



RABINAL, GUATEMALA, 1537

Beyond midnight, Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas was still in his candlelit study in the Mayan mission at Rabinal. Before he went to bed, he had to write his daily installment of his report to Bishop Marroquin. Persuading the Church hierarchy of the success of the Dominican missions in Guatemala was going to be possible only if it was properly documented. He took off his black cloak and hung it on a peg by the door. He stood for a moment, listening to the night sounds—the gentle coo of birds, the insects chirping in the stillness.

He went to the wooden cabinet on the wall, opened it, and took out the precious book. Kukulcan, a man of royal lineage who was famous for his great learning, had brought this book and two others to Friar Bartolomé so he could examine them. Las Casas set the book on the table. He had been studying the book for months, and tonight's work was going to be impor-

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tant. He placed a sheet of parchment on the table and then opened the marvelous book.

This page was divided into zones. There were pictures of six fantastic humanlike creatures he assumed were deities, all seated and looking to the left, and six vertical columns of complicated written symbols beneath them, which Kukulcan had told him was Mayan writing. The pages were a clean white, and the pictures were done in red, green, and yellow, with an occasional blue. The writing was black. Friar Las Casas trimmed his pen to make it as fine as he could, divided his sheet into six vertical columns, and began to copy the symbols. It was hard, demanding labor, but he saw it as a part of his work. It was as much a part of his Dominican calling as his clothing—the white habit that signified purity and the black cloak over it that signified penance. He had no idea what the symbols meant or the names of the mythical deities, but he knew that the images contained deep knowledge that the Church would need to understand its new converts.

For Las Casas, managing the gentle, patient conversion of the Mayan Indians was a personal duty, a penance. Bartolomé de Las Casas had not come to the New World in peace. He had come with a sword. In 1502, he had sailed from Spain for Hispaniola with the governor, Nicolás de Ovando, and accepted an *encomienda*, a conquered land, and the right to enslave all the Indians he found on it. Even in 1513, after a decade of cruelty by the conquerors, and having been ordained as a priest, he joined in the conquest of the Indians of Cuba, while accepting another royal grant of land and Indians as his share of the plun-

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der. As he thought about his early life now, he was sick with shame and regret.

When he'd finally admitted to himself that he had participated in a great sin, he'd begun his personal program of repentance and reformation. Las Casas would always remember the day in 1514 when he had stood up and denounced his past actions and returned his Indian slaves to the governor. Remembering that day was like touching the scar of an old burn. After that, he had sailed back to Spain to plead with the powerful for the protection of the Indians. That had been twenty-three years ago, and since then he had worked tirelessly, devoting his writings and his labor to making up for the wrongs he had done and countenanced.

He worked for several hours at his copying until he had finished the page. He placed his parchment copy in the bottom of a box of sermons with all of the other pages he had copied. As he moved about the small room, the candle flame flickered. He placed another clean sheet on the table, waited for the candle to be still and throw a steady yellow light again, and then started the next task. He dipped his pen in the ink pot and began with the date: 23 January 1537. Then his pen stopped, held above the paper.

He heard sounds that were familiar to him and made him instantly angry. He heard the feet of soldiers marching in a platoon, their boots hitting the damp earth, spurs jangling and sword hilts clanking as they swung against steel at the bottom of each soldier's cuirass.

"No," he muttered. "Not again, Lord. Not here." It was a vi-

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olation, a betrayal. Governor Maldonado had broken his promise. If the Dominican friars succeeded in pacifying and converting the natives, there were to be no colonists arriving to claim *encomiendas*—and, above all, no soldiers. The soldiers who had not been able to conquer the Indians in these regions by fighting must not come in now and enslave them after the friars had befriended them.

Las Casas threw on his black robe, flung open his door, and ran down the long gallery, his leather sandals flapping on the brick pavement. He could see the troop of Spanish cavalry soldiers, all armed for battle with swords and lances, their Toledo-steel cuirasses and cabassets gleaming in the light of the bonfire they were building in the square across from the church.

Las Casas ran to them, waving his arms and shouting, “What are you doing? How dare you light a fire in the middle of the mission square. The roofs of these buildings are nothing but straw!”

The soldiers saw and heard him, and two or three of them bowed to him politely, but these were professional fighters, conquistadors, and they knew arguing with the head of a Dominican mission was not going to make them richer or more powerful.

When he charged at them, they stepped aside or retreated a step but would not engage with him.

“Where is your commander?” he said. “I am Father Bartolomé de Las Casas.” He seldom used his priestly title, but he was, after all, a priest, the first ever to be ordained in the New World. “I demand to see your commander.”

The nearest pair turned in the direction of a tall, dark-

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bearded man. Las Casas noticed that this man's armor was a bit more ornate than what the other men wore. His had filigree engraved on its surfaces, with gold inlay. As Las Casas approached, the man called, "Fall in," and his men lined up in four rows, facing him. Las Casas stepped between him and his soldiers.

"What are soldiers doing bursting into a Dominican mission in the middle of the night? What business do you have here?"

The man looked at him wearily. "We have a job to do, Friar. Take up your complaints with the governor."

