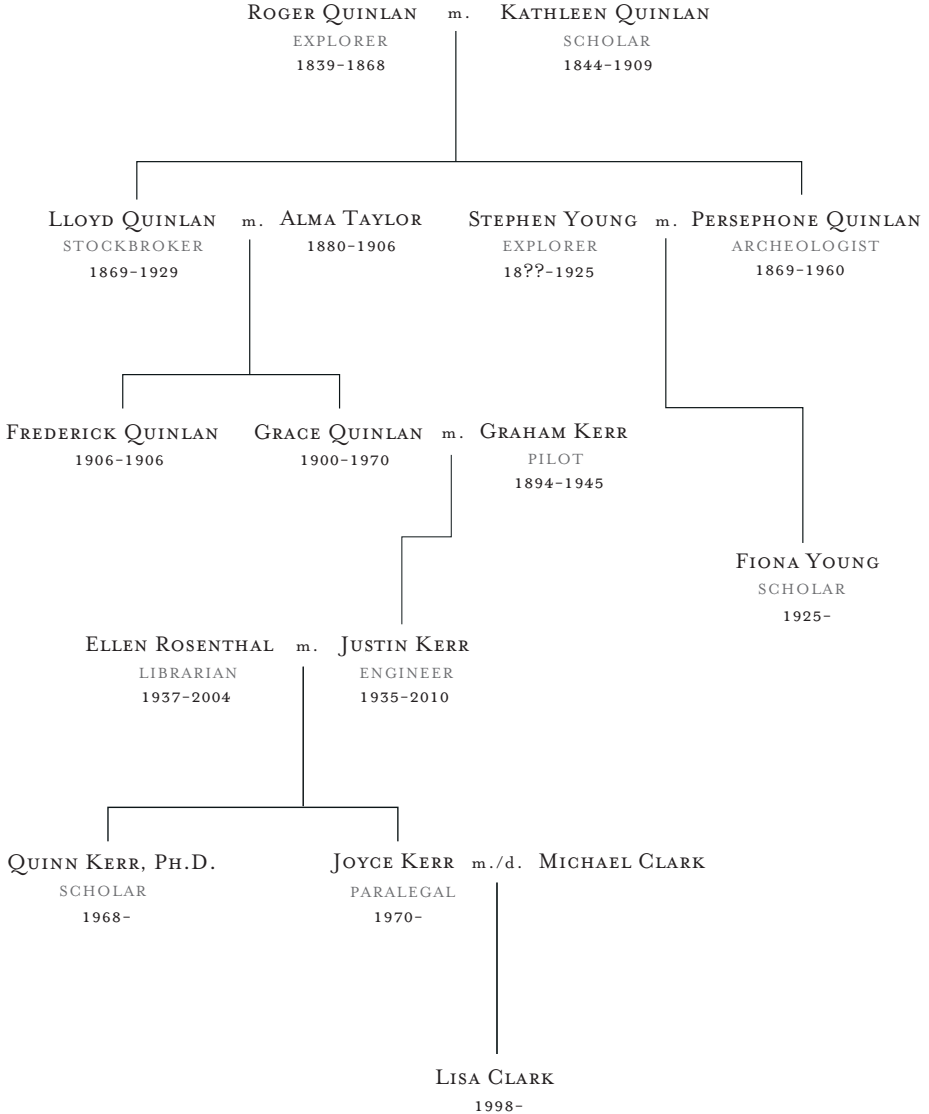
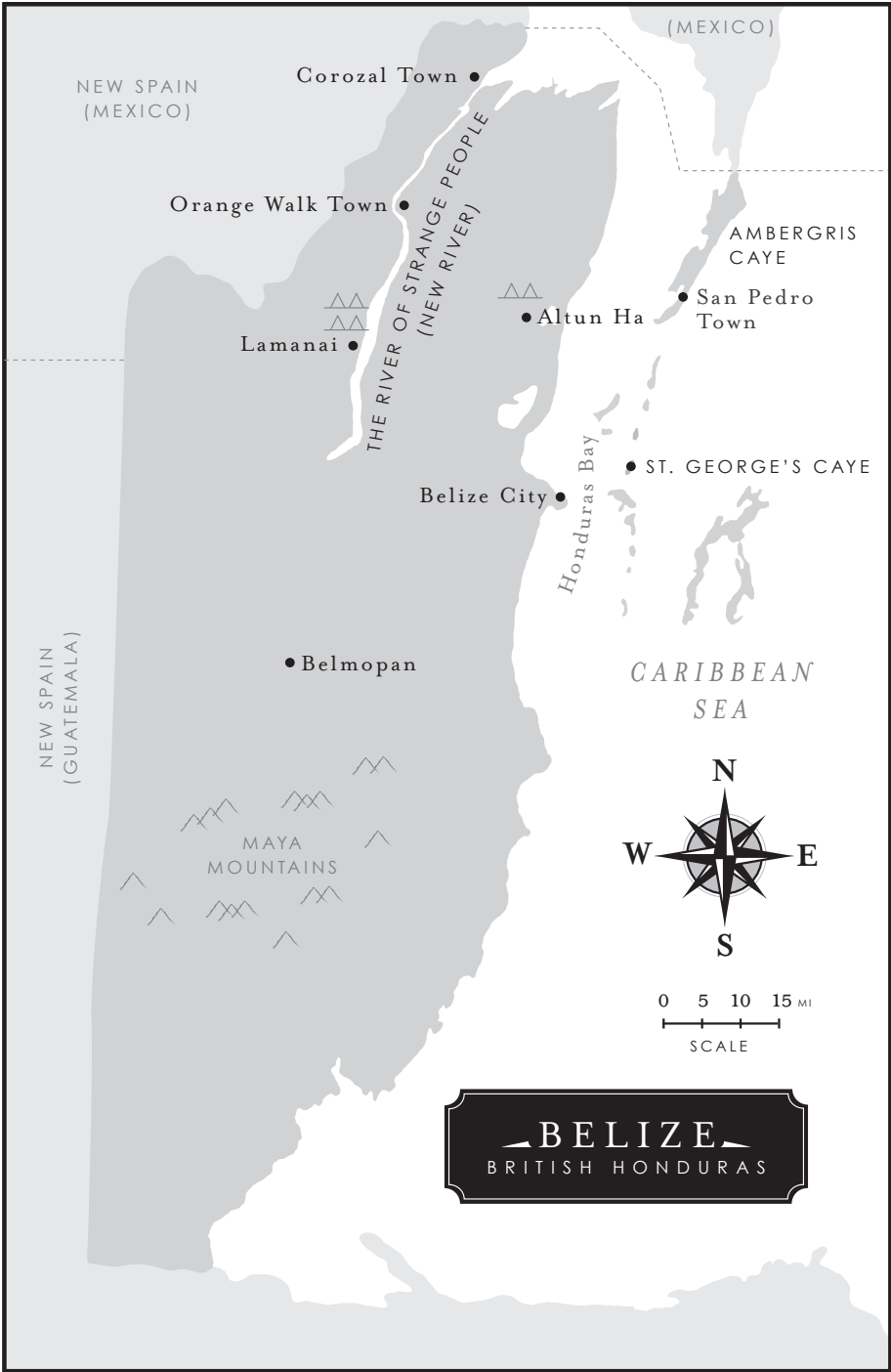


# The River of Strange People

◀ **JOYCE KERR** ▶  
 FAMILY TREE





NEW SPAIN  
(MEXICO)

Corozal Town

Orange Walk Town

Lamanai

THE RIVER OF STRANGE PEOPLE  
(NEW RIVER)

Altun Ha

Belize City

Belmopan

MAYA  
MOUNTAINS

(MEXICO)

AMBERGRIS  
CAYE

San Pedro  
Town

ST. GEORGE'S CAYE

Honduras Bay

CARIBBEAN  
SEA



0 5 10 15 MI  
SCALE

**BELIZE**  
BRITISH HONDURAS

## SAILING FOR THE DARK

Three drunken Fools, out raising hell,  
Quit their debauch when they heard tell  
That a sneaky thief, whom men call Death,  
A drinking mate of theirs just slayeth.

A barman tried to warn the Fools  
To keep their distance from the Ghoul  
Who's never lost a single battle.  
Unfazed, they vowed to hush Death's rattle,

Swearing allegiance, each to th'others,  
As if they were true-born blood brothers:  
"Tonight we'll slay this traitor Death;  
He shall be slain, who all folk slayeth!"

Up leaped the Fools, in drunken rage,  
To seek out Death in his village,  
Swearing the mad oath that defined them:  
"Death shall be dead – *if* we can find him."

Alas, instead of Death, they found  
A Chest of Treasure on the ground,  
O'er which they fought, each killing th'others –  
As if they really were blood brothers.

O'er their fresh-butchered bones Death stepped,  
Laughing, as he retrieved his Chest;  
And bade us heed the Fools' last breaths:  
"Chase your dreams – but don't mess with Death."

– loosely translated from Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Pardoner's Tale*

## NOTE TO THE READER

'The River of Strange People' is the Maya name for the river in Belize that whites call the New River. By 'strange people' the Maya meant – and still mean – all the conquistadors, buccaneers, pirates, explorers and loggers who came up that river over the last 500 years, and forever altered the world the Maya had lived in, undisturbed, for thousands of years before the Conquest.

The Mayan words 'Xibalba' and 'Xhuxh' are pronounced 'She-bal-ba' and 'Shoosh'. (This is because the 16<sup>th</sup> century Castilian conquerors of the Maya had no letter for the 'sh' sound, so they used 'X' when transliterating Mayan glyphs.)

The historical facts contained in this novel about the ancient and modern Maya, their 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish conquerors, the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century buccaneers and pirates, and the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century British explorers and loggers who colonized Belize, are accurate, except:

- While Lamanai was indeed a great capital city of the ancient Maya, and its Mask Temple is a famous archeological site deep in the Belizean jungle, the cave and the fountain of youth placed at Lamanai in this novel are fictitious.
- While it is true that only four ancient Maya books survived the 1562 Spanish Inquisition, and many Maya shamans were tortured by the infamous *strappado*, the *Lamanai Codex* at the center of this novel is a fictitious book.
- While the buccaneers and pirates of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries did indeed haunt the islands and coast of modern-day Belize, and behaved in lawless fashion as depicted, the pirate assaults on Lamanai in this novel are fictitious.
- While 19<sup>th</sup> century explorers 'discovered' many 'lost' Maya cities in the jungle, Roger and Kathleen Quinlan, like all the characters in this novel, are fictitious.

The wreck of the *General Grant* off the Auckland Islands in 1866 is an actual shipwreck which occurred as narrated, except of course the Quinlans were not really on board.

Finally, the depiction of modern medical efforts to 'conquer death' by activating in our somatic cells the telomerase – the cellular agent which allows cancer cells to live forever – is accurate. Likewise, there truly are renowned scientists who predict that in less than ten years human trials will begin on drugs to make us all immortal ('the cellular fountain of youth'). It remains undetermined whether immortality would really be a good thing.

