixty dollars American. He pulled the dope out and showed it to Lxil. She rolled her eyes and said they had enough reasons to be thrown in jail without being arrested as drug runners. Peter agreed and threw it overboard. She saw the money. "I wondered what part of your plan would take care of buying food and fuel."

"I didn't tell you? I was leaving that part to blind luck...and here it is!" Lxil laughed probably thinking he was kidding.

Out the right window the green, jagged coastline of southern Mexico invaded the clear-blue sea. It seemed so tranquil. Dolphins streaked in front of their boat, diving and leaping. A sign of good luck. He walked to the back and climbed over the cabin to the bow and watched the aquatic athletes of the deep. Their presence heartened him. He took off his shirt and felt the sun's warmth and the cool of the salt water spray on his chest. He relaxed, closed his eyes, and tilted his face toward the sky. The boat loped through the waves in rhythmic fashion. After a few minutes he climbed from the back area, through the cabin and into the bedroom. He stripped and put on the bathing suit he found and walked out through the cabin. Lxil snickered at the poor fit of the oversized suit. Peter tightened it up and defensively asked her if she found better for herself. She explained that she brought her own. To his amazement she pulled off her blouse and her skirt to reveal a bikini top and cut off jeans. She pulled down her cut offs to disclose a bikini bottom, then pulled the jeans back up and buttoned them. She laughed at Peter's embarrassment. He stammered to protect what was left of his macho self image. "Do you want me to take the helm for a while?"

“Sure. Just keep a zero-one-zero heading.”

She brushed against Peter as he took the wheel. Her body was the perfect combination of feminine curves and athletic firmness. The small of her back flared into the faded jean shorts. Her belly lay flat against protruding hip bones. The bikini only partially covered shapely breasts. Teardrop-shaped eyes and a light bronze cast to silky skin caused her to look more Malayan than Mayan. He tried not to gawk, with only limited success and sensed some enjoyment on her part over his awkwardness. He started to tell Lxil that his oversized suit did have the advantage of hiding an involuntary erection, but thought better of it. Peter always hated to give up comments he deemed witty, regardless of how inappropriate they might be. Lxil turned back without warning and caught him craning his neck to watch her leave.

She smiled. “I’m glad we are making this trip together. You are special to me.” She held his eyes with a bold stare.

She walked from the cabin. Peter wanted to call after her and ask what she meant by *special*. Special like a brother? Special like a friend? He wanted her to be more specific. How about special in the way she wanted her lover to be? That would be specific. How about I-don’t-want-any-part-of-your-body-left-unattended special?

Lxil rummaged through the bins in the open area. After a while she came back with a foot-long lure with bright red and yellow streamers. A wicked hook curled under its plumage.

“We have no live bait, but I found this lure. Maybe we can catch supper.”

“Good idea. Do you want me to rig up our rod?”

“No. I have done this many times for my father.”

A cloud came over her face when she spoke of her father. Peter tried to brighten up the conversation by confessing that the best experience he had rigging for a big fish was fixing up his spinning outfit for a big mouth bass at Possum Kingdom lake just west of Mineral Wells, Texas. She allowed as how salt water fishing was just a bit different. She showed him how to attach the gaudy fake bait to a wire leader and their conversation steered back to happier times. She handed him the rod and reel.

“Let out forty or fifty feet of line. I’m used to handling the boat--trolling for fish.”

“Thanks. This is a good division of labor. You may know more about the technical details of fishing, but nobody has more luck than I do, so I should do the fishing.”

Lxil guffawed. “You wouldn’t be running from drug lords and the entire Mexican government if you had even a modicum of luck.”

“Well--you need to factor in the pleasure of your company, which I’d otherwise not have enjoyed.”

Too sappy? Neither spoke as they held each other’s gaze. Finally he turned away, stammered something about fishing, and walked toward the back of the boat. He stopped by the kitchen and poured a glass of water then hesitated.

“Do you think this water is fit to drink?”

“Yes. We have a full reserve of fresh water. I checked. We’ll be good for several days if we’re careful. No more than a minute in the shower. We use sea water for everything we can.”

“Aye, aye skipper.” Peter gave her a snappy salute. She returned a less complimentary gesture.

He cast to the side of the boat then let out more line until fifty feet trailed behind the boat. He put on the drag and put the pole in a holding slot, then sat on a bench and leaned back against the side of the boat. The sun felt soothing and the action of the boat against the waves rocked him like a baby in a cradle. He soon nodded off. Technicolor visions raced in and out of that timeless dimension of his mind. A screeching sound worked its way into his dream and he found himself on one elbow, half awake and half asleep, trying to reconcile his fantasies with the reality of his consciousness. Visions of Lxil, explosions, and a little girl clutching his hand tumbled from his mind.

“Peter! You have a fish. Get the line.”

“I’ve got it. I’ve got it.”

Peter jumped from the bench and fell down. He got up and tried to steady himself. The pole arched against the sky as taunt line played out through its eyes. The drag on the reel sang a high-pitched wail as it complained of losing line. Finally regaining all of his senses, he walked over to the bent rod, pulled



it from its slot and, for one shocking moment, thought the rod and reel would be ripped from his grasp. He stumbled to the back of the boat while desperately clutching the arched pole and banged his knees on the siding. He pulled back, causing the rod to bend even more and the drag to cry out, let the rod down, and reeled in line on the now-silent reel.

“Invite guests. We’ve hung Moby Dick.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah. I skinned my knee and bruised my ego, but otherwise...”

Peter strained, pulling back. His imagination conjured up all sorts of descriptions of what was on the other end. All alternatives shared the conclusion that it was big.