"He promised me that soldiers would never come here."

"Perhaps that was before he learned of the devil's books."

"The devil doesn't have anything to do with books, you idiot. You have no right to be here."

"Nonetheless, we are here. Pagan books have been seen here and reported to Fra Toribio de Benevente, who asked the governor for help."

"Benevente? He has no authority over us. He's not even a Dominican. He's a Franciscan."

"Those internal squabbles are your business. Mine is to find and destroy the evil books."

"They're not evil. They contain the knowledge of these people and all the information that exists about them, their ancestors, their neighbors, their philosophy, language, and cosmology. They've lived here for thousands of years, and their books are a gift to the future. They tell us things we could never find out in any other way."

"You're misinformed, Friar. I've seen some of them myself. There are nothing but pictures and signs of the demons and fiends they worship."

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“These people are being converted, one at a time and voluntarily. Not the way the Franciscans do it, baptizing ten thousand people at a time. The old Mayan gods have been diminished to mere symbols. We’ve made great progress here in a short time. Don’t waste all the work we’ve done by proving to them that we’re savages.”

“Us? Savages?”

“Savages. You know—people who destroy art, burn books, kill people they don’t understand, and make slaves of their children.”

The commander turned to his men. “Get him away from me.”

Three soldiers took hold of Las Casas and, as gently as possible, pulled him away from the square. One of them said, “Please, Father, I’m begging you. Stay away from the commander. He has orders and he’d rather die than disobey.” They backed away from him, turned, and ran back to the square.

Las Casas took a last look at the soldiers building their big bonfire. The soldiers running back and forth, breaking apart anything made of wood and throwing it into the bright flames that billowed above them into the sky, looked more like demons than any of the deities depicted in the Mayan books. He turned and moved along the back of the adobe mission buildings, staying in the dark, sheltered places. At the edge of the cleared land, he stepped onto a jungle trail. The foliage grew so thick around the trail that his progress was like moving through a cave. The trail led downward toward the river.

When Las Casas reached the river, he saw that many of the Indians had come out of their huts in the village and that a fire

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had been lit. They had been aware of the arrival of the strange soldiers and had gathered in the center of their village to discuss what to do. He spoke to them in K'iche', the language of the Mayans in this district. "It's me, Brother Bartolomé," he called out. "Soldiers have come to the mission."

He saw Kukulcan, who remained seated in the doorway of his hut. He had been an important chieftain in Cobán before he had decided to come to the mission, and now the others all looked to him for leadership. He said, "We saw them. What do they want? Gold? Slaves?"

"They've come for books. They don't understand the books, and someone told them that Mayan books were all about evil and magic. They've come to find any books you have and destroy them."

There were murmurs and expressions of consternation. The news seemed utterly incomprehensible to the crowd, as though someone had come to chop down the trees, drain the rivers, or blot out the sun. This seemed to them an act of pure malice that could not gain the soldiers anything.

"What should we do?" Kukulcan asked. "Fight?"

"All we can do is try to save some of the books. Pick out the most important ones and take them away from here."

Kukulcan beckoned to his son, Tepeu, a man about thirty years old who had been a respected warrior. They spoke together in quick whispers. Tepeu nodded. Kukulcan said to Las Casas, "There's no question. It has to be the one I brought to the mission to show you. That one is worth all the others."

Las Casas turned and moved toward the jungle path. Tepeu

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was suddenly at his shoulder. "We have to get up the trail before they find it," Tepeu said. "Try to keep up." Then he began to run.

Tepeu ran up the path as though he could see in the dark, and being able to make out his silhouette ahead made Las Casas able to move faster too. They went upward toward the mission at a full run. When they reached level ground, Las Casas could see a line of soldiers coming along the main road toward the Indian settlement.

Las Casas didn't need to watch the soldiers now. He had been part of the extermination of the Taino on Hispaniola, and he could picture exactly what they were doing. The first team of soldiers burst into a hut. A minute later, one of them came out carrying a Mayan book. He heard a man say in Ch'olan, "I saved that from the city of Copán!" An arquebus shot shook the ground, and a flight of parrots rose from a tall tree in a flurry of flapping wings and screeches. The man lay dead in front of his hut.

As Las Casas and Tepeu slipped through the dimly lighted area behind the mission, Las Casas thought about Tepeu's family. Kukulcan had been a high priest, a scholar. His family was of the royal class. When disease had killed the last ruler, he had been chosen to lead. He and Tepeu had given up their elaborate feathered regalia when they'd left home, but Tepeu was wearing the dark green jade ear plugs, bracelets, and bead necklace that only Mayan aristocrats were allowed to own.

They ran along the backs of the buildings toward the Dominican quarters, and they could see that the soldiers were returning from their search of the mission's collection of native

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objects. They carried armloads of books, ceremonial pieces, and carvings to the bonfire.