FOR SUSAN KESSLER

*So many places we haven't seen:  
Are you ready to grow young again?*

# The River of Strange People

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Summary: An historical thriller about a modern British biologist seeking to conquer death, who joins forces with an American soldier of fortune, a Belizean archeologist and an American paralegal, to try to retrace the steps of past explorers in their failed quest to discover the location of the fountain of youth, hidden for centuries by the Maya in Belize.

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Death is the price we pay for sex.

– Aristotle

Off old Cape Horn it blows a gale,  
I'll be Jonah, you be the whale,  
I wanna dive as deep as we can go.

Your ship is sailing for the dark,  
Leave your suitcase, take my heart,  
Hold me, stow me, love me, very slow.

Why must this hour come to pass?  
I look at you and raise my glass.  
Our kisses cannot stop the scythe, the hook  
– I'll tell it all, in my new book.

– Greg Brown

PROLOGUE

# Into the Flames

28 June 1562

Deep in the heart of the Central American rain forest, a huge bonfire burns in the night. Guarding the fire is a circle of Spanish soldiers, their backs to the blaze. The dancing firelight glints in demonic patterns off the soldiers' armor as, visors down, they point their swords out at the dark.

Twenty paces from the tips of their swords, the swath of open ground the soldiers cleared for the fire dissolves into a murky perimeter. To the west looms a huge pagan temple, where the local Maya still practice human sacrifice. To the east lies a vast black lagoon, on whose waters Maya oars make no sound. And in all other directions, shadowy and dense, is the forbidding jungle.

From beyond the dark perimeter come the booming roars of jaguars and monkeys, the crashing of coatis in the thickets, and the piercing cries of oil birds. But these mysterious animal sounds are not what made the Spanish soldiers lower their visors and draw their swords.

What the soldiers fear, they cannot hear, much less see. They fear the eyes in the jungle.

The eyes came to all the other fires this *bandera* has guarded this month, at three other sites along the Yucatan Peninsula. So the soldiers presume the eyes are here tonight at Lamanai, too, just beyond the deep shadows at the jungle's edge, watching this fourth fire of the Holy Inquisition that Friar Diego de Landa unleashed this summer of 1562, to end all pagan idolatry in the Yucatan.

And the soldiers are right.

For interspersed amidst the trees lurk hundreds of hidden Maya warriors, painted for war yet impossible to detect, their angry eyes watching the alien fire, their hearts pulsing with hate. Crouched in the thick foliage, silent and fatal, the painted warriors are interwoven into the very fabric of the rain forest, as seamless and treacherous and violent as the wreath of creeper vines and strangler figs overhead, which are slowly choking to death the trees whose trunks and limbs they've entwined.

In the dark the painted warriors grip sharp obsidian lances and lethal *atlatis*, loaded with wooden spears. From 40 years of defeats, the Maya warriors know their Stone Age weapons

can't match furnace-forged Toledo steel. Yet the Maya fear neither Death nor their Spanish oppressors, so the impotence of their ancient weapons never dissuades them from attacking Friar de Landa's fires.

Yet tonight, at Lamanai, the Maya mount no attack. Why, on this one night, at this one place, do the Maya watch from the trees as if paralyzed, while the Friar's fire burns unmolested?

Because human hearts are soft. And because Emilio Alvarez, the Captain of the Spanish *bandera* guarding the Inquisition's blazing *auto-da-fe*, is an expert in the art of torture.

Theoretically, torture is illegal in New Spain, by Crown fiat – although Friar de Landa still authorizes it in extreme cases. But torture, in Captain Alvarez's view, is more than just the blunt infliction of pain on the human body. The artful torturer is also an astute observer of human nature, who locates, with surgical precision, human pressure points, and then administers only the amount of pain necessary to elicit truth and vanquish heresy. In this way, the artful torturer serves God.

At the first two fires in the Friar's Yucatan Inquisition, constant skirmishing kept Captain Alvarez too busy for nuanced observation of the Maya character. But at the third fire, last week in Mani, the fighting was more sporadic, and Alvarez finally got enough time to pinpoint the one soft spot in the fierce Maya heart: the deep reverence with which all Maya idolize their elderly shamans.

So before building tonight's fire at Lamanai, Alvarez first invited all the local shamans to Lamanai – and next, with the Friar's blessing, jailed them all in an old tomb deep inside Lamanai's Mask Temple. Then Alvarez released the oldest shaman, Pel Echem, with a message back to the local warriors: if the Friar's *auto-da-fe* is attacked, all the other shamans will be burnt at the stake.

By this ploy Alvarez created a stalemate. For as much as the Maya hate their Spanish oppressors, they could never bear to see all their honored elders dispatched, before their time, down to the dark caves the Maya believe are the passage to Xibalba, the Maya land of the dead.

So tonight, at Lamanai, the warriors do not attack. Instead, they just glower at the Friar's fire, burning before the temple where their shamans are jailed – a temple their ancestors built two centuries before Jesus was born, and almost two *millenia* before the Spanish came to the Yucatan, with their galleons and guns, and began building fires to try to compel the Maya to worship Him.

Stoking the fire are twelve priests – eight from the Friar's traveling Inquisition, and four conscripted from a local mission. Like ants the black-robed priests work in two passing lines, each priest trudging with an empty gunnysack from the fire, up the steep 200-foot-high steps of the Mask Temple, and vanishing into the inner sanctum at the top; and then, after a few minutes inside, reappearing in the other line, ferrying fuel in his gunnysack back down the steep steps, and out to the fire.

The fuel the priests ferry to the fire in their gunnysacks consists of dozens of small statues of Maya Gods; and thousands of sheets of crumbling fig bark, each folded like an accordion, and bound in animal skin.

Icons. And books – ancient Maya books, called codices.

Thousands of these Maya codices, for Lamanai's Mask Temple holds the world's largest collection of ancient Maya literature. Curious little books, to the Spanish eye – much smaller than European folios, and written in a lost language of mysterious, evil-looking glyphs. But dangerous all the same, for although the Maya shamans claim they can't read the old glyphs, still they chant over the codices during the pagan rites they persist in practicing – replete with orgiastic blood-letting, and human sacrifice – in spite of 40 years' exposure to the civilized teachings of the Christ.

Which is why Friar de Landa ignited this holocaust here in the steaming Yucatan jungle: to purge the Maya forever of their bloody idolatry, through holy fire. To this end, once each priest reaches the *auto-da-fe*, he crosses himself, then casts all the idols and codices from his sack into the flames. With each idol and codex cast upon the fire, skeins of black smoke billow up into the humid night air, swirling in wild chaotic loops, before coalescing into a sooty opaque haze that hovers above the fire – a haze through which the very stars in the night sky can scarce be discerned.

One codex tumbles to the fire's edge, opening to a page with an engraved picture of an ancient Maya shaman. As the heat of the fire curls the codex, the page with the shaman's image writhes in the flames, as if the engraved old shaman himself were being burnt alive on the pyre.

In the hazy firelight, the youngest of the local missionaries conscripted to assist the book burning, Father Antonio Sanchez, stumbles at the base of the Mask Temple, and falls to his knees. Signaling he is unhurt, Sanchez hands the books and icons in his sack to the next priest in line, and motions the other priests to pass. From his knees, Sanchez gazes up at the smoke-obscured stars awhile, then at last stands, and drifts away from the line of priests ferrying books to the fire.

In the darkness no one seems to notice the small lumps under Father Sanchez's cassock, or the way he drifts ever further from the firefly light of the *auto-da-fe*, and ever closer to the dark edge of the jungle. At the far corner of the ancient Maya temple, Sanchez glances back at the priests and soldiers, kneels, and rolls out of sight into a patch of wild herbs growing beside the temple.

On hands and knees Sanchez scrambles the last few yards to the trees at the jungle's edge. There, concealed by the deep shadows, Sanchez stands and raises one hand in silent greeting to an elderly Maya, garbed in a red robe thin as a tomato skin: Pel Echem, the old shaman Captain Alvarez released earlier today – rumored by other Maya tribes to be over 150 years old.

From his cassock Sanchez hands two items to Echem. One is an untitled Maya codex, its cover engraved with a submerged crocodile, which later generations will call the *Lamanai Codex*. The other is a small jade statue of a two-headed Maya God – an indecently priapic Itzamna, the Creator God, joined with the skeletal head of Ah Puch, Lord of Xibalba, the Maya underworld.

An instant later, four pairs of blistered white hands stuff cotton gags into the mouths of Sanchez and Echem, and haul them down to the turf. In the brief scuffle that ensues, Echem drops the *Lamanai Codex*, and the priapic two-headed jade idol, into the brush at the jungle's edge.

The four white slavers tie burlap hoods over their captives' heads, ensnaring them in thick nets of maguey rope, preventing further struggle. Then the four slavers lug their silent faceless bundled captives to the temple, their retreat from the jungle's edge covered by the brandished swords of Captain Alvarez and six soldiers. No Maya warrior challenges the abductions; and none challenges Alvarez, when he retrieves the *Lamanai Codex* and the jade idol from the jungle's edge.

The slavers haul their bundled victims up the temple steps, and stow them in the inner sanctum at the top. For an hour Sanchez and Echem lie there on the floor, while the priests finish destroying the Lamanai library. Then Captain Alvarez releases all the shamans and priests, except Sanchez and Echem; and lets his soldiers relax on the temple steps and watch the fire, still burning strong. Enlisting a Corporal named Ruiz to assist, Alvarez unties Sanchez and Echem, and leads his prisoners down the temple's inner steps, past the ransacked library, to the damp tomb at the base of the temple.

The tomb is twenty paces square, its ceiling twice a man's height. The only exit is the inner steps, where Alvarez posts Ruiz. Four smoking pine torches, mounted on blank plaster walls, cast the only light. The tomb's earthen floor is bare – save for a closed stone sarcophagus in one corner, a tangle of ropes and metal objects by the stairs, and a European chair near one pine torch. On the chair sits Friar Diego de Landa, studying the *Lamanai Codex* and the jade statue.

The Friar doesn't look up when Alvarez escorts his robed prisoners in, binds their hands behind their backs, and bids them stand in silence before His Grace. For several minutes the only sound is the crackling of the *Lamanai Codex*, as the Friar turns its stiff old bark pages.

Aft last the Friar lifts his hawkish face, his hooded ascetic eyes blank as the tomb's walls.

"Father Sanchez, for the love of God, why imperil your immortal soul *for these*" – the Friar waves the statue, and thumps the *Lamanai Codex* – "a lewd idol, and a book in a dead language no one can read anymore?"

Father Sanchez stands mute, staring down at the moccasins on his feet.

The Friar's European chair scrapes earth, as he shifts to inspect his other prisoner.