Waddling backwards, in crouched position, Peter reached the swivel chair and sat down. He continued to pull back, then lowered the rod and reel, its butt pressed firmly against his belly. After several minutes both the fish and fisherman tired. Peter’s arms ached. The fish no longer dragged off more line. The catch came closer to the boat. Several more minutes passed. A silver shape jetted across the bow, pulling line with it. Peter’s heart raced when he saw it. He pulled hard but the prey dove. With a new burst of energy the fish reeled off yards of line. The process began anew. Peter’s belly ached against the butt of the rod; his arms shook. Finally the fish pulled along side.

Lxil found a gaff and leaned over the side as their catch passed by. She missed on the first try but nailed him the second and Peter stepped back as she hauled in a twenty-pound tuna. As it flopped around on the deck, Lxil deftly hit and killed their meal, then pulled a knife and fileted it. Peter felt embarrassed and shocked at the size of his fish. He fully expected to see a Hammerhead shark or some other monster of the deep. Lxil seemed to know what he was thinking.

“The salt water fish fights harder than you expect, does he not? This is a beauty. Maybe you are lucky.”

“Now I know why I never got around to salt water fishing. It’s too damn much work.”

Actually he enjoyed the fight and looked forward to the next day’s fishing. He threw the remains of the fish overboard and

located a mop and bucket then cleaned up the deck. Chores done, he walked back in the cabin and found that Lxil had tied the wheel so the boat headed in the general direction of their route. She discovered some cooking oil, herbs, and utensils overlooked earlier, and set about cooking a filet.

From behind he put his hand on her waist. She did not pull away. He wanted to kiss her, but was afraid of her reaction. One filet looked bigger than the two of them could eat so they decided to throw the other overboard as well. As they ate, one of them checked to be sure they still were on heading. After their meal Peter took the first watch. He pushed in the throttle and the boat responded, planing out toward their destination. Lxil cleaned the dishes and sat behind Peter and chatted about a surprisingly wide range of topics.

They spent the afternoon talking. They asked and answered questions in an uninhibited manner. Lxil told Peter stories in vivid detail about the Indian revolution, including the capture and retention of Domingez. He unsuccessfully attempted humility when he told her of his flying adventure with Kuk. They determined that they both liked anything written by Victor Hugo, enjoyed writing themselves, and wanted to be published someday. Peter tried to brag about his scuba diving adventures, but discovered her diving stories to be much more exciting. She wanted to know what it was like to be in the Texas fast lane and he told her it was too boring to talk about. They discussed family, agreed on politics, and found each other's jokes extremely funny. Their conversation finally slowed to quiet comfortableness.

As the night approached Peter was taking his turn at the wheel when he spotted some lights on the shoreline. Lxil was studying some navigational maps she found, so he touched her shoulder to get her attention.

"What is that?" He pointed toward the shore.

"The lights of Celestun. We should moor the boat there for the night...get food and fuel."

As Peter pulled into a slip at the end of the dock, a young, thin man, draped in oversized clothes, stepped up and caught

their rope from Lxil. As he secured their boat Lxil and Peter stepped off and walked over to him.

“Please top off our tanks,” Peter said.

“*Sí, Señor.*”

“Can you tell me where we can buy groceries?”

“*Sí.* It is only two blocks on this road. A grocery on your right.”

“Is it open this time of night?”

“Oh, yes. It will be open.”

They loaded up on fresh vegetables, bread, beer, canned juices, ice, a new bathing suit for Peter, and anything else that looked appealing. They teased and debated over each purchase just for the fun of it. After entertaining the cashier for a while, they carried their bounty back to the vessel. Peter checked their tanks to be sure they were full then told the attendant they intended to spend the night and paid him for the gas and rental of the slip. Peter gave him a few extra pesos and asked him to be sure they would not be bothered. The young man thanked him and assured him that his stay would be a peaceful one.

“Lxil, you take the bedroom and I’ll sleep on the deck.”

He made the statement authoritatively enough, even though his heart was not in it. He hoped that she would decline his gallant suggestion in favor of a night of torrid sex. She merely smiled and nodded.

Peter grabbed a pillow and blanket and climbed on top of the cabin. The pleasant cool breeze felt good. As he stared at the stunning heavens, Reggae music from somewhere in the town drifted by. The smell of salt water sparked a genetic memory of origin. Peter heard the click of a closing door and soft sounds of footsteps in the cabin and imagined Lxil disrobing and climbing under the sheets of the bed. Twice he got up and walked to the front of the boat only to stare into the dark night. Long after the lights of the town turned off and the music quieted he fell into a sleep of tempestuous dreams.

Peter woke the next morning to the warmth of the sun and the smell of coffee and bacon. He climbed down into the cabin and found a bar of soap in the cabinets over the sink. Lxil stood by the hot plates, beaming. “Good morning, Peter.”

“Good morning. Breakfast sure smells good.”

Without thinking he hugged Lixl and gave her a kiss on the cheek. He immediately regretted what he had done and started to apologize, yet Lxil did not seem to take offense, but continued on with her cooking. His display of affection seemed appropriate after their night of liaison in his dreams. He shoved the soap in the pocket of his bathing suit, strolled to the back and jumped into the clear water. After swimming and frolicking he pulled out the soap and lathered up, then climbed up the back ladder and showered off the salt water and remaining soap with fresh water from their reserve tank. Forty-five seconds...good.

When he returned to the kitchen, Lxil just finished setting the table and turned to greet him. This time she gave him a hug. The curves of her body caused Peter to ache for her. They sat down to eggs scrambled with onions and tomatoes, bacon, and strong, black coffee. After a leisurely meal and more conversation like that of the day before, he stood.