Mayan books were long, folded strips made of the inner bark of the wild fig tree. The writing surface was painted with a thin white stucco, and the paints were made from native pigments. The books that the soldiers had found they tossed into the flames. The oldest ones were the driest and they ignited instantly—a flare of light—and then fifty or a hundred pages that had been saved for centuries were lost forever. Las Casas knew that in these books could be anything. Kukulcan had told him some were mathematical treatises, astronomical observations, the locations of lost cities, forgotten languages, the acts of kings, going back a thousand years. In a second, the information, painstakingly written and drawn by hand, was only sparks and smoke rising into the night sky.

Tepeu was quick and moved with great skill in the darkness. He opened the big wooden door of the church just enough to slip inside. Las Casas had the advantage of the black Dominican robe, which was shapeless and darker than a shadow. A few moments later, Las Casas caught up with him in the church.

He led Tepeu down the aisle of the church toward the altar, then to the right of it. There was a door that led into the sacristy. In the dim moonlight from the high windows, they passed by the alb and chasuble hanging on pegs set into the wall, the wooden chest where the rest of the vestments were stored, protected from the incessant humidity of the Guatemalan jungle. He led Tepeu out the small door on the other side of the room.

They left the church for the long, roofed-over gallery of the Dominicans' quarters. They padded along the brick walkway

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barefoot so their sandals would make no sound. At the end of the gallery, they entered Las Casas's study. Tepeu went to the simple worktable, where he saw the book. He picked it up carefully and looked at it with such intense devotion that he appeared to be greeting a living person, someone he had feared was lost.

Tepeu looked around the room. Las Casas had a native pot that was decorated with paintings of a Mayan king's daily activities. Las Casas had the side turned outward that showed the man's daily ablutions and not the side that showed him piercing his tongue to give a blood sacrifice. The pot held the friar's supply of fresh water and was tied with a kind of sling that the Indian acolyte used to carry it.

Tepeu poured the rest of the water into Las Casas's washbasin, then reached in and wiped the pot dry with a cloth. He put the precious book inside the pot.

Las Casas went to the cupboard on the wall that held several writing projects he was working on. He retrieved two more Mayan books and handed them to Tepeu. "We should save as many as we can."

Tepeu said, "They will not fit. The first one is worth a hundred of these."

"The rest will be gone forever."

Tepeu said, "I'll take the book far away to a place where the soldiers will never be able to find it."

"Don't let them catch you. They think what you're carrying are messages from the devil."

"I know that, Father," Tepeu said. "Give me your blessing." He knelt.

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Las Casas placed his hand on Tepeu's head, and said in Latin, "Lord, let this man's righteousness be enough. He wants nothing for himself, only to be the preserver of his country's wisdom for future generations. Amen." He turned and went to the cupboard, then returned with three gold pieces. He handed them to Tepeu.

"This is all I have. Use it to get what you need on your journey."

"Thank you, Father." Tepeu walked toward the door.

"Wait. Don't go out there yet. I hear them." Las Casas went to the door and stepped outside. There was a strong smell of burning, and he could hear the shouts coming from the village by the river. He stood with his back to the door while a platoon of soldiers pushed through three of his Dominican monks who were trying to keep them from entering the mission. Four soldiers broke into a storeroom down the gallery to search it.

Las Casas reached behind him, turned the knob, and opened the door of his study. He caught only a glimpse of Tepeu slipping out. He had the water pot on his back, with the strap around his waist and a tumpline over his forehead so much of the pot's weight rested there. He was across the clearing and into the trees at a run, but he was visible for only seconds, and utterly silent.



OFF ISLA GUADALOUPE, MEXICO: THE PRESENT

Thousands of silvery fish swam past Sam and Remi Fargo, gleaming, turning this way and that in unison, as though they were all controlled by one mind. The water was clear and warm, and Sam and Remi could see far beyond the steel bars of their cage.

Sam held a three-foot aluminum shaft with a small, sharp barb on the end. It was a tool for the application of tags, and in the weeks since he and Remi had been on this voyage, he'd become adept at using it. He looked at her, and then ahead again, staring into the distance.

As they watched, a darker spot seemed to form itself at the limit of their sight, as though the tiny particles held in the water were coming together to form a solid shape. It was a shark. And as Sam and Remi had known he would, he turned toward them. He came at an angle, drawn, perhaps, by the dense schools of

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fish that had gathered near the steel shark cage and flitted in and out between the bars. But there was no question the shark was aware of Sam and Remi.

The Fargos were experienced divers, and they were both used to the idea that it was not possible to go into the ocean anywhere in the world without having a shark notice their presence. They had seen many sharks over the years, usually small blues that came close to investigate the wet-suited newcomers diving near the kelp beds not far from their home in San Diego, reject them as prey, and swim off. This shark embodied the other possibility—the nightmare predator, always swimming forward to keep the water moving through its gills, equipped with sight, smell, hearing, a network of nerves running along its body that felt even small vibrations in the water, and the ability to sense minute electrical discharges from the muscle contractions of its victims.

The shark's large tail gave a series of lazy undulations, and it moved toward them. As its outline became easier to see in the clear water, the shark seemed to grow. In the distance it had seemed large, but now, as it approached them, Sam realized that he had observed it much farther away. The closer it grew, it became immense. It was exactly what he and Remi had come to find—great whites that were over twenty feet long.