"And you, Pel Echem, with thousands of Satan's icons and books in your evil lair" – again the Friar waves the statue, and thumps the *Lamanai Codex* – "*what's so special about these two?*"

\* \* \*

An hour later Captain Emilio Alvarez stands atop the closed sarcophagus in the Mask Temple's tomb, hammering a spike into the plaster ceiling, while singing an old troubadour love song:

*There is a songbird who nightly moans,  
And there is an angel who comes to console;  
You are the songbird, my own true love,  
And I am the angel, who's come to console.*

The ancient plaster falls in chunks from the ceiling, revealing a solid mass of old stone above. But the old stone proves pliable enough for Alvarez to hammer two spikes into it, three paces apart, directly above the ends of the sarcophagus, by the tomb's back wall. Pleased, Alvarez sings on:

*There is a lily which time doth consume  
And a fountain which keeps us forever young;  
You are the lily, come grant me perfume;  
And I am the fountain, long may I run.*

As he sings, Alvarez screws two butcher's hooks onto the ceiling spikes. Then, gripping one hook, he steps off the sarcophagus and hangs in the air for a ten-count. Satisfied the spikes will hold a man's weight, Alvarez loops a long thick rope through both ceiling hooks, pulling the middle of the rope down to the sarcophagus, so the rope forms an 'M' above the sarcophagus.

Alvarez crosses the tomb to the old Maya, still standing before the Friar's now-empty chair.

"Why do you think the Friar allowed Sanchez to walk out with him into the fresh night air," Alvarez asks the old Maya, "while you're stuck down here in this shit-hole, with Ruiz and me?"

Impassively the old Maya gazes, his face a blank mask, his skin dry as a petrified tree.

"Why do you think, among all the shamans, you were the one I picked to let go this evening?" Alvarez leans in close, crinkling his nose at the fragrant orrisroot the old Maya exudes.

The old Maya, in turn, gags at the reek of Alvarez's sweat-soaked shirt, but stands silent.

"Why do you think four slavers just happened to be waiting at my command in the woods tonight?" Alvarez bares his teeth in a false smile. "Don't you see? *Sanchez betrayed you.*"

At this the old Maya flinches; but then shakes his head emphatically no.

"Oh I know, the missionaries all love you Maya. But human flesh is weak. When I found out Sanchez keeps a Maya bitch" – a flicker in the eyes tells Alvarez the old Maya knows about Sanchez's mistress – "well, then I didn't even need the *strappado* to get the truth from Sanchez."

The Maya darts a quick glance past Alvarez, at the M-shaped rope dangling from the butcher's hooks above the sarcophagus.

"Curious how the *strappado* works? You'll soon find out, old man. Unless you tell me right now, why you asked Sanchez to steal that one statue, and that one book."

Impassively the old Maya gazes at Alvarez, his face again a blank mask.

Summoning Ruiz from the stairs, Alvarado escorts the old Maya to the *strappado*. Ruiz pins the Maya face down on the sarcophagus, while Alvarez binds the Maya's wrists, still tied together behind his back, to the mid-point of the M-shaped rope. Then Ruiz and Alvarado each grip one end of the rope, and simultaneously yank down hard, like sextons tolling a heavy bell.

Their first pull hoists the old Maya's wrists a yard into the air. The Maya's head and feet flop down, his body forming an inverted U; but by standing tip-toed on the sarcophagus, he keeps the weight off his wrists and arms. Methodically Alvarez and Ruiz reach, hand over hand, up the two ends of the taut rope, as high as they can reach; then simultaneously yank down hard again. This second pull hoists the Maya up another yard, lifting his feet off the sarcophagus, his weight now supported only by his bound wrists looped, behind his back, over the middle of the *strappado*.

Two quick pops echo off the walls – the sound of the old Maya's shoulders dislocating from their joints. Next come longer ripping sounds, as the sinews of his shoulders tear away from his bones. Then a brief lull, filled only by the heavy breathing of Alvarez and Ruiz, straining at their taut ropes – before a series of awful shrieks fills the tomb, each fresh scream mixing, in continual cacophony, with the echoes of the Maya's past screams, still bouncing off the plaster walls.

After a ten-count, Alvarez and Ruiz lower the screaming old Maya down, in a controlled fall. But right at the end Ruiz's grip slips, and the Maya drops the last hand's length too fast, hitting the stone sarcophagus face first, cracking his nose. Blood spurts from the Maya's nostrils.

Alvarez waits for the last echoes of the Maya's screams to die off.

Then he murmurs: "Why'd you ask Sanchez to save that one idol? Why that one book?"

The half-broken old Maya spews blood and phlegm, but says nothing.

Without compassion Alvarez wraps a wide cotton bandage round the old Maya's nose, tying it tight behind his head. "Can't let you bleed to death before you confess," Alvarez grunts. "Now tell me: what's so special about that particular statue, and that particular book?"

The old Maya groans, but lies mute.

Alvarez never shouts. "The *strappado* hurts far worse the second time."

Still the old Maya lies mute. So again Alvarez and Ruiz yank down twice on the rope. With the second yank, the Maya's shoulders pop all the way out of their sockets. He screams even louder than before, as the muscles in his back and arms burst, like the ancient bindings of the books outside, cracking in the fire. After another ten-count, the soldiers again

lower the Maya onto the sarcophagus. This time he twists his head before Ruiz drops him the last hand's length.

"Why did you come back for that statue," Alvarez presses, "and a book no one can read—"

The broken old Maya gurgles incoherently.

Raising his eyebrows in hope, Alvarez rolls the old Maya on his side.

"I couldn't hear you." Alvarez bends in close. "What's in that little book worth all the—"

The old Maya spits blood onto Alvarez's face.

Alvarez recoils, and glares at the old Maya, murder in his eyes. But the artful torturer never acts in anger. So Alvarez wipes his face on his sleeve, and strolls to the stairs. Without haste he selects two weights from the pile of metal there, and attaches the weights to the Maya's ankles.

"You will be surprised," Alvarado confides, "how much more painful for your shoulders and arms the *strappado* is, with these weights on your ankles."

A third time Alvarez and Ruiz hoist the old Maya twice, raising him again up off his feet, suspending him by his dislocated shoulders for another ten-count. Dark bruises blotch the Maya's arms, as internal blood vessels rupture; and the Maya screams himself hoarse, before the soldiers finally lower him roughly back down onto the top of the stone sarcophagus.

"In the name of the One True God," Alvarez says, "tell me, you faithless heathen: why did you ask Sanchez to steal that statue and that book? Why run such a crazy risk?"

This time the old Maya doesn't even groan. Alvarez pokes the Maya in both eyes, provoking a flinch that reassures Alvarez his victim can still feel pain.

"You are one tough old Indian, Pel Echem. I'll give you that. But in the end you'll confess. Every man does. You cannot escape. You cannot die. That is the genius of the *strappado*. It will never kill you. It will just torment you forever. Till you confess."

The old Maya lies mute. But Alvarez can tell he is listening.

"We'll take a short break now. Give you time to think. But we'll be back, soon. And we'll hoist you all night if we must. We won't stop till you tell us what the Friar wants to know."

The echoes of Alvarez and Ruiz, clomping up the stone stairs, die away.

Lying alone in his ancestors' tomb, his hands bound behind his back, his wrists still tied to the *strappado*, Pel Echem rubs his face against the stone top of the sarcophagus. Searing pain from his broken nose burns through all Pel's nerves. Yet over and over Pel rubs his face against the stone, trying to push the gauze off his nose, hoping to bleed to death, so he can embark for the dark caves of Xibalba, before his torturers return.

But Captain Alvarez tied the bandage too tight.

Giving up on suicide, Pel rolls off the sarcophagus and down onto the earthen floor behind it, pulling the *strappado* rope along with him as he falls. In the dim light from the smoking pine torches, Pel backs up against the far side of the sarcophagus, and gropes the stone carvings there, until his fingers find the *ourobouros*, a depiction of the Maya Creator

God Itzamna as a coiled serpent eating his own tail, symbolizing the circularity of all life and time. Pel sticks his middle finger into the hole at the center of the *ourobouros* carving – but Pel's finger isn't long enough. Into the gloom Pel squints, searching for a long thin stick on the floor. Finding none, he turns and slides backwards, like a crab, until, near the back wall, a small sharp stone jabs his butt.

Tears of pain fill Pel's eyes as he squeezes both hands round the stone, clutching it like death. Rising to his knees, Pel backs his heels up against the wall, and with his bound hands scrapes the sharp stone against the wall, carving onto the old plaster a message he will never see. Under the circumstances all he can manage is one Maya glyph, and a series of lines and dots. When he's done, Pel drops the stone, slides crabwise back to the sarcophagus, and crawls back on top of it, so that when his torturers return, they won't notice the fresh pagan writing on the wall.

\* \* \*

Three hours later, in the dead of night, the *auto-da-fe* still burns, stoked to last till daybreak, as a symbol of the Eternal Light which Friar de Landa's Inquisition is bringing to the poor benighted Maya souls living in the darkness around Lamanai. The dark jungle is quiet now, except for a few oil birds crying in the trees. The jaguars and monkeys and coatis are asleep; the Maya warriors are all abed in their villages; and the Spanish soldiers are dozing on the Mask Temple steps.

Only five men are awake at this ungodly hour. At the outer base of the Mask Temple stand Friar de Landa and Father Sanchez, watching in the flickering firelight as Captain Alvarez and Corporal Ruiz pick their way down the steep temple steps, toting the broken body of Pel Echem. Beneath his thin red robe Pel's knobby, dislocated shoulders sag, like empty husks of maize.

When they reach the ground, the soldiers stand Pel up on his own feet, his hands still tied behind his back. Pel wobbles, but doesn't fall. To prevent escape, the four Spaniards surround Pel.

Friar de Landa shakes the jade idol and the *Lamanai Codex* in Pel's face. "So, you wicked old pagan wizard, the Captain says at last you've consented to answer my questions?"

Peering over his blood-drenched bandage, and shivering with shock and pain, Pel's eyes are frantic, like an infuriated jaguar enmeshed in a hunter's net. But he nods a fierce yes.

"What's so special about these evil curios," the Friar asks, "worth all the pandemonium tonight?"

Pel's vocal chords vibrate. "They're – a key." The rest of his words die in his blood-clogged throat. Pel spits out a mess of blood and saliva, and tries again. "A key," he croaks, "and a map."

"You lie." The Friar waves the *Lamanai Codex*. "There's no map in here. No keys, either."

"The glyphs in the book are the map." Pel spits more blood on the ground. "Instructions."

"You mean, 'directions'?"

Pel looks confused by the Spanish word, but after a racking graveyard cough, nods yes.

"Father Sanchez says you are the only man alive who can still read this book. Is this true?"

Pel darts a quick reproachful glance at Sanchez, but nods yes.

"And this book is a map *to what?*" the Friar asks.

Pel tries to steal another glance at Sanchez, but this time the Friar grabs Pel's jaw and holds it fast. "Don't look to Father Sanchez for the answers! Just speak God's truth, pagan."

Pel twitches with fear. In a voice still wet with blood, he says: "The Lamanai Waters."

The Friar releases Pel's jaw, and jerks his thumb at the dark lagoon beyond the fire. "Who needs a map to find waters at Lamanai?"

"Not the lagoon," Pel says. "Special waters. Waters which slow down Time."

"How can water slow down Time?" the Friar asks.