“I’ve got the dishes. We probably need to set sail as soon as we can,” Peter declared.

“Set sail?”

“Well, you know, one of those nautical terms.”

“You mean like *scuttle the port holes*?”

“Like Popeye says in his cartoons, exactly. Say, you’re not suggesting Popeye doesn’t know his sailor terms, are you?”

“Oh no. I just wanted to be sure I understood what you meant by *nautical terms*.”

Lxil’s eyes twinkled. Soon they cruised open water and resumed their bantering. The day shone brilliantly and their spirits soared.

## Chapter 25

Two ragged men at the end of the pier watched as the Chris Craft disappeared over the horizon. Both men were bearded and unwashed. The larger of the two picked up the mike of a ship-to-shore radio and spoke into it.

Flores, standing on board a junky-looking, fifty-foot fishing boat received the call. After a few seconds of listening he broke into a toothy grin. He stalked to a nearby pub and ordered his crew of five to board his boat and cast off. His crew looked no better than their comrades who radioed from the pier. Their hair was oily and unkempt. They once again permeated their vessel with human stench on their arrival. Flores cut a better figure than his crew. He dressed in a flashy, reasonably clean shirt, opened to the waist, tight pants, wide black belt, and boots.

He cranked up two powerful Mercruiser V-12 engines, deceptively hidden under the ratty exterior of his vessel and soon his boat pulled out of the port at Progreso and cruised south. The crew gathered below deck. Each man, a member of a profession as old as sailing itself, checked his weapon. Flores slid down the ladder to check his men.

“A man and a woman flashed much money in Celestun. They sail the coastline toward us...only two aboard. The boat will bring a good price...don't damage the boat or I will have your head.” Flores seethed out these words so there would be no question in anyone's mind that he meant literally what he said.

One of the motley crew, Rico, stood and spit on the floor. He smiled revealing specks of food in a beard that glistened with grease. Uneven, discolored teeth protruded from red, swollen gums. “Don’t damage the bitch either. She’s mine.” His voice was guttural with a gin-slur.

The captain started to challenge this man’s insubordinate claim, but thought better of it. There was no woman to fight over yet. If they did capture her alive, it would be better to respond to this proclamation with a bullet to the back when the need for a full crew ended.

Flores assumed his prey followed the coast, so he set a coastline course to intercept them. Even so, the vast ocean hides its occupants well. Rico manned the crow’s nest, looking for a telltale dot on the horizon.

Thirty minutes passed before Rico yelled, “One o’clock!” The men rushed to the bow and squinted to see the forty-two-foot boat make its way through the ocean’s waves. Flores cackled out loud, grabbed the controls and set a course to intercept his prey.

## CHAPTER 26

Peter stood at the wheel when Lxil spotted an approaching vessel.

“Look at eleven o’clock. There’s a boat heading our way.”

Peter nodded. “Wonder who it is.”

“It doesn’t look military. I don’t like it. Steer fifteen degrees star...right.”

Peter made the change and held course. Minutes passed like hours. His heart sunk as the ratty-looking ship altered course to intercept their new heading.

Lxil mumbled in a low tone, “Pirates.”

“What?”

“Pirates, Peter. We’re in trouble. Let me take the wheel. Get the automatic rifle and all the ammunition you can find.”

The boat leaned sharply to the right as Lxil turned to escape. Peter jammed a banana clip into the rifle and rushed to the back of the boat. By this time the pirates followed directly behind them at a surprising rate of speed. Their boat slowly but surely grew in size.

Lxil muttered the obvious, “They’re catching us.”

Five men stood on the front of the boat with assault weapons. Peter could not imagine a more malevolent looking group. If they exchanged fire Lxil and Peter would be blown out of the water. Peter felt the pounding of his heart in his throat and

his palms became slippery with sweat. His mind raced, but he could not think of any escape. He felt helpless, impotent.

“Peter, come here.”

He rushed into the cabin.

“Hold the wheel.”

As he did, Lxil rushed to the navigation map spread out on the table. She frantically checked coordinates then rushed to the left side window, then back to the map. One of the men fired a machine gun burst across the bow of the Chris Craft. Both Peter and Lxil involuntarily jumped. A loud speaker told them to stop.

“I’ve got one thing to try. Peter, if it doesn’t work, let them have it. They don’t intend to let us live. Getting shot will probably be more pleasant than what they have in mind.”

“You got it. Remember. I’m pretty lucky.”

“Well, let’s just use it all now.”

“Lxil, I think I love you.”

“Hold that thought.”

Peter crawled to the back of the cabin. When the time came, he intended to swing around the wall, into the open area and blast their antagonists. Rage welled up inside, pushing out the chilling fear that clutched him.

“Hold on,” Lxil screamed over the roar of the engines.

Peter grabbed the railing as the boat turned sharply to the left but fell to the floor anyway. He jumped up to a crouched position. The other boat swung wide, following Lxil’s maneuver. As it narrowed the gap, another burst of automatic fire hit close to the boat and another warning boomed over the loud speaker. Peter prepared to return fire.

“Watch out,” Lxil screamed. She jerked the throttle back and put their vessel in full reverse. Everything loose flew forward, including Peter. His head hit the small table in the kitchen area and the rifle skidded across the floor. Their boat jolted and screeched on something, then backed up. Simultaneously a smashing, explosive sound emanated from the pirate’s vessel. Peter looked up in time to see their boat yaw and list on a shallow reef that jettied out hundreds of yards from shore. Two of the men on the front fell into the water. Everyone



on board plummeted to the deck and scrambled to stay on board. One man found his weapon and struggled to stand up.