The shark swam through a school of fish that separated into two swirling swarms, then reunited into a school again, but the shark paid no attention to them. Its tail gave another undulation, and it glided ahead. The shark, its nose a flattish, pointed protuberance that seemed about four feet wide, moved through the water toward them, then turned again. The shark's body

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swung past the steel cage where Sam and Remi were hanging, so close that they could have reached out and touched it. The body was thick, and the pointed dorsal fin above it looked as tall as a man.

The shark didn't leave. It passed by them again. Sam and Remi remained motionless inside their cage. Even after many dives near the island, Sam found that during these long minutes he became conscious of the steel bars that had been welded into the cage. Were they solid? They had seemed to be when the cage had been lifted into the water by the crane. The welds, he now could see, looked short and hasty—maybe unreliable. The welder couldn't possibly have imagined the size and power of the creature just now passing by.

This animal was at Guadaloupe Island to find elephant seals and tuna, and Sam and Remi didn't look much like either. In their black wet suits, though, they looked a bit more like California sea lions, which could make them seem very tasty to a great white. Then, as abruptly as it had appeared, the shark gave a few twitches of its tail and glided away from the cage. For a few seconds, Sam felt intense disappointment. Considering their size and ferocity, great whites were sometimes surprisingly cautious. Had Sam missed his only chance to get this giant on record?

Then, without warning, the shark wheeled about, flicked its tail four or five times, and barreled into the broad side of the steel cage, its huge mouth gaping, revealing the rows of triangular teeth. Sam and Remi clung to the bars on the opposite side of the cage while the shark shook the forward part of its

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body, working to get its jaws around the cage but unable to accomplish it.

As the shark pushed the cage forward, the cage tilted, and Sam saw his chance. He jabbed the aluminum shaft into the skin at the base of the tall dorsal fin and immediately withdrew it, pulling it back inside the cage. The shark seemed not to have felt it or noticed. The barb was set, and the bright yellow shark tag, with its six-digit number, trailed from the base of the fin, looking tiny on the enormous fish.

The shark swam below the cage, and Sam and Remi waited. They half expected him to turn around, build up even greater speed, and ram the cage again, this time snapping the careless welds and breaking open the cage and spilling them out in front of his big, toothy mouth. But he continued about his business, farther and farther away, until he was gone. Sam reached up and tugged on the signal rope three times, then three more times. Somewhere in the other world above them there was the vibration of a motor, and the cage jerked, then began to rise.

They came up out of the water, lifted entirely up into the air in the bright sunlight, and swung onto the deck of the yacht. Remi took off her mask and mouthpiece, and said to Sam, “So what do you think it was—that we didn’t look appetizing enough for a second try?”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “You look scrumptious. I’ve been practicing looking indigestible to prepare for this.”

“My hero.”

He pulled back the hood of his wet suit, smiling. “That was amazing.”

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“Thanks to you, I’ll never run out of subjects for nightmares.” She kissed his cheek as they stepped from the cage and walked toward their cabin to change out of their suits.

A few minutes later, Sam and Remi stood on the foredeck of the chartered seventy-eight-foot *Marlow Explorer*. It was a modern luxury yacht that could do twenty-four knots wide open, but, in the two weeks they’d been aboard, Captain Juan Sandoval never had the need to open up the twin Caterpillar C30 diesels. They were not in a hurry, crossing stretches of ocean to look for promising spots for finding great white sharks, occasionally putting into pleasant Mexican ports to refuel or buy provisions. The yacht was a bigger vessel than Sam and Remi needed. It had three full staterooms with their own baths, as well as separate quarters for the three-man crew. Captain Sandoval, mate Miguel Colera, and cook George Morales were all from Acapulco, which was the charter boat’s home port. Sam and Remi had chartered the boat to take them to Isla Guadalupe, about one hundred sixty miles off the coast of Baja California, because it was a well-known spot to see large sharks.

They had volunteered to participate in a marine biology study run by the University of California at Santa Barbara to learn more about the movements and habits of great white sharks. The work of tagging them had been going on for years, but it had met with only limited success because most sharks that had been tagged were never seen again. Keeping track of individual great whites presented many difficulties. They were reputed to travel vast distances, they were very difficult to capture, and they were dangerous. But Isla Guadalupe seemed to

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offer a special chance. It was a place where very large, mature great whites reliably appeared year after year. And if members of an expedition were willing to get in the water inside a shark cage, it might be possible to tag them without attempting a capture. Sam used his satellite phone to report the tag number and description of today's shark.

As the boat moved along easily on the open water toward Baja California, Remi let the wind blow through her long auburn hair to dry it. Sam leaned close to her. "Still having fun?"

"Sure," she said. "We always have fun together."

"That's not what you were thinking. Something's bothering you."

"To tell you the truth, I was thinking about our house," she said.

"Sorry," he said. "I thought spending some time away on a research project would help the time go faster. I figured you were getting tired of the repairs and remodeling."