"The Lamanai Waters strengthen a young man's blood." Pel coughs up more blood. "So he may live four *k'atuns* – generations – before he even begins to grow old."

The Friar's eyes grow cold. "You mean: *the fountain of youth?*"

Pel nods yes. The Friar glares at Pel a long time. But Pel does not flinch.

"Your Grace," Alvarez interjects, "my grandsire reported to General Cortes, that the Maya at Cozumel told him, the fountain of youth was down here, among the Maya at Lamanai."

"And did Cortes, or your grandsire, ever *find* the magic fountain among the Maya here?"

"No," Alvarez concedes.

"Of course not," the Friar says. "In 40 years of searching, no one's ever found the fountain of youth, anywhere in the New World. Don't you see? The fountain of youth is just a fairy tale, like El Dorado, which the Indians use to send us away, always somewhere further down the road."

Alvarez looks down, chastened by the Friar's harsh tone and icy gaze.

"Worse than a fairy tale," the Friar adds, "for the fountain of youth tempts men to dream of living forever in this world, instead of seeking eternal life in the Next World, through faith in Jesus Christ." The Friar shakes the jade idol and the *Lamanai Codex* at Pel. "Your fountain is an evil lie!"

"It is no lie." Pel shrugs. "You asked me what makes these objects special. I told you."

The Friar glares at Pel in angry silence for an entire minute. But then abruptly, the Friar turns to the Spaniards, his eyes feverish and brimming with energy. "Yet does not God often hide His wonders from us? And if there truly is a fountain of youth, here on earth, must it not be His work? And if it truly is here in this jungle, should we not seek it out – to praise it, like all His works?"

All three Spaniards look at their feet, loath to debate the mercurial Friar.

So the Friar debates himself. "A century ago, God granted the Flemish master Van Eyck a vision, which he painted as a triptych for the great cathedral at Ghent. Van Eyck's triptych

depicts a band of Christian pilgrims, emerging from a dark forest much like this one” – the Friar gestures at the nearby jungle – “to worship Christ the Lamb. And right beside Him, in van Eyck’s vision, was *the fountain of youth*.”

The Friar turns back to Pel, his eyes again cold and severe. “Only one way to learn if you speak the truth, old man. Take us now, to your fountain of youth.”

“It’s too dark. It’s – it’s in a cave.”

“We’ll bring torches.”

Pel shakes his head no. “Even with torches, I can’t find the passage into the cave at night.”

“Then we’ll build another big fire right outside the cave. God’s light will show you the way.”

Pel gets a wily look. “But you preach God’s light is brightest at the dawn.”

“And so it is. Yet dawn is also when your warriors will return. So we go now.” The Friar’s tone conveys he will brook no further objections. “Which way, old wizard?”

Pel’s eyes search the trees at the edge of the dark jungle.

“It’s hopeless – your warriors all went home to bed,” the Friar says. “*Which way?*”

Pel sighs. “South,” he mutters. “Then west.”

“Lead us.” The Friar motions for Alvarez and Ruiz to step aside.

Pel takes two lurching steps south, but stumbles, catching himself with his palm on the temple’s bottom step, wincing in apparent pain. The soldiers step further back, giving Pel more room. Yet when Pel straightens, he walks much faster than before, with crisp, sure steps. Seeing that Pel is stronger than he first appeared, the Friar turns to Alvarez. “Put him on a leash, Emilio, so he—”

The words die on the Friar’s tongue, as Alvarez and Ruiz rush past, chasing Pel, who’s now on a dead run – wobbling, like one of Magellan’s penguins, because his hands are still tied behind his back, yet nevertheless managing to stay several paces ahead of the soldiers.

Straight at the *auto-da-fe* Pel runs, shrieking: “Only the oil birds will ever see the fountain!”

The next instant Pel Echem plunges head first into the flames.

# BOOK ONE:

## THE FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH



## CHAPTER ONE

# Hearts of Darkness

Monday 27 December 2010

Deep in the heart of the Central American rain forest, a small skiff roars up the New River in the dead of night. Squatting in the skiff's prow is an American soldier of fortune, Kip Hunter. On the middle thwarts sit Kip's two young mercenaries, Bruce Tobin and Harry Benz. And back at the stern, manning the rudder, sits their guide, Alfonso something-or-other – a guide Kip already regrets hiring because, even though Al's unlicensed and half-Maya, he just can't shut the fuck up.

A cool breeze sweeps Kip's face as he scans the dense black mangrove along the dark river, searching for any sign of Maya scouts. Even in the bright moonlight, Kip knows he hasn't got a snowball's chance in hell of actually spotting a Maya scout, because Al's cheap little skiff is juddering like it's about to fall apart, blurring Kip's vision; and besides, any Maya scout with half a brain would stand a yard back of the bank, virtually undetectable in the mangrove's deep shadows. At least by Kip, whose 45-year-old eyes see far less than they did in his glory days in the USMC.

But Kip learned, in the Marine Corps, that leadership is often more about appearance than reality. By scanning the riverbank, Kip sets a vigilant example for his two young guns, Bruce and Harry, whose sharp eyes might actually spot something; and even more important, Kip dissuades their chatty guide from asking, again, why in the world Kip wants to visit the Maya ruins at Lamanai in the dead of night, especially since the site's been closed to the public the past two months.

Abruptly the guide's outboard motor coughs and dies, and the skiff lurches to a choppy halt in the middle of the river. Kip whirls to yell at the guide, but in the spooky quiet that suddenly engulfs them, Kip lets the reprimand die in his throat, reluctant to make any unnecessary noise. As the skiff sheers beam-on into its own wake, the guide tilts the motor up and out of the water, leaving the skiff to drift slowly downstream in the sluggish current, away from Lamanai.

"What the hell ya doin', Al?" Kip growls in a low voice.

"You said you want no one at Lamanai to hear us coming," the guide says. "Even though I keep telling you, no one's lived within ten miles of those ruins, since the archeologists packed up and left, ten years ago. But if you want a silent approach, boss, it's time to paddle."

Kip gazes out across the black water at the blank jungle along the New River's banks, utterly bereft of markers or signs to indicate where the hell they are. "You sure we're close?"

"Round the next bend is the New River lagoon," the guide says. "Halfway up the lagoon is Lamanai."

"If you say so." Kip shrugs. "But before we paddle, we gotta put on our war paint."

From his backpack, Kip pulls out three tubes of blackface, and tosses two to Bruce and Harry. The three white men all smear the greasy black gel on their exposed arms, necks and faces; and then pull on black gloves, to match their black clothing and black skull-caps.

Then Kip pitches his tube of blackface back to the guide.

"I don't need this shit." The guide snorts. "My mama says I'm dark enough as it is. She—"

"Not in this bright moon, you ain't. No offense, but you could almost pass for a white man."

Bruce and Harry guffaw. But the guide looks offended.

"Relax, Al." Kip puts on his most conciliatory tone. "All I'm sayin' is, back in the day, a coupla *conquistadores* musta slipped in the back door and spent some quality *siesta* time with a few o' the ladies in your blood line. So now you need blackface to cover up, just like me and the boys."

Bruce and Harry guffaw again. But the guide still looks huffy.

"Ain't no one out on the river in the middle of the night," the guide whines. "Who's gonna see our faces?"

Kip frowns. "We're gonna meet some guys at Lamanai. Can't have 'em see us comin'."

"Helluva place you picked for a meeting," the guide says. "Been closed two months—"

"Cut the chatter, Al, and put on the blackface."

The guide inspects the tube, curling his lip in disgust. "Bugs'll swarm all over this shit."

"Then use bug spray."

"Bug spray don't stop botflies." The guide gets an obstinate look. "I don't get this, boss. If these guys don't know we're coming, what the hell are they doin' out at deserted Maya ruins?"

"You ask too many questions."

"You make me nervous."

"Good. That's the way I like it. Now put on the fuckin' blackface, and let's start paddling."

But Al the half-Maya guide proves just as stubborn as the original pure-bred Maya, who chose death by starvation in caves rather than become Spanish or British slaves.

"This boat's all I have. I have a right to know what kinda trouble I'm paddling my boat into."

Kip glares at the guide, but decides the only way to shut him up is to answer his question.

"The guys we're meeting at Lamanai are there for a religious retreat. Dangerous fanatics. Which is why we need to put on blackface, and paddle real quiet so they don't hear. *Comprende?*"

"They're pure Maya?" the guide asks.

Kip nods yes.

"There's no pure Maya left in this part of Belize."

Kip raises an irritated eyebrow, trying to signal he's fast running out of patience. "These guys are from Guatemala."

"So we're gonna kick 'em outta Lamanai?"

Kip rummages in his backpack. "No. They got permission to use the site. We're just – payin' a visit. Now put on the blackface, before we drift all the way back to Orange Walk."

The guide goes sulky. "I don't want no botflies layin' eggs in the pores o' my face."

Kip jerks his head up from his pack, and gives the guide a long, dead-eyes stare – which always wilted the young Marines under Kip's command in the Gulf. But the guide is made of balkier stuff. Pretending not to notice Kip's stare, the guide picks up a paddle and dips it in the river.

*The insolent bastard!*

Kip decides he's tolerated enough of this mini-mutiny. From his backpack he pulls out his Smith & Wesson .40 caliber automatic pistol, and points it straight at the guide's heart.

The guide stops paddling, but still doesn't flinch. "You promised me, no guns."

"I lied."

Keeping his pistol aimed at the guide, Kip nods at Bruce and Harry. From a long duffel bag the young mercenaries pull out their AK-47's, snap in the clips, and lay the automatic rifles on the thwarts; and then pull out a dozen grenades, which they stuff in the pockets of their dark green camo jackets.

Kip waves his pistol. "Up to you, Al. Put on the blackface right now, or die in the river."

*Still* the guide doesn't flinch. "A gunshot'd wake up the Maya you say are out at Lamanai."

"Good point." From his belt Kip unsheathes his long USMC knife, and clammers over the first thwart, eyeing the guide all the way. Bruce and Harry lean out to make room for Kip to pass by.

With a clatter, the guide drops his paddle, and begins slathering on the blackface.

"Good call, Al." Kip re-sheathes his knife, holsters his pistol, and sits on the first thwart, facing backwards to watch the guide. "All our lives'll be on the line this morning, Al. Which means we need *perfect discipline*. Like any military operation. No more dissent. *Comprende?*"

In lieu of a nod, the guide lowers his eyes. Sullenly he finishes applying the blackface, then picks up his paddle, and begins to steer them back on course upriver. The insolent bastard.

Bruce and Harry pull out two more paddles, and begin to pull. But in the dead silence of the pre-dawn jungle, the rustle of water from their strokes sounds like it could be heard for miles.

"Quiet, lads," Kip says. "We got plenty o' time. Quiet is more important than speed."

Bruce and Harry slow their strokes, but still can't avoid making a small lapping noise at the start and end of each pull – the only audible sounds anywhere along the river.

"Maya oars are silent," the guide taunts. "Like mine."

"Shut up, Al," Kip mutters. "They're doin' the best they can."