Peter grabbed his rifle and ran to the back then emptied a clip to keep everyone down. The Chris Craft engine roared and sea water splashed in the back of the boat as Peter and Lxil backed up, but they moved slowly. Someone inside the other boat fired several rounds at them. Peter emptied another clip. Lxil threw the throttle into full power forward and spun them 180 degrees. Peter kept firing so they wouldn't have a chance to regroup and shoot again. Splintered boards thrust into the air as the grounded vessel rolled over on its side. Soon they were out of range. Setting down his weapon Peter walked over to Lxil and gave her a hug from behind.

“Great show, Lxil.”

“If those assholes want to be big-time pirates, they should at least know where Dead Man's Reef is.”



## CHAPTER 27

Lxil and Peter felt little need to rush toward their destination. They fished for awhile and explored several coves along the shoreline. They talked constantly. About midday a small deserted island came into view. The entire island measured three to four acres. A twenty-meter-deep beach of white sand banded the key. Palm trees and tropical plants filled its center. They anchored, lowered a small inflatable dingy, and loaded it with a bottle of wine, food, and a blanket, and headed for the beach. Both wore only their bathing suits. Soon they were busily spreading out their blanket under the shade of a large Palm tree. The breeze felt cool, but the sun warmed them. Peter opened the bottle of wine and Lxil fixed snacks.

After they settled in on their blanket, Peter put his arm around her. "Lxil."

"Lxil."

"Yes."

"Do you remember when we were about to be chopped up and thrown to the sharks by Black Beard and his gang of roughians?"

"Yes."

"And I told you I thought I loved you?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm still thinking about it."

Lxil laughed and pushed him away. “You let me know when you’ve made up your mind.”

Peter put his wine down in the sand and reached out to touch her face. She caressed his hand. He tried to think of something to say that wasn’t too schmaltzy, but emotion overwhelmed him. He only looked into her eyes and whispered her name. She let go of his hand and slid her arm around his waist. Her touch sent shock waves through him. He pressed his lips hard against hers. She responded. He moved next to her she pushed herself against him. Peter ached as he felt the shape and warmth of her body. They both exploded with passion, fiercely kissing and exploring each other, their bathing suits thrown to the side. He lay on her and felt her nakedness against his. He lifted himself with straight arms and looked down on her sleek, firm body and its secrets. He then felt her tight warmth and she matched his aggressiveness with astonishing power and emotion.

They made love, snuggled, swam, and napped away the afternoon and evening. They devoured the food and wine. During the night they went back to the boat and slept together in the bedroom. The next morning Peter ambled to the cabin to put a pot of coffee on the butane-powered hot plate. Lxil entered the cabin just as the black brew started boiling. She wore a white, linen, long-sleeve shirt Peter bought for himself in Celestun. The rolled up sleeves hung just below her elbow; the tail reached mid-thigh. His heart raced as he took in her beauty. She smiled warmly as she ran her fingers through her hair and they embraced as if they had always done so. The touch of her surged warmth and energy through Peter.

“Lxil, mother told me that the woman of my dreams would look different first thing in the morning, but I thought she meant look worse.”

Lxil beamed. “I think there is a compliment in there somewhere, so thanks. You look extra good yourself.”

“Now don’t go turning my head.”

Lxil rolled her eyes and shook her head, then buried her face in his chest and hugged him hard. He hugged her back then poured them some stout coffee.

Late morning they pulled in their anchor and headed west around the tip of the Yucatan toward El Cuyo. Lxil caught a beautiful fish while Peter handled the wheel and they ate her catch for a late lunch. After they cleaned up, Lxil took her turn at the helm.

Peter walked up and kissed the nape of her neck. “Look. I have an idea. The reason we were going to Belize City was because your father was identified as a Zapatista and it would be dangerous to stop at a big Mexican port. Are you wanted by the Mexican government?”

“No.”

“Well, neither am I. Why don’t we just stop at Cancun? It’s not too far from here is it?”

“No. It’s only a few hours from here.”

“We can spend some time there. Get to know each other better. Then we can go to Belize, or wherever we want. What do you say?”

“My father intended to pick up some guns in Belize City for the revolution, but that mission has been put off. Sure, why not.”

“Great. It’s a date then.”

They cruised away the afternoon. A red cast lay over the shoreline when Peter spotted El Cuyo. Night falling on the sea brought on feelings deep inside of him. He felt the change of temperature carried in by the sea winds and smelled and felt the swelling salt waters as they passed the hull of their vessel. A shooting star streaked across the black heavens. Lxil brought him a drink and he held her tight as they cut through invisible waves. Time passed quickly in the amorous hours they shared.

“Peter, look.”

“My God. It looks like Las Vegas on a peninsula.”

Miles of splendid illuminated hotels on a sliver of beach lay before them. The white sand beaches and pools in front of the hotels also shone brightly. They presented a spectacular site of commercial glory. Peter and Lxil navigated to the El Presidente Plaza Hotel at the convergence of the Caribbean Sea and Nichupte lagoon. Several people played on the beach but Peter saw no one on the dock. When they stepped off the boat, an attendant approached them. He wore a white hotel uniform

which consisted of shorts, a braided shirt, white socks, and canvas shoes. His young, smooth-shaven, Spanish face beamed a welcome to them.

“How can I help you?”

“We wish to check into your hotel.”

“Certainly, sir. May I see your passport or visa?”

The lack of official screening surprised Peter. He pulled out his worn billfold and drew from it a water blurred passport with a six-month visa stamp. Lxil showed the boy her driver’s license and voter’s registration card.

“May I carry your bags?”

“We’re traveling light.”

“Yes sir. Let me show you the way.”