A few months ago, they had returned from the excavation of hoards of plunder hidden in crypts across Europe by the Huns during the fifth century. Three rival treasure seekers either believed that the Fargos had taken some of the valuable artifacts home with them or they simply wanted to take revenge on the Fargos for beating them to the treasure. They had mounted an armed attack on the Fargos' four-story house on Goldfish Point in La Jolla and battered it to pieces. Since then, the Fargos had been overseeing the repairs and rebuilding.

"I was tired of it," she said. "Contractors were driving me nuts. First, you have to go with them to the plumbing showroom to pick out exactly the fixtures you want. Then you need

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a meeting to hear that they've stopped manufacturing that model and you have to pick out another one. Then—"

"I know," he said, and threw up his hands.

"I hate the repairs, but I miss our dog."

"Zoltán's fine. Selma is treating him like king of the pack."

He paused. "When we started this trip over a month ago, they were hoping we'd be able to tag ten sharks. That big guy we just got is number fifteen. I guess it's time to hang up our tagger and head back."

Remi pulled away a little so she could look into his eyes. "Don't get me wrong, I love the ocean, and I love you. And who wouldn't like to travel around on a state-of-the-art yacht, going from one gorgeous spot to another?"

"But?"

"But we've been away for a long time."

"Maybe you're right. We've accomplished more than we set out to do, and maybe it's time to go home, get our house finished, and start on a new project."

Remi shook her head. "I didn't mean right this minute. We're heading for Baja already, and we'll reach land at San Ignacio Lagoon. I've always wanted to see where the gray whales go to mate and calf."

"Maybe after that we can keep going straight to Acapulco and get on a plane."

"Maybe," she said. "Let's talk about it then."

After another day, they anchored in San Ignacio Lagoon, then launched the plastic ocean kayaks. Remi and Sam climbed down into them, George Morales tossed their two-bladed paddles down, and they glided into the lagoon. It wasn't long be-

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fore the first of the gray whales rose to the surface before them, spouted water and steamy spray from double blowholes, and then made a rolling dive downward, its tail working to leave a roiling, bubbly trail on the surface. They were silent for a few seconds—an animal the size of a city bus had risen in front of them and sunk again, leaving their little, orange plastic kayaks alone on the lagoon.

The Fargos spent the rest of that day and the following out in their kayaks. Whenever they met a gray whale, it would come close to them, apparently curious. Sam and Remi petted each whale on its head and back and then watched it go.

In the evening, the Fargos would sit at the table on the rear deck of the yacht with the crew and share a dinner of fresh-caught fish or Mexican delicacies brought from a restaurant in the small town of San Ignacio. They would stay out until long after dark, talking about the sea and its creatures, about their lives and their friends and families, as the night sky filled with brightening stars. After Sam and Remi retired to their cabin to sleep, they could sometimes still hear the sound of the whales spouting in the darkness.

Next, they moved south along the coast, making for Acapulco. On arrival, they called Selma Wondrash, their chief researcher. They had given her and the young couple who worked under her, Pete Jeffcoat and Wendy Corden, the month off, but Selma had insisted on staying in La Jolla and supervising the construction while they were away.

Selma answered, “Hi, Remi. Zoltán is just fine.”

“It’s both of us,” said Sam. “Glad to hear that. And how’s the construction going?”

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“Just remember, the cathedral at Chartres took a few hundred years to build.”

“I hope you’re joking,” said Remi.

“I am. There’s not a single piece of woodwork left with a bullet hole in it. The lower two floors are pretty much finished, and everything works. There’s still a bit of painting they’re finishing up on the third floor, but your suite on the fourth floor still needs at least two weeks of work. You know what that means.”

“That there will finally be enough closet space for my shoes?” Remi said.

“Yes,” Sam said. “And two weeks means four weeks in contractor language.”

“I love working for a pessimist. When anything goes right, you’re so surprised. Where are you, by the way?”

Sam said, “We’re through tagging sharks. We’re in Acapulco.”

“Is everything still okay?”

“It’s lovely,” said Remi. “Fresh fish, chicken mole, dancing under the stars, et cetera. It beats being shark bait. But we’re thinking of coming home soon.”

“Just let me know. The jet and crew will be waiting to bring you home. I’ll pick you up at the Orange County airport.”

“Thanks, Selma,” said Remi. “We’ll let you know. It’s time to have some more fun. Our dinner reservation is in ten minutes. Call if you need us.”

“Of course I will. Good-bye.”

They were staying in one of the two towers at the hotel, and that night, just after they got into bed, they felt a brief tremor.

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The building seemed to rock for a few seconds, and they heard a faint rattling, but nothing more. Remi turned over and held on to Sam, then whispered, "Another reason I love you is that you take me to hotels that have been remodeled to stand up to earthquakes."

"It's not a trait women usually list for the guy of their dreams, but I'll take credit for it."

The next day they checked out of the hotel and returned to the yacht. As soon as they reached the dock, they sensed something had changed. Captain Juan was up in the bridge listening to a Spanish-language radio station with the volume up so loud that they could hear it as soon as they were out of the taxi. George was standing at the rail watching them approach, his face a wide-eyed mask of worry. As soon as they stepped aboard, Sam heard the words "*sismo temblor*" and "*volcán*."