They all lapse into heavy silence. The New River widens into the lagoon, and they keep paddling south, along the lagoon's western shore. Kip returns to scanning the shore, still thick with mangrove, searching for any sign of Maya scouts. But in the eerie quiet of the dark lagoon, Kip

can't help hearing the echo of his own words – spit out during his little showdown back on the river with their dumb-ass guide – about the 'dangerous fanatics' waiting for them at Lamanai.

To soothe his jangled nerves, Kip pictures those fanatical Maya as he hopes to find them: all curled up, and sound asleep. Kip's intel – from his client, Ron Graham – is that there are exactly 17 Maya men out at Lamanai, participating in the religious retreat. No women, no children; just two old shamans, and 15 devout novitiates in their early 20s. Ron says all 17 men sleep together each and every night on pallets in the empty tomb at the base of the Mask Temple. Ron's photos of the tomb showed only two exits: a wood door to the outside, cut by 19<sup>th</sup> century archeologists; and an inner staircase which leads up from the tomb to the temple's top. So all Kip has to do is simultaneously seize the door and the stairs, and the sleepy Maya should surrender to Kip's superior gun power.

All good, in theory. But even half-asleep, these young novitiates will still be dangerous. They may be pious, but their religion involves lots of blood; and they hail from the most remote, poverty-ridden villages high up in the *Sierra Madre*, where the fiercely separatist Maya raise all their sons hard and mean, always ready to die in the next revolt against the Guatemalan government. These Maya novitiates won't be packing AK-47's, like Bruce and Harry; or even .40 caliber S&W's, like Kip; but they also won't be sleeping far from their obsidian knives, or their *atlatis* – or whatever other Stone Age weapons these violent maniacs wield in their primitive rites.

Kip shudders as he thinks of that blood-thirsty priest in *Indiana Jones*, ripping the heart out of his living victim with his bare hands. Surreptitiously Kip pops six Inderal tablets into his mouth – beta-blockers, to take the edge off the fight-or-flight doubts assailing his aging nerves.

But even beta-blockers can't block the darker doubts creeping into Kip's mind. What if this whole raid is just a set-up? After all, Ron Graham is not Kip's typical outlaw client. Ron's the Director of the Belize Ministry of Archeology, a real mucky-muck – at least as much as any bureaucrat in a shitty little dump like Belize can be called a mucky-muck. But what's worrying Kip is, Ron's also asshole buddies with Kux Ahawis, the radical Maya shaman leading the religious retreat at Lamanai. Ron says he and Kux fell out last month over a two-headed jade icon Kux brought to Lamanai but won't let Ron examine. So Ron hired Kip to steal the icon for him.

But what if Ron's lying?

What if one of Kip's many enemies got Ron to set Kip up for an ambush out at Lamanai?

In the slow-paddling skiff on the moonlit river, Kip conjures Ron Graham's doughy face two weeks ago, when he came to Kip's San Pedro warehouse, lips trembling, and offered Kip \$50,000 – American, not Belizean – to mount a river assault on Lamanai, and steal the two-headed jade icon from the Mask Temple, where Ron says Kux Ahawis keeps it under constant guard. Was Kip too quick to say yes? He figured Ron just looked nervous because crime is outside Ron's comfort zone; so once Ron forked over \$25K in cash, as a down payment, Kip cast aside all doubts.

But should Kip have asked more questions that day?

Like, for example, where'd the Director of Archeology come up with \$25K in cash so fast?

On the other hand, if someone wanted Kip set up, why involve a well-connected politico like Ron Graham? There's so many other, easier ways to take Kip down, if that's your goal in life.

Kip takes a deep breath and tries to relax, hoping the beta blockers'll kick in soon, slowing his heart rate, regulating his breathing, and steadying the mild tremors in his aging hands. Never a good thing, to have shaking hands – especially when you're pulling a gun on 17 religious fanatics trapped in a small tomb of their ancestors. A tomb they believe is the beginning and end of all life, the be-all and end-all, the Alpha and the Omega. Or whatever the hell the Maya believe.

Kip steals a glance at Bruce and Harry. No doubt the young mercs are wrestling right now with their own fight-or-flight instincts. No man's immune from fear. But the young guns probably don't have beta-blockers to pop. And for all their tough talk round the San Pedro bars, the truth is, Bruce and Harry have never seen action anywhere near as hairy as this dirty little war might get.

"Hey, fucker!" Kip hisses over his shoulder at the guide. "You're too close to shore!"

Sullenly the guide points at a narrow beach ahead, with nothing but a short stretch of wet sand, and a splintered wood sign, depicting a submerged crocodile. "That's 'cause we're landing."

Kip peers up the shadowy shoreline, but sees no temples. "Where the hell's Lamanai?"

"Here," the guide says. "That crocodile sign marks the north end of the old settlement."

"Where's the Mask Temple?"

"Two miles to the south. Stay close to the river as you hike, you can't miss it."

"Fuck that!" Kip hisses. "Take us closer to the temple in the goddamn boat!"

"The only other beach is right by the Mask Temple. Your Maya friends'd hear us landing."

Kip looks at the dense mangrove along the shore, everywhere but this beach. The guide's probably not lying. So Kip grabs his submersible diver's backpack, and jumps into the reedy water.

Bruce and Harry follow, AK-47s slung across their shoulders, and pull the skiff's prow onto the beach. The guide stays seated at the skiff's stern.

"Everybody out," Kip orders.

"Our deal was, I stay with my boat."

"Our deal changed. I don't trust you anymore, Al. You're coming with us."

"Whatever you're going to do, I can't help. I've never fired a gun."

"Bullshit. But I'm not givin' you a gun anyway. All you gotta do is walk, and shut up."

After tying the skiff to a huge ceiba tree, the four men set off on a narrow, winding, vine-laden path through the jungle, more or less parallel to the river. The guide leads, with Kip close behind, watching to be sure the guide doesn't try to defect. Bruce and Harry bring up the rear.

The hike is slow and hard, with giant roots tripping them every other step. Kip succumbs to dark thoughts, like why the hell a man of his age and talents can't find something better

than jungle work to make a living off of. Maybe it's time to go back to sea diving, like Mel Fisher did when he—

Abruptly the guide stops, grabs a stick, and furiously whacks the brush along the path.

"Hey, you dumb motherfucker!" Kip hisses. "*Quiet* is the goal here."

"*Living* is my goal," the guide retorts. "That snake I just chased off is poisonous."

They resume their march. After half an hour, Kip sees a huge shadowy shape, towering above the jungle canopy inland, to the west. But the guide shakes his head no. Wrong temple.

They march on a few more minutes till Kip sees, with a wild surmise, another huge shadow bulking straight ahead, close by the river. The guide nods yes. Kip signals for the utmost quiet.

Guns drawn, they creep up on the Mask Temple, careful not to step on any branches, and close within twenty yards of the temple, without seeing any sign of a scout. There, in the deep shadows at the edge of the jungle, Kip signals a halt, to review his assault plan, now that he's looking across a swath of open ground at the real temple, instead of just Ron Graham's photos.

The stone steps up the sides of the Mask Temple are steep, but not as bad as some Maya temples Kip's seen. Harry should have no trouble climbing those steps undetected, and then creeping back down close to the tomb via the inner staircase, to block that exit. No problem there.

But the closed wood door on the tomb's east face gives Kip pause. In his backpack, Kip's got four military issue M112 blocks of C-4 plastic explosive, which he plans to use to blow a man-size hole in the door, with the shock and awe of the blast giving Bruce time to fire a few rounds through the hole, before he and Kip crawl in and induce the sleeping Maya to surrender. Unless—

Well, unless lots of things. Like von Clausewitz said, in any military operation, nothing goes according to plan, so you should always plan on having to scrap your plan. Maybe the detonator'll misfire. Maybe the wood door'll withstand the C-4, like Hitler's conference table famously did in 1944. Maybe the hole they'll blow won't be big enough to crawl in through. Or maybe they'll crawl in, only to find the Maya have guns. Or maybe the Maya'll overpower Harry and escape up the inner stairs.

Maybe, Kip thinks, he needs to pop some more Inderal.

Or maybe there's a better way to skin this cat.

Like, how 'bout some hostages? The way Kip did once to seize an ammo dump in the Gulf.

You gotta figure, 17 Maya ain't all peeing and shitting inside that tomb where they're sleeping. They may be re-enacting primitive rites and all, but even cavemen didn't shit where they slept. Come dawn, these fuckers are gonna wander outside, half-asleep, to answer nature's call in the low scrub here outside the Mask Temple. Kip could grab the first one, force the hostage to open the door, and walk in behind him. If anyone inside starts firing, they'll only hit their own guy.

In hushed tones Kip lays out his revised plan. They'll hold off on the C-4 till dawn, while Kip waits to try to grab a hostage. Harry'll wait on the inner stairs, out of sight of the Maya, till he hears Kip enter the tomb. Could be a long wait, since dawn's still an hour off. Bruce'll wait here till Kip grabs the hostage, and then run into the tomb behind Kip. The guide'll sit here with Bruce and shut the fuck up. If he makes any noise or tries to leave, Bruce'll cut his throat, from ear to ear.

The mercs nod assent. The guide shrugs fearful acquiescence.

So Harry climbs the steps and disappears into the temple. Bruce and the guide squat at the edge of the jungle. And Kip, pistol drawn, scrambles across the open ground between them and the Mask Temple, careful not to step on any twigs in the low scrub. At the temple, he sets his backpack down quietly, and stands three feet behind the hinge side of the closed wood door.

And waits, with his pistol drawn.

Which is always the hardest part of any mission.

Kip tries not to let his mind wander. But after awhile he can't help noticing this temple is unlike any he's seen, in his 15 years in Central America. Not as steep as the temples at Tikal, nor as elegant as the temples at Altun Ha; but the Mask Temple's almost as big, and clearly way older.

And it's unnervingly primitive.

Since Kip is at the east wall, he can't see the huge ten-foot angry human face carved into the west face of the temple, which he knows, from Ron Graham's photos, is the reason the building's called the *Mask Temple*. So it can't be the big angry mask unnerving Kip. It's something about the rougher stone of this temple. Or its squatter shape. Or the dark lagoon nearby.

Kip stretches his arms, reminding himself the closed wood door could open at any minute. Better concentrate on the job at hand. Kip visualizes the precise steps he'll need to take, when that door opens. First, three steps round the moving door, and grab the first guy out. Press the pistol to his temple, and hiss a 'shhh' before anyone yells. Then wave everyone who's there back in the doorway, and walk in right behind them. Hopefully with Bruce close on his heels.

Kip takes a deep breath, wondering again if he needs to pop more Inderal.

But he decides against it. Can't risk passing out, when the time for action comes.

Time passes. Slowly.

Noticing an irregularity in the ancient stone he's leaning against, Kip pivots and gazes up the steep face of the temple, and then grins, grimly, as he sees why the stone's different here. Kip's standing at the base of a 200-foot-long stone slide – a slide the shamans no doubt used, back in the bad old days, to dump their victims' butchered corpses, after they'd been sacrificed up top.