They walked over manicured white sand and passed an Olympic size pool with underwater bar. Guests mingled around the beach and pool. Their escort lead them into an open-air lobby with a Spanish tile floor and huge, brightly colored paintings on the wall. A young, plump woman, in similar uniform, asked how she could help. Peter yanked out his American Express card and laid it in front of her with a symbolic gesture of power only a Yankee capitalist could understand. She accepted it appreciatively.

“We need a room, food and a shop where we can buy some clothes.”

“Yes, sir. We have an ocean view room for one-seventy-five per night. I can direct you to our three restaurants or we have twenty-four hour room service. Our shops are down the hall behind you and they should be open for another thirty minutes.”

“Damn, it’s great to hear the pampering voice of civilization. We’ll take the room. Please run the card through and we’ll be back for the key. I feel a shopping spree coming on.”

Peter grabbed Lxil’s hand and took off for the shops. She gave only mild protest. Peter explained how important it was for them to capture this window of opportunity and, after all, American Express would pay for it. Peter explained that *power buying* could only be described as the Western civilization’s version of a feeding frenzy. It took a while, but Lxil got in the spirit--she was a quick learner. Amused sales persons rang the

bell captain who took their prizes to the room. They walked across the impressive lobby, holding hands and saying giddy, silly things to each other. Deep pile beige carpet covered the floor of their spacious room and a king-sized bed faced an armoire, mirror, and dresser. Double doors opened into the marble bathroom with a full spa tub and shower. Peter flopped on the bed and Lxil fell on top of him.

“Peter, how long is your credit card going to hold out?”

“We’re in good shape. I saved a fair amount. It’ll last me until I write something worth publishing.”

“Are we going out tonight?”

“Damn straight--If you want to.”

“Yes. Let’s dress up and put on the...the...”

Peter looked at her, then snapped his fingers. “Dog?”

“Yes. The dog.”

“Great. And we’ll paint the town red and all of those other Norte Americana expressions.”

Peter finished showering and shaving and gave up the bath room to Lxil. He put on his new dark blue silk shirt, white linen slacks and loafers, then sat in one of the wing-backed chairs and flipped through the magazines on the table. He turned on the television in the armoire to catch the news.

In a few minutes the door opened and Lxil stepped out. She wore a simple, powder blue, sleeveless silk dress. It revealed the firm beauty of her body in an unpretentious way. High neck lined, the dress clung to the curve of her breasts, then dropped straight across her flat belly. The hemline stopped several inches short of her knees, revealing the athletic shape of her legs. No one ever looked more elegant or seductive.

“Lxil, you are the most stunning woman I have ever seen.”

“Thank you.”

“It just so happens, I have some stolen jewelry for you to wear.”

Peter presented the drug cartel jewelry to her with as much pomp and circumstance as he could muster.

Lxil giggled at Peter’s pomposity. “Oh, thank you. I don’t think I can remember any prettier stolen jewelry.”

She picked out a small gold necklace and bracelet from the plunder.

They walked arm in arm to the elevator and rode it to the top floor. A maitre'd greeted them as they stepped into the lobby of the restaurant.

The night view through the glass walls revealed a full moon, shimmering its reflective light on the sea, the smaller lights of the stars and two ships cruising by. The formal setting of the restaurant contrasted with the relaxed scene of the beach resort. Their maitre'd did a good job of acting as if he were escorting the King and Queen of France. He seated them in two cushioned chairs at a small table next to the floor-to-ceiling windows. A waitress took their drink orders and left them with menus. They both ordered gin and tonic, Peter insisted on Bombay Sapphire.

“Peter, are you sure we can afford this?”

“When I left work I invested my two hundred thousand dollars life savings and vowed not to touch it until I knew where I was going with my life.” He smiled. “This seems as good as any place to go.”

“I’m glad I’m with you.”

“Well, everything else will work out as long as that’s true.”

Peter felt a sense of foreboding. He coveted Lxil and wanted her more than any woman he had ever known, but now that she was accessible, he worried about the commitment. Peter ordered a pasta and seafood dish and Lxil ordered Salmon on a bed of spinach. Peter pretended he knew the difference and ordered a Merlot from the wine list. They talked about their adventures and speculated about whether the pirates were able to rally help to get them off the reef. The past adventures changed Peter’s thoughts on what was important and what he should be concerned about. The other conversations around them, were identical to his pre-Chiapas days. Now they lost much of their relevance. The *power shopping* had been fun, but paled in comparison to the adventures of the past few weeks. In spite of Peter’s revelation, he and Lxil enjoyed the decadent evening, retiring in the early morning rays of light. Peter woke at noon to discover Lxil missing from bed. She stood on the balcony watching the ocean and the people on the beach.



“Hey, baby. How ‘bout a kiss?”

After Lxil ravaged his body, he admitted she fully accomplished the first request and wondered out loud what would have happened had he requested torrid sex. She kissed him one more time, put on her cut-offs and T-shirt and left for the lobby to get a box for mailing. Peter called his ex-college roommate, now stock broker, Bill to tell him he was alive and to watch for an American Express bill that would be coming through. Peter had left his buddy in charge of his finances and executed a power of attorney so he could conduct any necessary business during Peter’s absence. Bill said he was happy to know Peter was alive and wondered if he was sane. Peter admitted he probably was not, but Bill needed to aid him in any event.

“Of course I will, Peter. What do you want?”

“I will be sending you some jewelry *I acquired* and I want you to sell it for whatever you can get.”

“Will I still be able to keep my license after this?”

“Yes. This stuff is not on any list of stolen property and never will be. Second, I need some checks on my account and I need to be pretty liquid in my investments. I’m not sure of my plans, but if I need to I want to be able to write a big check.”

“I’ll take care of it. Can you tell me what’s going on?”