"What is it?" asked Sam. "Another earthquake?"

"It just came five or ten minutes ago. Juan might know more."

Sam, Remi, and George all climbed to the bridge and joined Captain Juan. When he saw them, he said, "It hit down the coast in Tapachula, in Chiapas. Right near the border with Guatemala."

"How bad?" asked Remi.

"Bad," he said. "They're saying eight-point-three, eight-point-five. Since then, there's smoke coming from Tacaná, the volcano north of the city. The roads are all closed by landslides for a long distance. People are hurt, maybe some killed, but they don't know how many." He shook his head. "I wish we could do something."

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Sam looked at Remi and she nodded. "We've got to make a phone call. Start getting the boat ready to move. Anything you haven't done since we put in here, get it done now."

Sam took out his satellite phone and went out to the fore-deck. He dialed. "Selma?"

"Hi, Sam," she said. "Coming home so soon?"

"No, there's trouble. There's been a major earthquake in Tapachula, down the coast from here. They need help and the roads to the city are blocked—maybe the whole area. I don't know what sort of airport they have in Tapachula, but I'd like you to call Doc Evans. Ask him to order a standard disaster medical package to be flown in to whatever hospital there is standing—whatever they'll need after a big quake. Tell him it's our treat. Get him a bank credit for a hundred thousand dollars. Can you do that?"

"Yes. If I can't reach him, I'll get my own doctor to authorize it. The airport is a different issue, but I'll find out if they can fly it in or if they have to drop it."

"We're going to head south as soon as we can get loaded."

"I'll stay in touch." She hung up.

Sam hurried back to the bridge to talk to Captain Juan. He said, "We seem to be in a position to do something more important than tagging fish."

"What do you mean?"

"The roads to Tapachula are out, right?"

"That's what they say on the radio. They said it could take months to clear them."

"Since we put in here, you've taken a lot of food and water on board already and filled the fuel tanks, right? I'd like to load

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up this boat with as much as we can carry and head down there. We can probably be there in a day or two.”

“Well, yes,” he said. “A little more, maybe. But the company that owns the boat won’t pay for a trip like that or for the supplies. They can’t afford it.”

“We can,” said Remi. “And we’re here. So let’s go buy the supplies.”

Sam, Remi, Captain Juan, George, and Miguel went to work. Sam rented a large van, and they all went through Acapulco together, buying bottled water, canned food, blankets and sleeping bags, professional-level first aid kits, and basic medical supplies. They loaded their purchases onto the yacht and went out for more. They bought cans of gasoline, fifteen auxiliary generators, flashlights and batteries, radios, tents, clothing of all sizes. When they had put as much as they could into the living quarters, the hold, the forecastle, and even the bridge, they crammed the decks with large containers of water, gasoline, and food and lashed them to the rails so they wouldn’t shift in rough seas.

While they were finishing the loading, Remi set George and Miguel to calling Acapulco’s hospitals to see if there were supplies and prescription medications that would be in demand in Tapachula. The hospitals sent packages of prescription painkillers and antibiotics, splints and braces for broken bones. One hospital had three emergency room doctors who wondered if they could get a ride to Tapachula on the Fargos’ chartered yacht.

The doctors arrived in midafternoon with their own supply of medicines and equipment for the voyage. Two of them, Dr.

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Garza and Dr. Talamantes, were young women who worked in the emergency room, and Dr. Martinez was a surgeon in his sixties. They immediately stowed their kits and helped Sam, Remi, and the crew bring the final vanload to the dock and onto the deck, then settled into the two unoccupied cabins belowdecks.

At four in the afternoon, Sam gave the order, and the yacht left the harbor to begin the five-hundred-ten-mile voyage by sea. Captain Juan worked the engines up to full speed and kept them there hour after hour, making for the disaster zone on a straight course that stayed well out in the deep water. The three crewmen and Sam and Remi each stood watches at the helm. When they weren't sleeping or helping with boat chores, they worked under the supervision of the doctors to divide some of the medical supplies into kits that could be delivered to small clinics, emergency rooms, and individual doctors.

It was when they were moving back within sight of shore the next evening that they knew they were approaching the area of destruction. They were only a mile offshore from a populated area, but they could see no lights. Sam went to the helm and checked the charts. "Where are we?"

"Salina Cruz," said Miguel. "It's a good-sized town, but I don't see any lights."

"Can we go in a little so we can see better?"

"There are beaches, but there are also sandbars. We're heavily loaded, so we have to be careful."

"All right," said Sam. "Go in as close as you can and drop anchor. We'll take a party onshore with the lifeboat, see what we can do, and then come back."

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“All right.” Miguel moved in as close to shore as he dared and then dropped anchor. In a few minutes, as Sam, Remi, and George were preparing the boat, Dr. Talamantes came up on deck. She watched Sam and George lift one of the generators into the boat and then some gasoline to run it. She said, “Be sure to save some space for me and my bag. The rest should be food and water.”

Sam said, “We may need to make a few trips, but that’s a good way to start.”