All Maya temples have this feature. But this particular stone slide is more overgrown with weeds and moss than any other slide Kip's seen, which is why he failed to notice it earlier. It's so badly overgrown that in most parts the stone and shrubs are indistinguishable, as if the slide itself reverted, some time ago, to a state of nature – the spectacle of all those

gruesome deaths, over all those centuries, finally compelling the jungle to reclaim the Mask Temple's slide as one of its own.

The guide said the archeologists left Lamanai what, ten years ago? This looks more like 500-and-ten years ago. But that's Central America for you. Everything here grows like weeds.

Like the wild herbs poking through the scrub beside the Mask Temple, which Kip kneels to inspect. These herb leaves are bigger than the leaves on any wild herb Kip's ever seen before.

Mindlessly Kip tugs on one of the plants, but it doesn't budge. Kip pulls again, harder, but fails again. Pissed, he sets down his gun, stands upright, bends at the waist, and yanks with all his might on the herb with both hands. At last the roots relent, and the herb emerges from the loamy soil, trailing a massive root system. Holy hell. The damn plant must weigh close to 50 pounds.

Kip drops the herb and shakes his head.

The fuckin' rain forest. Where life runs amok.

Kip retrieves his gun and, for the sake of his aching back, sits on the step beside the stone slide – leaning forward, in case the wood door suddenly opens.

But still the door stays shut, as quiet as the jungle in the night.

In school Kip never gave a damn about history. Yet here, in the near-pitch-dark of the fading moonlight, he can't shake the brooding spirit of the blood-flecked Maya past, all around him.

This place even *smells* like death.

Kip chuckles at his own uncharacteristic skittishness. *Note to Self: next time you go raid an old Maya temple, try to come up with a plan that does not involve standing in the shadow of the spooky old temple for an hour in the dark, right beside the old death slide. Done and done.*

But it can't just be the long bloody history this death slide's seen that's oppressing Kip, because all Maya temples have a death slide. It's something intangible about the Mask Temple, making it feel more primitive than other Maya temples. Like this temple was built by men more violent, and more *fearful*, than the builders of later Maya temples. Not haughty, aristocratic rulers, seeking to cow their vassals into submission by the sheer mass of their arrogant temples; but rather, bare-knuckled rulers, who still understood that they themselves had only recently emerged from the darker chaos of the jungle – and who still understood how thin the line is between man and beast. The builders of the Mask Temple had every reason to be proud of figuring out how to erect such an awesome building, centuries before Europeans built anything like it; yet, to Kip, it feels like they had no illusions that their advanced architectural skills separated them, in any meaningful way, from nature's harsher laws. To the contrary, it's like this huge squat violent and indestructible temple was built, not in defiance of nature, but in submission to its darker force.

A crashing noise nearby startles Kip. Instinctively he drops to one knee and assumes a shooting position, pointing his gun out at the dark jungle. Twenty yards away, Bruce, too, assumes a shooting position, and scans the tree line in all directions through the rifle sight of his AK-47.

But after five anxious minutes, Kip concludes it must've been just coatis, scuffling in the thickets. After waving to Bruce to stand down, Kip turns and takes a leak against the Mask Temple stone, and returns to watching the wooden door next to him.

Time passes. Slowly.

Kip works hard to keep focus. Whenever the beguiling touch of a former lover comes to mind, Kip squashes the image of her fragrant charms at once, by imagining the creak of the wood door beside him opening. Whenever a random family memory comes to mind, like his Marine Corps father scowling the day Kip wrecked his car, or his mother playing Jeopardy at home against the television contestants, or his little sister bawling her head off the day Kip tripped her and she broke all four front teeth, Kip squashes the random memory by reviewing, again, the precise sequence of steps he'll have to follow here, once the wood door opens, which could be this very second. And whenever he finds himself hearing, again, the endless indictments his ex-wife leveled against him, daily, during their short, unhappy marriage, Kip bites his own tongue to stop the noise.

But hardest for Kip to suppress is the fictitious internal dialogue he always carries on with Mel Fisher, the Key West treasure hunter who was Kip's mentor growing up in Florida. Crazy ole Mel, the butt of all jokes, never had two nickels to rub together – till 1985 when, at age 63, Mel found a billion dollar Spanish treasure ship off the Keys. And got the last laugh on everyone.

Mel was a tough old bird, but all those years before he struck gold, even with dozens of creditors circling like buzzards round his door, Mel never broke the law. So in the eternal call-and-shout that plagues Kip's mind, Mel regularly reproaches Kip for resorting to violence.

*'That's piracy, kid,'* Mel says. *'Leave me alone, Mel,'* Kip retorts. *'I'm not lucky like you.'*

At last, to Kip's relief, come the heedless harbingers of the dawn. First the howler monkeys stake out their territory, with huge scratchy roars, like antic children slowly opening un-oiled doors. Next the songbirds chirp, their numbers so immense they soon drown out the monkeys. And last comes another familiar jungle sound, which Kip can't quite place – a rhythmic beating of the leaves, a heavy flapping, like dozens of tents coming loose from their moorings all at once.

Kip puzzles without success for several minutes over that low, throbbing, flapping sound.

Until the first red tinge of dawn shows itself over the tops of the towering trees across the dark lagoon on its eastern shore. Now, in the grubby first light of day, Kip sees the cause of that familiar low, throbbing, flapping sound.

Buzzards.

Dozens of black vultures, swooping in and out of the trees, and circling right above Kip. Spooked, Kip walks a few steps out into the wild herbs, and casts his eye back up at the top of the Mask Temple, where he sees dozens more vultures, perched on the classic Maya roof comb.

*What the hell?* Kip's not superstitious, but buzzards'd strike anyone as a bad omen.

Kip looks across the scrub at Bruce and the guide. They plainly see the buzzards, too. Kip looks sideway at the wood door, still shut. Something's wrong. He can feel it in his gut. Something's stirring those buzzards' blood lust. And whatever it is, it can't be good.

\* \* \*

Deep in the throes of the most primordial of human passions, Dr. Clive Phelps remembers what his lover, Gemma Murray, likes best. Slowing the rhythm of his own aggressive thrusting, Clive gently, but persistently, traces small circles round the anterior junction of Gemma's dilated *labia minora*, then steadily shortens the radius of those circles, while accelerating the pace of his circumambient index finger, until the ever-tightening circles reach her smallest, most sensitive, part. As Clive anticipated, the coaxing motion of his circling finger induces Gemma's mouth to form a circle of its own, her swollen lips pursed in an expression of sweet surrender. Closing her pellucid eyes in pure ecstasy, Gemma emits a wild soprano moan, signaling her release.

The sights and sounds of Gemma's pleasure fill Clive with a primitive sense of his own power, causing Clive, in turn, to climax, with a wild rush of blood to his head, followed by a shudder in his loins, as he spills his seed into the dark passageway that leads to Gemma's womb – or, more accurately, medically speaking, the dark passageway that leads to oblivion, because of Gemma's prudent daily use of birth control pills. At the same moment, Clive's arms turn to jelly, and he collapses onto Gemma's supple body, his face parachuting into the pillow beside her head.

Clive knows that the proper etiquette, for lovers canoodling just after dawn in a lush bed in the swanky Jolly Roger resort on Ambergris Caye in Belize, calls for him to raise up on his elbows, gaze wordlessly into Gemma's eyes, and stay with her awhile for an after-glow. 'In the moment', as Gemma likes to say. And honestly, Clive wishes he was the kind of man who could stay 'in the moment.' But almost the instant his sperm departed, Clive felt the bright morning sunlight, flooding through the windows, warming Clive's thighs like a hot reproach. How much time has Clive lost already, dallying in bed? As he rises up on his elbows, Clive sneaks a glance at his travel clock – quickly noting the time, 7:30 a.m. – before gazing into Gemma's eyes, as good manners dictate.

"On the clock again today, are we?" Gemma sighs. "Clive, you really must learn to relax."

"I'm sorry, Gem – it's just, I'm nervous about my telomerase lecture this afternoon."

"Bollocks! You've given that telomerase lecture a dozen times. Everyone loves it. You're a Member of the Royal Society. You've testified before Parliament. Don't expect me to believe a small conference of half-crooked docs on holiday, who only came to Belize to get a sun-burn and probably wouldn't care if you just got up and mooned them all, makes you the least bit nervous."

Wriggling out from under Clive's carcass, Gemma smiles at him, and heads for the loo.

Well, at least Gem's in a jolly mood. A thundering good orgasm tends to do that.

The instant the bathroom door closes, Clive springs out of bed and heads straight for his medical journals, stacked high on the hotel room's desk.

But before he gets to the desk, Clive's attention is diverted by the sight of his entire naked body, captured in the room's full-length mirror. Every day Clive sees his handsome face, in the bathroom mirror; and sometimes even on the telly. But very rarely does Clive see his naked body, even though he's quite fit for a man of 38. And virtually never does Clive see the inspiring sight he now sees: his tumid priapic organ, still swollen from its recent congress with Miss Murray.

Clive cocks his head to contemplate the spectacle of his engorged member, pulsing hard with pure vitality. From a purely clinical point-of-view, the male erection is a tribute to the majesty of the human cell – and to the RNA-encoded telomeres upon which the life of every human cell depends. If only all our telomeres remained healthy and vibrant, we'd live forever; but like Clive's already-flagging erection, telomeres, too, lose steam and become frayed and useless, far too soon.

And then we die.

But is the cure for death, Clive wonders, as simple as the basic rhythms of life, expressed in the act of love in which he was so recently engaged? Perhaps—

Unfortunately, Gemma picks this very moment to pop back out of the bathroom to fetch a hairbrush, and catches Clive in the act of admiring his own life force in the mirror.

"What *is* it about men?" Gemma teases. "You just never get over having a penis, do you?"

Clive grins. "Definitely my favorite organ. I just wish he didn't run out of bullets so fast."

"I'm rather glad 'he' does." Gemma arches an eyebrow. "Or I'd never get a moment's rest."

She laughs and returns to the bathroom, just as Clive's mobile rings.

"Dr. Phelps? It's Robert Margulies at *The New York Times*. You asked me to call early today for our interview, so I hope I'm not too—"

"It's fine. Dawn is the only good time to catch me. Just remind me, your story is about ... ?"

"Telomerase. Ever since the three Americans won the Nobel Prize last year for discovering telomerase, we've heard a lot about how vaccinating against telomerase may cure cancer. But my editor wants me to do a year-end story about the role of telomerase in aging and death, which we don't hear so much about. I'm told you're the world's leading expert on, well, on death."

"I prefer to say I'm an expert on *mortality*." Clive chuckles. "Sounds better."

"Okay. What's the current focus of your mortality research, Dr. Phelps?"

"Identifying a mechanism to activate telomerase in somatic human cells."

"But isn't everyone else trying to *kill off* telomerase with vaccines, so we don't get cancer?"

"They are," Clive says. "But cancer and immortality are just flip sides of the same coin."

A pause. Presumably the journo is writing down Clive's catchy quote. "In what sense?"