“I’m not sure myself, buddy, but you’ll be the first to know when I figure it out. Send the checks to the El Presidente Plaza Hotel in Cancun, Mexico. I..I don’t see the address.”

“No problem. I can get it. Have you heard about the Indian uprising in Chiapas?”

Peter grinned, looked at the ceiling, and leaned back in his chair. “Yeah. It’s been on the news.”

“Well, stay away from that shit.”

Peter let out a deep cathartic laugh. “Don’t worry about me.”

“Janet’s back in town. She told me about your breakup. She’s worried about you.”

Peter stopped laughing. In a soft voice he said, “Tell her not to worry. Tell her she was right. If she’s waiting on me, tell her to stop.”

“I’ll handle everything on this end. You just get back to us in one piece. How is your book coming?”

Peter shot up. He had forgotten about his lost book. Then he relaxed and smiled. “It’s gone. But, at least, now I know enough to write one.”

“You lost me on that one, Peter.”

“I’ll explain when I get back.”

“Okay, pal. We’ll throw a party for you.”

“I’m ready. It’s been a long time since a valet has parked my car...for that matter, it’s been a long time since I’ve had a car. Got any single malt scotch?”

“You bet, buddy. Get back to us and civilization A.S.A.P.”

Peter grinned. “Take care compadre.”

“You too bro.”

## CHAPTER 28

Kuk sat, leaning against a tree. Blood colored his right sleeve. Small drops hit the ground, leaving small, red, concentric puddles below his finger tips. Scattered around him lay several of his soldiers, mangled by a bomb dropped by a Mexican military jet. He knew he needed to leave the area because government troops would soon sweep the valley.

He tried not to glance at the mangled bodies of his friends, or wonder who would plant the fields for their families. He looked and listened for other survivors but discovered none.

He pulled to his feet, and once again searched the fields with his blurry eyes. Kuk solemnly shook his head and walked into the jungle. Having barely made a kilometer, he heard a Mexican officer barking orders. Kuk broke into a painful jog. Soon the distance between him and his enemy grew enough for him to rest. He found a stream and washed the debris from his arm and tied a bandana above the arm wound to stop the bleeding. It had been a rough day. The rebels were driven from the towns they captured and now survived only in the deepest regions of the rain forest. Even though peace talks were well underway, firefights such as this one still occurred.

He knew it was time to pull back military actions and rely on press releases and diplomacy to take its place. Yet, he felt skirmishes necessary to excite the press and motivate the mediators.

Marcos told him to go home and rest and see his family. Alone now, he judged it time to do so. He knew when Marcos needed another rebel attack he would be the first selected.

Kuk walked through the evening and deep into the night before he slept. At daybreak he woke and journeyed the remaining distance to his home on the side of a mountain. As he climbed the last few meters he saw the small terraced *Milpa* in which his crop of maize, corn, and sweet potatoes ripened. In the center stood a solid structure with adobe brick walls, made from raw clay and straw, crowned by a heavy, rust-colored, tile roof. His youngest child, a daughter named Caal, played in the doorway. She wore a plain, loose-weave, undyed, wool dress. He smiled. Caal was the only child still living with Kuk and his wife, Maya. As he neared the hut, his daughter looked up and squealed. Maya immediately appeared at the door. Even with the evidences of hard toil on her face, she was a handsome woman. Her black hair fell down her back in a single braid. Maya wore a *Huipil* draped over her shoulders, covering her chest and back. The wool piece was brightly colored red, with some yellow, brocaded with lozenge motifs. It lay over a simple, beltless, natural-colored, cotton dress. Her welcome smile melted into an expression of concern.

“Kuk, you’re injured.”

Kuk laughed and said, “Yes, but now I’m here for you to pamper me.”

Maya, closely followed by Caal, ran to him. He hugged both with his left arm and they helped Kuk into their abode. In the far corner lay their only piece of furniture, a wooden-framed bed, its slats covered with a rush mat and folded wool blankets at its foot. The only other accommodation for sleeping was a hammock hung at the front of the room. Two chests, shelves and hanging cords provided storage space for their meager possessions. On the left side of the room leaned a ladder carved from a tree trunk, giving access to the rafters which held tools and a coil of rope.

The front right corner contained a small domestic altar on which a picture of the Virgin Mary, candles, incense, and tobacco were displayed.

The only other room, with no separating wall, was the kitchen. The hearth, consisting of three raised stones, commanded the prominent position in this room. Resting on these stones were the essentials for preparing food: cooking pots; a pot for cooking corn in limewater; the earthenware disk for grilling tortillas; an iron pot for simmering black beans; a mill stone; and enamel plates and dishes.

Maya bathed Kuk with cool spring water she hauled from the valley's stream and tenderly placed poison-absorbing leaves on his gaping wound.

Kuk slept the rest of the day and the next night. When he woke just before daylight he found his wife attentively sitting next to his bed. She smiled and stroked his hair.

"Welcome to the land of the living."

Kuk started to laugh but movement of his body caused pain to shoot through his arm. He said nothing and laid still, otherwise he gave no evidence of anguish. It was his way, and the way of their people.

"Help me, woman, to see our crops."

Maya knew it was useless to protest, so she lifted him from their bed and put his right arm around her neck. Kuk slowly walked from their austere, but immaculately clean house, through the doorway and into the early morning light. There he saw evidence of the long hours of toil his wife and girl provided to the struggling plants. Kuk felt overcome with pride in his little family and guilt that they braved this chore without him. He and his family knew how important the revolution was to the Mayan people, but such fighting did not take care of the relentless demands for survival.

"Come, husband, let's go inside. You can see that all is in order."