They lowered the boat off the stern, and Remi, Sam, Dr. Talamantes, and Miguel climbed aboard. Miguel started the outboard motor, and approached the beach at an angle. When they reached the surf line, he turned off the motor and cocked it up to get the propeller out of the water. The boat glided in, was given one final push by a wave, and struck the sand.

Sam and Remi jumped out of the bow and dragged the boat a few feet up on the beach. Dr. Talamantes and Miguel then climbed out, and all four hauled the boat up farther. Miguel tossed the anchor out onto the beach in case the incoming tide reached it.

They began to unload the boat, and people ran down to the beach to help them. Miguel and Dr. Talamantes spoke to them in Spanish, and Remi translated for Sam.

“They’ve got some people with minor to moderate injuries,” said Dr. Talamantes. “They’re in the school a couple of blocks up there. I’ll go take a look at them and be back.” She took a flashlight and her medical kit and hurried up the road with two local women.

The others finished unloading the cases of bottled water,

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and Miguel spoke with a man for a minute, then said, "This man works for the local medical clinic and he wonders what we're going to do with the generator."

"That's as good a place as any to start," said Sam. He looked around and saw that someone had brought a child's red wagon from the street above. They loaded the generator onto the wagon and hauled it three blocks to the clinic in the center of town. Sam made the connections and got it running within a few minutes. The lights in the clinic came on, dimly at first and then a bit stronger, as the generator chugged away outside.

As they were getting the clinic opened and taking patients, Dr. Talamantes arrived. She said, "I've already seen quite a few people at the school. All minor stuff, fortunately. I heard you were getting things up and running here."

"Has anybody heard about what's going on nearer to the epicenter?"

"Tapachula is apparently a mess. A couple of boats have made it here, taking injured people out and looking for supplies they could take back."

"Then we'd better get another load of supplies to shore and then leave for Tapachula. Do you want to stay here while we go for another load?"

"Good idea," she said. "I can see a few patients while you're doing that."

"Miguel, you stay with Dr. Talamantes," said Sam. "George and Juan can help us reload the boat."

Sam and Remi hurried down to the beach where the lifeboat was hauled up. As Sam lifted the anchor, Remi stood by him.

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“Did you want a moonlight cruise for two or just want to show me what a good boatman you are?”

“A little of each,” he said. “I also figured we could carry more supplies if we had fewer people.”

They pushed the boat into the water, and Remi got in and sat in the bow, facing Sam. Sam turned the boat around into the waves, pushed off, and sat in the center seat to row. He rowed the boat through the first wave, then the second, took another hard stroke, shipped the oars, stepped to the transom, started the motor, and shifted to forward. The boat knifed through the next wave, rose over the one after that, and then moved offshore.

Sam could still see the yacht anchored in deeper water outside the surf, but, as he watched, he could see something had changed. There was the silhouette of another boat, a small cabin cruiser, pulled up close to their yacht and tied off to the side. He counted three men on the bridge and two more on the rear deck. As the lifeboat came closer to the yacht, he saw one of the strangers go to the steps and disappear belowdecks where the cabins were.

Sam cut the outboard motor, and, in the silence, Remi said, “What’s wrong?”

“Turn around and look at the yacht,” he said. “We’ve got visitors. I’d rather approach quietly until I’m sure they’re friendly. Watch them while I row.”

Sam moved to the center seat again while Remi sat in the bow and watched. They were still a few hundred feet from the yacht and its new companion. When Sam was a hundred

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fifty feet away, he circled the yacht, came in behind it, and tied onto the starboard stern cleat, the side away from the small cruiser. He whispered, "I guess we'd better make sure it's safe before we announce ourselves."

Sam and Remi stood on the seats and listened. They could hear a lot of shouting in Spanish. The words were vague even to Remi, but the tone was angry. Sam pulled himself up on the ladder at the rear of the yacht so he could see. After a few seconds, he ducked back down. "There are three men with Juan on the bridge. George is tied up and gagged on the floor. One of the men just punched Juan. I think they're trying to make him drive off with the yacht."

"What do you want to do?"

"See what you can find in the lifeboat's safety kit. I'll look in the emergency locker on the yacht's rear deck." He began to climb the ladder as Remi opened the kit in the bow.

She whispered to him, "Look. A Very pistol." She held it up. It was a vintage flare gun made of metal, not plastic. She brought out a plastic packet of flares, opened it, broke the gun apart, loaded one flare and put the others in her jacket pocket.

Sam whispered, "A good start. Let's see what I can find up here."

He silently stepped onto the rear deck, made his way to the sheltered spot below the steps to the bridge, opened the built-in steel chest, set aside a few life preservers, and found a second Very pistol. He loaded it, found a large folding knife inside the first aid kit, and pocketed it.

Remi appeared at his elbow and pointed up the steps to the bridge. "Shall we?"

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Sam nodded, and they climbed the steps. Remi crouched just below the level of the bridge on the right side and Sam crouched on the left. They listened, watching the shadows on the ceiling of the bridge caused by the instrument panel's lights. One of the men hit Captain Juan and he fell to the floor beside the bound George.