"Cancer cells replicate endlessly," Clive explains, "and are therefore theoretically immortal. Except of course they die when they kill their hosts. So as you correctly noted, the immortality

of cancer cells is the problem to which most telomerase research is directed: how to kill cancer cells, before they kill us. But we mustn't forget, cancer cells have mastered the art our somatic cells have not – how to replicate beyond Hayflick's Limit, so they never grow old and die of their own accord."

"What's a 'somatic cell'?" Margulies asks. "And what's 'Hayflick's Limit'?"

Clive suppresses the urge to tell the journo to go look these things up on Wikipedia before wasting Clive's time. But Clive can't do that, because free publicity like this attracts investment money, like bees to honey. Still, realizing this interview'll take longer than he'd hoped, Clive sits down, the steel hotel desk chair cold against his naked bum. "A somatic cell is a non-cancerous cell – a 'good' cell, if you will. Somatic cells are all the cells in your body you want to live forever."

"Got it. I've heard that term before, 'somatic cell' – I just never knew what it meant."

"No problem," Clive says. "Dr. Leonard Hayflick is the scientist who discovered that, during a normal human lifetime, our somatic cells divide about 50 times, which keeps our bodies alive about 75 years, plus or minus – but then our cells hit the limit named for Dr. Hayflick, and stop dividing. Once our cells stop dividing, they grow senescent and die – and we, alas, die with them."

"I thought our skin cells regenerate, like, every day. Or, like, when we get cut, and bleed."

"If you suffer trauma, your skin cells engage in a healing process independent of Hayflick's Limit. And even absent trauma, you may feel you're always getting 'new skin' because, at any moment, about 5% of your skin cells are undergoing their regularly-scheduled recursive divisions. But each skin cell, individually, only divides about 50 times, like most other somatic cells – except those involved in the immune system, which divide more often but still reach a recursive limit."

"So how will you get our somatic cells to replicate beyond Hayflick's Limit?"

"Telomerase," Clive says. "Are you wearing shoes with laces right now?"

"Uh, yeah, I am. Sneakers."

"Splendid. Take one 'sneaker' off, Mr. Margulies, so you can follow with me here. Hold it up, and look closely at the ends of your shoelaces. Are the little plastic bits at the ends still intact?"

"Well, uh, one plastic end is intact, but the other one is really gnarly."

"Brilliant! Your shoelaces will make perfect illustrations of Hayflick's Limit. Let's start with the end where the plastic bit's still intact, shall we? Pull the lace out from the top eye-hole in your sneaker there, and pinch the plastic bit between your thumb and forefinger. You with me?"

"Uh, yeah. Got it."

"Good. Now, imagine your shoelace is a cell. Each time the cell divides, the end of the cell gets run through the ringer, just the way the plastic bit at the end of your lace gets jammed in and out of the eyehole, each time you lace up your sneakers. So what happens to the cell is, with each replication, the end of the cell frays, and shortens, just like your shoelace does. Eventually the end of the cell becomes so frayed, it can't go through the ringer

anymore, as I gather the other end of your shoelace there no longer can. Can you take hold of that 'gnarly' end a minute now, please?"

"You mean, the end that's already reached Hayflick's Limit?"

"Oh, well done, Robert! Truly, if all my students were so quick, I could spend more time in the laboratory. Yes, take hold of the end that's already reached Hayflick's Limit – the frayed end."

"Got it."

"Remember, the cell is your entire shoelace. So you see, like your shoelace with the frayed end, the cell still has plenty of life left in it, even though the end is frayed. It could keep replicating, unbounded, for many more decades – theoretically, forever – if only we could figure out how to fix the worn-out end of it, so it could keep on going through the eyehole of your sneaker during replication. But you already know how to keep your frayed old shoelace end working, don't you?"

"I spit on it," Margulies says, "and twist the frayed end, and then it goes through."

"Exactly what we all do to repair a frayed shoelace. And the way that cells repair that same problem – the frayed ends of cells, after so many replications – is telomerase."

"So telomerase is like spit?"

"Somewhat," Clive says. "Only telomerase doesn't come from the outside, like our saliva fixing shoelaces does. With cells, the fixer-upper, the telomerase, is already there, inside every cell. You see, in a human cell, the equivalent of the plastic bit at the end of your shoelace is called a telomere, which is what allows the cell to keep replicating. And next to the telomere, in every cell, is the enzyme we call telomerase, designed to repair the telomere, whenever it gets frayed."

"So why doesn't the telomerase fix our cells when our cells grow old?"

"That's the big mystery. Right now in our somatic cells – our 'good' cells – the telomerase just sits there, maddeningly dormant, while the cell grows senescent and dies. That's why we die."

"Then how do you even know telomerase can fix a frayed telomere?"

"Because in *cancer* cells, that's what telomerase does. That's why cancer cells could theoretically live forever. When the telomere at the end of a *cancer* cell starts to fray, the telomerase in a cancer cell leaps into action, repairs the frayed telomere, and the cancer cell keeps on replicating, far beyond Hayflick's Limit – until the cancer finally kills its host."

"So if you can figure out how to activate telomerase in somatic cells—"

"Then you and I can live forever – or at least, until we die from violence."

"In which case," Margulies says, "you'll be the doctor who conquered death."

"Indeed." Clive pauses, to give Margulies time to write down his own catchy words. "Fact is, Robert, death is just a disease, like any other. Waiting for a cure, just like any other disease."

A pause ensues. Clive can almost see the journo's pen, scribbling like mad.

"So, back to my original question, Dr. Phelps: what specific mortality research are you involved in, right now, to activate telomerase in somatic cells?"

"Well, I can't give away state secrets, Robert. We're trying many different compounds and enzymes, to see what's most effective in activating telomerase. But don't worry, we'll find it. As the famous medical saying goes, '*don't think, just try*'. So right now, we're trying lots of different things."

"Are you *close* to conquering death?"

Clive pauses. "The lawyers tell me I have to be very, very careful, answering predictive questions like that. We have investors, you see, and therefore stocks are involved. You have a veritable minefield of securities laws in your country, regarding 'forward-looking statements' and 'safe harbor provisions'. All I'm allowed to say is, we're making very good progress."

"Will there be clinical trials on humans soon?"

"Researchers other than I have already publicly predicted clinical trials of immortality drugs on humans within ten years," Clive says. "I believe it'll be sooner than that."

"Who are these other researchers? I'd like to quote them, if that's okay with you."

Clive hesitates. He hates to give his main rivals free publicity. Better to quote obscure academics. "I'll have my assistant fax you some names before noon. Will that be soon enough?"

"Yes, thank you. How much sooner than ten years d'you think the human trials will be?"

"I wouldn't care to hazard a guess publicly, Mr. Margulies. But I'll be sure to let you know, as far in advance of the clinical trials as the lawyers will allow me to."

"Thank you. By the way, I saw that before you won the Lasker Award and the Gruber Genetics Prize, you also won the Landon Prize back in 2001 – isn't that for cancer research?"

"Yes, it is. I started out doing cancer research, but then got hooked on mortality research."

"What made you switch?"

Clive blinks. An image of his tragic son, Nigel, flashes to mind. "Just a natural progression, I suppose. Like I said before, cancer and immortality are really flip sides of the same coin."

"Okay, thanks. If I find I have more questions later, would it be alright to call you again?"

"Absolutely. If I don't answer, leave me a voice mail, and I'll call back as soon as I'm able."

"Thanks so much, Dr. Phelps. Is there anything else you can tell me that I failed to ask?"

"You were lucky to be born when you were, Robert. I predict you'll never die."

Clive smiles and hangs up the phone. He ends all his interviews and lectures with that line.

Clive turns in his chair, and sees Gemma, showered and standing next to him, dressed in a breath-takingly skimpy sun dress. She's flipping through a tourist brochure.

"Why are you so much sexier *in* your clothes than I am out of mine?" Clive asks.

Gemma inspects Clive's naked body with clinical detachment. "It's a mystery. But what I want to know is, why does Lamanai have to be closed till next week? I really wanted to go there! But there's a day trip we can take to the Maya ruins at Altun Ha. Shall I sign us up for tomorrow?"

Clive looks at the stack of medical journals piled high on the desk.

"I – I need to work, Gem. Why don't you go to Altun Ha without me?"

Gemma puts a hand on one of her lithe hips. "No, love, I'm not going off on a dangerous junket in the primeval jungle without you. Would Wednesday be better for you?"

Clive winces. "Gem, I'm sure you'll be perfectly safe without me. The hotel wouldn't—"

"My safety is not the point. I came down here to spend quality time with you, Clive, away from Oxford and all your work." Ruefully Gemma glances at the stack of journals. "Or so I thought."

"And we've been together every second the past 24 hours," Clive points out.

"Well, if you don't count the three phone calls with your research assistants last night during dinner, and your constant emailing on your Blackberry all through our romantic moonlit beach walk last night, I suppose that would be true. But we're here for a week, Clive, not 24 hours."

"I have a lecture to give this afternoon," Clive pleads.

"Those journals are not for your lecture. They're – actually, I don't know what the hell they're for, or why you felt you had to drag them all the way down here to snarl up our vacation."

"Knowledge moves somewhat faster in medicine, dear, than it does in Maya studies." No sooner are these pompous words out his mouth than Clive regrets them. But it's too late to recant.

"Oh, *believe me*, I know your work is *far* more important than mine." Gemma stretches 'far' out till it's a three-syllable word. "That fact gets drummed into me whenever we're together. And 51 weeks of the year, that's fine with me, Clive. But this one week, while we're down here so close to the land that was once all Maya, couldn't we just *pretend* you think my work is important, too?"

"I *do* think your work is important, Dr. Murray. If you recall, we met because I read your book about Maya medicine – *Rainforest Remedies* – and I rang you to tell you how much I liked it."

"You rang me to quarrel with my thesis that a 'primitive' Maya healer can actually do more good for many human ailments with ancient healing herbs than modern pharmaceuticals do."

"That was just a diversionary tactic, Gem, so I could persuade you to have dinner with me."

"Don't try to charm your way out of this, you smoothie." Gemma sighs. "Clive, I don't want to argue with you. But I also do not wish to spend my holiday watching you read medical journals."

"Precisely why I think you should go to Altun Ha tomorrow without me. Old Maya ruins'll plainly interest you more than me. Meanwhile I'll attend the conference today, and plow through these journals without you tomorrow, and then I'll be more fun later in the week."

"But our holiday'll be half over by the time you come up for air!" Gemma protests. "Clive, I understand you have to attend the conference today. But what's so bloody important about these journals that you've got to read them tomorrow? Why can't they wait till next week?"

Clive looks at the blasted journals, but just can't give them up. "I'm running out of time."

"Why? Who's put a deadline on you? Your investors?"

"My son."

Gemma looks utterly gobsmacked. "Your son? *Nigel*?"

Clive nods. Seeing where this is going, he reaches for his wallet, lying there on the desk.

Gemma peers intently at Clive. "I don't have any idea how Nigel comes into your work. All you've ever told me is, Nigel's very sick, and lives with his mum."