Kuk gave his wife a trembling hug. "Yes, all is in order. I rest now, but soon you'll see your man pull his turn at the yoke."

As they worked their way back into the house, Caal raced by, kicking a small wooden ball. She looked up at them, giving Kuk a snapshot memory of an angelic face covered with an innocent, happy smile.



## CHAPTER 29

Peter and Lxil spent the next three days taking full advantage of the resort life. They forced in drink, food, and resort activity with a vengeance. On the morning of the fourth day both lay in each other's arms, exhausted.

Peter said, "I don't think I can move. If you want to do something exciting, I may be able to make it to the balcony to watch."

Lxil purred, "No, my love. I want to lie with you all day."

Peter climbed from bed and opened the sliding doors overlooking the beach. A light breeze bellowed the thin, white, curtains as the humid smell of the sea pervaded the room. Peter walked back to the bed. The blue sheets only half covered Lxil's curves. A painting. A photograph hanging in an art gallery. He stopped and gazed at her. She pushed herself up on one elbow. Her black hair cascaded across her face in slow motion. Peter slipped into bed and gently rubbed her back. Both drifted back to sleep and didn't wake until noon.

Small drops of rain from a passing tropical cloud blew in. Peter rose and shut the door, then turned to see Lxil awake.

"Hi, Sleeping Beauty.

She smiled. "You should talk."

Peter shrugged. "Listen, I need to get us airline tickets for the States today. I don't think I'll have much trouble getting you a visa."

Lxil interrupted, "Peter, I love you--but I can't leave Chiapas--the revolution. It's a place where I matter. And it's a place that gives much back to me."

"I see. Well I love you too, but I can do as much good for the revolution in Dallas and can take a hot shower any time I want--and not get shot at--unless I honk my horn at someone on Central Expressway."

"What?"

"Nothing. Obscure humor is a talent of mine."

"Peter, I know you don't want to go back, and I don't blame you. After all of this is over, maybe I can come to visit?"

"Sure. When are you leaving?" Peter spoke more curtly than he intended.

"I go to Belize tonight to pick up a cargo of guns."

"Well...I guess this is goodbye then."

A steely silence separated the two lovers. Finally Peter mumbled something about getting a newspaper and left for the lobby. He picked up a *USA Today* and made ticket arrangements for the next morning's flight with an obliging young man at the front desk.

Peter walked down the beach trying to assimilate all of his recent experiences. What's important. What's right for him. Eventually he found himself back at the hotel lobby. He called his friend Bill on a pay phone.

"Hello."

"Hey, Bill, it's Peter."

"Where the hell are you? We're ready to have that homecoming party."

"Still in Mexico. You talking a big party?"

"Friggin' A, partner. Lots of trust fund babies ready to meet you. Just say the word and we'll get things moving. Oh, by the way, the jewelry, cool stuff, lots of value. Tell me again how we're not gonna get in trouble."

"Don't worry, buddy. It's cleaner than anything else I own."

Bill chuckled, "That's not exactly the level of assurance I wanted, but it's too late to back up now. You got yourself a small fortune."



“Great, Bill. Thanks for the help. I’ll make sure you get your share.” Silence. “Tell me one more time about the party and the unbridled decadence.”

Bill’s voice sounded sober. “You okay, buddy?”

“Never been better. See you soon.”

Peter hung up the phone and went back to his room. Lxil was packing. She hugged him. He didn’t respond.

“I know you have a good life to go back to--I just hope you can understand that my life in Chiapas has too much meaning to me now--and even after the revolution to give it up.”

“I do.” Peter started to say something else but decided anything more would be worthless and unbelievably sappy. She grabbed her bags and left the room.



## CHAPTER 30

Lxil was working on the mooring lines when the sounds of steps caused her to jerk her head to discover the source. Peter stood in the middle of the deck holding his bag. He felt a big grin grow and take over his face.

“Peter?”

“Scuddle the port holes, mate. Let’s get underway.”

She started to hug him but he extended his hand with palm up, signaling her to stop. “Please control yourself. I’m only going for a little while. It just occurred to me that there isn’t any other place in the world that holds more excitement for me. After all, it would take quite a bit of work to get a drug cartel, local militia, pirates, and the national army all pissed off at me somewhere else.”

Peter thought for a minute then said in a soft voice, more to himself, “Anyway, maybe there is something more important for me than the *Sun Also Rises* life I’ve been living...and there’s a little girl I need to check on.”

The lovers cast off the lines and jumped aboard their beautiful craft. They passionately embraced, feeling happiness and relief. Peter and Lxil took turns steering through the night. Neither could sleep. Lxil continually checked the maps for bearings. Speeding at thirty knots through the night could be dangerous business. The craft had two spotlights on its bow that they kept pointed at the water in front of them. Peter and Lxil

quietly concentrated on their destiny. Lxil tenderly put her hand on his shoulder when he was at the wheel. An occasional cloud blocked the moon, but, otherwise the night glowed. After five hours of traveling Peter spotted lights. "Lxil, what town is that?" He pointed toward shore.

"San Pedro."

"How close are we to Belize City?"

"About an hour. I need to radio ahead and the suppliers will meet us close to a cave offshore from the city."

Lxil picked up the radio mike and turned to a different frequency. "Star light. Your transportation is ready."

Peter looked quizzically at Lxil. "What the hell was that?"

Lxil laughed. "Hey, just because we're Indians doesn't mean we can't have clandestine codes. Want me to say, "We're ready to pick up the illegal shipment of guns now"?"

Peter scoffed, "A simple, polite explanation would have been sufficient." He smiled.

Soon the black shape of a small island appeared. Lxil pulled the boat back to idle and circled. In a few minutes Peter spotted flashes from a Q-beam. "See that?"