Sam stood and charged onto the bridge. Sam aimed his Very pistol at the apparent leader, who had just struck Juan. He said quietly, "Drop your gun."

The man smirked. "That's a flare pistol."

"So is this," Remi said from behind the other two men. One of them began to turn, possibly to bring his gun around toward Remi.

Sam spun the man in the direction he had been turning and pushed him through the doorway and out over the deck, where he fell and lay stunned. Sam fired his flare gun into the torso of the man beside Remi and Remi fired into the torso of the leader beside Sam.

The cabin filled with a sulfurous, choking cloud of smoke, but they could still see the blinding magenta sparks cascading out of the flares, starting the men's clothes on fire and burning the skin beneath. The man Sam had shot dropped his pistol and used both hands to try to slap out the fire as he hurried down the steps, fell on the deck, got up, and jumped overboard into the water. The leader tried to go down without falling, but Sam planted a foot in the small of the man's back and propelled him out over the rear deck. The man landed on the deck beside his unconscious friend and then got up and hurled himself overboard into the water.

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Sam handed Remi the folding knife from the emergency kit. "Cut George loose." He grasped both railings of the steps from the bridge and slid to the deck.

Sam glanced up and saw Remi kneeling at the entrance to the bridge, holding one of the pistols the burning men had abandoned. Sam knelt and picked up the pistol dropped by the unconscious man lying on the deck and stood beside the steps that led below to the cabins. He called down, "Come up out of there. Come on. All hands on deck." As he spoke, he was stepping out of his shoes. He moved barefoot to the upper side of the hatch behind the staircase. A man came up the steps, looking away from Sam. He had a pistol in one hand and Remi's computer in the other.

"Drop the gun but not the computer," Sam said. "Set it down gently."

"Why should I do anything you say?"

"Because I have your friend's gun aimed at the back of your head."

The man realized that the voice had been coming from behind him and slowly raised his hands to set the computer and the gun on the deck. Then he turned his head and saw one of his companions lying there.

Sam said, "Your other friends went for a swim. What are you doing on this boat?"

The man shrugged. "We knew any boat coming here would be carrying supplies and equipment because of the earthquake. Why else would anyone come now?"

"You were going to take food and medical supplies from people who need it?"

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“We need it too,” said the man.

“What do you need it for?”

“To sell it and make some money. People will pay a lot for those things after an earthquake. Farther down the coast, they’ll pay even more. Food and water are getting scarce. The roads are out, and the power is off, so things in the refrigerators are rotting.”

Sam said, “Well, you’re not going to get anything from us.”

The man shrugged, and said, “Maybe you’re right, but maybe I am.” He leaned back against the rail and folded his arms.

On the steps up from the cabins, there was new activity. The next person to appear was Dr. Martinez. He held both hands above his head. After him came Dr. Garza, with her hands held the same way. Then there was a young Mexican man with an expensive haircut, fitted, expensive jeans, and a pair of cowboy boots that seemed out of place on a boat. He had one hand on Dr. Garza’s shoulder and a pistol at the back of her head.

The young man said, “If you’ll put down your gun, I won’t shoot her.”

“Be careful,” said Sam. “Even hearing you say that makes my wife irritated.”

Remi was at the top of the steps on the bridge, aiming at the young man’s head.

The man leaning against the rail glanced at her unimpressed, and said, “Take his gun.”

The man lying on the deck got up and rushed toward Sam. Sam fired a round through the man’s foot and the man fell to the deck and rocked from side to side, wincing and moaning and holding his foot.

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As the young man in the expensive jeans moved his gun away from Dr. Garza's head to aim at Sam, Remi called from above him, "Last chance to drop it."

Sam said, "She's a pistol champion. Do you understand? She can put a bullet through the pupil of your eye if she wants to."

The man looked up at Remi and saw her sighting down the barrel of the pistol she held with a steady two-handed grip. He considered for a moment, then set his pistol on the deck beside him, as Dr. Garza hurried up onto the deck.

"Now, up with your friends," Remi said. The man climbed to the deck and joined his two colleagues.

"All right," Sam called out. "Now, all of you, into the water."

The man at the rail said, "But—"

"Alive or dead, you're all going to get wet," said Sam.

The man translated for his companions. The two uninjured men helped their colleague over the rail, then jumped in after him.

When Sam heard the final splash, he stepped to the stern of the yacht, picked up a can of gasoline, walked to the cleat where the small cruiser was tied, poured gasoline on its deck, then untied the boat and pushed it away from the anchored yacht. The five men swam toward it. When the boat had drifted thirty feet away from the yacht, Sam took out the Very pistol, fired a flare onto the cruiser's deck, and watched the bright orange flames roar to life. There was a smattering of applause from those left on the yacht.

He walked to the foot of the steps to the bridge. "Juan!"

"Yes, Sam?"

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“You and George feel healthy enough to work?”

“Yes.”

“Then start the engines, raise the anchor, and get us to that dock over there. Let’s pick up Miguel and Dr. Talamantes and get out of here.”