Lxil nodded and steered toward the flashes. Peter looked around as they approached the other boat. He worried that this might be a trap, but soon Lxil recognized one of the men aboard the other vessel. "Bob, good to see you!"

"Your supplier in Belize for an Indian revolution in Mexico is named Bob?"

Lxil turned to Peter and smiled. "Nobody's perfect. Sometimes we have to put up with a gringo or two if they are helpful."

Peter chuckled. "Okay, okay, but watch him...ya can't trust them gringos."

Lxil cut him a glance and raised her eyebrows. The two boats pulled along side. A sandy haired man dressed in black threw Lxil a rope. "Good to see you again, Lxil. Whose your friend?"

"Bob meet Peter."

The two men shook hands. Bob had a strong handshake and looked Peter in the eyes. “You’re running with pretty rough company, Peter.”

Peter started to respond when Lxil matter-of-factly added, “Peter’s my lover.” Both men looked at Lxil with astonishment while still gripping their handshake. Bob broke out laughing. “In that case you *really* better be careful.”

Peter looked at his new acquaintance and nodded. “That is the understatement of the night. How can I help move the weapons?”

Soon Peter was grabbing crates passed to him by Bob and a dark mute helper, also dressed in black, marked “FARM SUPPLIES” and lashing them down on deck. Once the last crate was secured, Bob saluted Lxil then Peter. “God’s speed”, he said as he cranked up his engine. Soon Bob, his sullen assistant, and his boat disappeared into the night. The crates stacked six feet high and would be obvious to any passing boat or plane. Peter and Lxil knew they must reach the drop off as quickly as possible. They sped away, heading for Del Carman to deliver their cargo to a Zapatista squad. They traveled through the night and all the next day, then into the night again. To Peter’s surprise, they met no other traffic. Even the remains of the pirates’ boat was gone. Peter grew tired. He could see in Lxil’s eyes she was exhausted too, but neither slept. Peter could feel the adrenalin coursing through him. Just before dawn the next day they pulled into their destination. Peter referred to their trip as his first and only “milk run” since he became a revolutionary.

Several rag-tag revolutionaries waited for them in a cove out of sight from the town or it’s docks. Lxil pulled in close enough so that the men could wade to the boat. Peter and Lxil handed over the boxes to the soldiers standing in waist-deep water who carried the treasure to shore. They were small, but strong and wiry men and quickly packed the weapons onto burros, then withdrew into the jungle.

The two weary gun-runners sat on the boat and watched them leave, then motored out into the bay and dropped anchor. Lxil put her arm around Peter and rested her head on his shoulder. “Wanna sleep for about a week?”

Peter yawned. “You’re not gonna try to take advantage of me?”

“Probably, but not for the first twelve hours.”

“Fair enough. Let’s go below.”

They both listlessly picked themselves up and climbed into their boat.

This day marked a new life for Peter. Soon he found himself working as a writer for the movement, volunteering at a field hospital and enjoying a life with Lixil.

Kuk was even able to teach him how to grow his own food--corn, sweet potatoes, chilies and tomatoes--and survive in an adobe hut on the side of a starkly beautiful mountain in the southern region of the Sierra Madre. On clear days he could see the blues of the ocean past the collage of greens from the canopy of the Lacandón rain forest, and on other days he watched the clouds meander in and out of the hills and valleys in a surrealistic fashion.

On still nights he sometimes felt the presence and power of *el tigre*.

Soon his face was covered with a thick salt-and-pepper beard and his hair grew long. Lxil often combed his growing hair into a pony tail for him. His hands became tough and his face dark. He held little resemblance, in body or spirit, to the Peter who ventured to the mining shack so long ago. He found a balance. He felt whole.

## EPILOGUE

Tom Paddet, a respected journalist received in the mail a diary authored by Peter Sims. No letter of explanation accompanied it. Tom and several other friends of Peter's conducted a search for him in the Chiapas area with no luck. No one knows if Peter is dead, hiding out, or merely has gone beyond caring about those things important in his old life. They did discover that Peter owned a forty-two-foot teakwood Chris Craft which was moored at Del Carman City for several months, but is now gone. No one unearthed hard evidence as to who took the boat or where they went. One dock worker did tell of gossip about an Indian woman and girl carrying a wounded white man, clutching a crystal, on board the Chris Craft. He did not know if those telling the rumor mentioned the names Peter, Lxil, or Hunahpu.

Bill Roughmore, Peter's friend and financial confidant reports that no bills after his stay in Cancún have come in on Peter's credit card, which is now expired, and he has evidently not written checks on his money market account.

Stories were told to them of a white shaman in the Lacandón rain forest, but could not be verified.

This novel is based upon Tom Paddet's experiences, research, interviews conducted by those in the search party and Peter's journal, which, unfortunately ends at the sighting of Del

Carman when returning to Chiapas, except for the following scratched in Peter's handwriting on the last page of his notebook:

SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED AND I CANNOT CONTINUE--I'LL HIDE MY NOTES AND TRY TO FINISH LATER--IF I CAN'T I HOPE THIS WILL GET IN THE HANDS OF MY FRIENDS--I MUST TELL YOU THIS--I LEARNED ONE THING THAT I MUST TELL YOU--IT ISN'T HOW LONG YOU LIVE BUT HOW MUCH LIVING YOU DO--A MEANINGFUL WORLD LIES JUST OUT OF SIGHT--*THE IMAGE IN A HOLOGRAM*--FIND IT--EMBRACE IT.







## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Blake Bailey is a trial lawyer who practices in Tyler, Texas. He is a pilot, scuba diver, Harley rider, trekker of the Himalayas, and occasionally writes prose.