Wordlessly Clive hands Gemma a recent photograph of Nigel Phelps.

Immediately, and involuntarily, Gemma recoils, stifling a gasp at the sight of Nigel's thin white hair, balding at the temples; his withered features; and the deep, wide wrinkles lining his skin.

"This was taken this summer, at Nigel's 9<sup>th</sup> birthday." Gloomily Clive stares at the photo, though every pixel in the digital image is forever burned into his mental hard drive. "We couldn't have a real party for the little guy, because he has no schoolmates. No friends his age, you see."

"Why – what's—?"

"Nigel has *progeria syndrome*. Accelerated aging. That's why he looks 69, instead of 9. He's got about three years to live. Unless I find a way to turn back the clock for him."

The travel brochure falls from Gemma's hand.

Absently Gemma bends to pick up the brochure. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I don't like to tell people Nigel's the reason I switched from cancer research to mortality research. It sounds – a bit cheesy, I feel. And I don't want to put the poor fellow in the spotlight."

"But I'm not just – 'people,'" Gemma protests.

"Precisely why I shared this with you, Gemma. For what it's worth, you're the only person, besides Nigel's mother, who's ever seen this photograph."

Gemma gazes awhile at the photograph of Nigel's preternaturally lined face. Then, with her uncanny knack for locating Clive's weakest point, even when she's not trying to expose him, she asks: "Can activating telomerase in human cells really 'turn back the clock' for Nigel?"

Clive bites his lip. "Probably not." Clive stands, suddenly aware of his foolish nakedness. "But it could stop the sands of time from running out any further on him than they already have."

Gemma raises a dubious eyebrow. "So then, if you were to find the key to activating telomerase, Nigel would stay – like this – forever?"

"Still better than being *dead*, wouldn't you agree?"

Gemma tilts her head, plainly startled by Clive's suddenly sharp tone. "Oh, of course, it's just – I – well, I—" abruptly, Gemma bursts into tears, and buries her head in Clive's shoulder.

Mechanically Clive swings an arm round her back. But the heat and pulse of the woman soon warms him up, and he wraps both arms round her in a true embrace.

"I'm sorry, Clive, I shouldn't have pressed," Gemma sobs.

"It's alright." Clive strokes her hair.

"No, it's not. It was so trusting of you to share all this with me. It helps me understand your obsession with work. But then I had to go and – press . . ."

"It's all fine. Really, Gem. I'm glad we got all this out in the open."

Through her tears, Gemma gazes at Clive. "You sure?"

"I'm sure. I want everything out in the open between us. Always."

Gemma wipes her tears away and smiles, playfully giving Clive's naked torso a once-over. "I can see that. But will you be dressing for breakfast, or are you going in the buff?"

"I'll dress. And while I do, why don't you book us two seats to Altun Ha tomorrow?"

“Oh no, Clive, you don’t have to—”

“Yes, I do,” Clive mutters through clenched teeth. “Like you said, I need to learn to relax.”

\* \* \*

At the desk of her father’s London hotel room, Joyce Kerr, 40, sits in shock – the condition she’s been in, for two hours now – watching the legal representatives of the modern state perform the various morbid functions the law requires, whenever a human death is discovered.

First, there was the brief, horrid examination by the Hilton Hotel’s house detective – a retired London cop in an appalling green suit, with an impenetrable Cockney accent, summoned by Joyce only because her 75-year-old father, Justin Kerr, failed to answer Joyce’s knocks and calls this morning, even though Justin was so excited last night to get an early start on this, his first full day of vacation in London with his daughter, Joyce. The shock of finding her father dead in his bed had been so brutal, Joyce couldn’t recall much from the time she spent with the hotel’s green-suited rent-a-cop, except he said ‘stand back, Missy, this may be a crime scene’ when Joyce got close to the inert cadaver her father had become, to try to glean what happened.

Next came the local Southwark constabulary, who treated Joyce with the officious respect they must, presumably, be trained to give any member of the deceased’s family who, so far as they know, is both bereaved and yet, also, a potential suspect in the death – their chilly courtesy prompting Joyce to seek refuge in the desk chair, for the duration of these inescapable formalities.

Last came Scotland Yard, and the London coroner, to investigate the scene, properly. Their arrival turned out to be both good and bad. The good – if anything can be termed ‘good’ on the day of your father’s death – is that Scotland Yard and the coroner soon concluded it was an ‘apparent’ heart attack, which meant Joyce stopped feeling like the unjustly accused in a Kafka novel. The bad, however, was that ‘procedure’ requires, evidently, hours of tedious examination to confirm the egregiously obvious fact that Joyce’s elderly father died while masturbating.

Because lying on the floor, never expressly acknowledged, yet plainly not unnoticed by any of the various officials passing through the room, is a girlie magazine titled, laconically, ‘Gents’.

Oh, this whole ordeal is all too grim, and mortifying, to be actually happening!

And yet it is. As Joyce’s 12-year-old daughter, Lisa – currently ensconced, by court order, with Joyce’s utterly unreliable ex-husband, Michael – likes to say, ‘it is what it is, Mom.’

Yeah, Lisa. It is what is. But what *this* is, if anyone ever makes me spell it out for you, as one day they may, well, it ain’t good. Your grandfather – my father, whom I’ve loved and honored all my 40 years – died jacking off to a bosomy lovely named Tiffany. *If* that really is her name.

So Joyce sits in shock, feeling miserable. Her knuckles ache from drumming them on the desk all afternoon, since this is no-smoking room, and she desperately needs a cigarette. What a

bad time she picked to try to quit. Her upper arm itches from the patch, which did not agree with her, and left a rash; and her brain is crying out for the sweet relief a smoke would afford her.

Yet instead of sweet relief, all Joyce has is busty Tiffany, falling out of her preposterously tight top. Thank God Joyce's mother, Ellen, died six years ago, and didn't have to endure this humiliating end to her husband's erratic life. Random words of Justin's assault Joyce's mind: *No matter what you young people think, the need for loving never dies.* OK, Daddy, I believe you. But when you said the 'need for love', did you really mean the need for 'Double-G Tiffany'?

Alone with her own ironic dialogue with her dead father, Joyce chokes back bitter tears.

To Joyce's relief, the lead Scotland Yard detective, Barry Foulds, sits on the bed, ready for a 'convo' with Joyce, as little Lisa would call it. Bad as this convo may be, it can't be any worse than sitting alone with her own dark thoughts about her father's final vulgar moments on earth.

"Do you have any family here in England?" Detective-Inspector Foulds asks.

Joyce shakes her head no – but then remembers her cousin, twice-removed. "Well, I do have one cousin in London, but she's 85 and we're not on speaking terms, and she's been lost in her own little world for 50 years, translating a single ancient Maya codex. So – ah, no, basically."

Foulds gives Joyce a very strange, almost bewildered, look, as he drinks this in.

"Is there a problem?" Joyce asks. "Am I legally required to notify my cousin or something?"

"No." Foulds raises an eyebrow. "Is your cousin, by any chance, named Fiona Young?"

Joyce's eyes open wide. "Yes! How did – how could you possibly know that?"

"I met Dr. Young last year, when she was lying down in front of a digger, protesting the demolition of an unlisted 18<sup>th</sup> century house in St. Thomas Street."

Joyce gapes. "I – I didn't know Fiona ever left her flat. She's a legendary hermit."

"For this one old house she made an exception. God knows why." Foulds coughs, very dry. "Right. I assume you'll want to take your father's body back to the States for burial?"

Joyce blinks. She hadn't thought this far ahead. "Well, um, Daddy wanted to be cremated."

Foulds brightens. "Ah! That will make things much easier. You're certain?"

Joyce meets the detective's eyes. "Perhaps I'd better call our lawyer, just to be sure."

So Joyce calls her boss, attorney David Burns in Ann Arbor, Michigan, an old family friend of the Kerrs. David is, as always, great in a crisis. After making sure Joyce is okay, David confirms that Justin Kerr's Will specifies cremation and no service. He also tells Joyce he will handle, from Ann Arbor, the arrangements for the London cremation, the death notices, and booking Joyce the earliest flight back home. Half an hour later, David calls back, apprising Joyce he's hired Honor Oak Crematorium in Southwark, apologizing that he couldn't get her on a flight back to Detroit until tomorrow afternoon, and promising to meet her plane. Joyce thanks David warmly, and hangs up.

"All set," Joyce reports to Foulds. "Honour Oak Crematorium will pick up the body. I'll take the ashes home tomorrow afternoon." Joyce blinks away tears. "No muss, no fuss."

"Honour Oak are very reliable." Foulds' eyes size Joyce up a moment. "Will you need any assistance before they get here, Mrs. Kerr? We have someone you can talk to, if you like."

"It's *Miss* Kerr," Joyce whispers. "And no, I'll be alright. Thank you, though."

Foulds nods. His eyes scan the books and papers on Justin Kerr's hotel desk, stopping at a copy Justin made yesterday afternoon, at the British Library, of a 19 July 1868 story in Lloyd's Illustrated Newspaper, about the death of Justin Kerr's great-grandfather, Roger Quinlan:

### DEATH OF AN EXPLORER

On Friday 17<sup>th</sup> July Dr. Lankester held an Inquest in the Grand Hall of the Royal Society for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge, Burlington House, Piccadilly, on the body of Roger Quinlan, aged 29 years. Mr. Quinlan, the only son of the late Chester Quinlan of Mary-le-bone, and formerly a medical student at Christ Church College, Oxford, very recently returned from scientific explorations in the uncharted jungles of Honduras, and was addressing, in excited utterances, a crowd of spectators on the paving stones outside Burlington House, when he suddenly fell down dead.

Two members of the Royal Society, Dr. A.M. Higgins and Dr. J.D. Grove, carried Mr. Quinlan into Burlington House to administer emergency ministrations, which proved ultimately unsuccessful. Thereafter it was determined that the Inquest should be conducted within the Royal Society, even though Mr. Quinlan was not a Member.

Dr. Higgins testified that on Friday morning Mr. Quinlan arrived at Burlington House, and in an animated manner attempted to nominate him-

self as a new Member of the Royal Society, claiming he'd discovered the lost Mayan city of Lamanai, deep in the wilds of the Honduras jungle; and claiming further, that amidst the ruins there, he had found the fabled Fountain of Youth. When Royal Society functionaries advised Mr. Quinlan that new Members are not permitted to nominate themselves, Mr. Quinlan prevailed upon his wife, Kathleen Quinlan, then in attendance, to nominate him; and when the Society's functionaries further advised that women may not make nominations, Mr. Quinlan created a disturbance, which resulted in Dr. Higgins being summoned to eject Mr. Quinlan from the premises.

Dr. Higgins further testified that, so far as he could determine from brief personal observations, made whilst escorting Mr. Quinlan out of Burlington House, Mr. Quinlan appeared to be, in spite of his manifest excitability, perfectly sober and of sound mind and body; indeed, Mr. Quinlan struck Mr. Higgins as the very picture of robust good health, being unusually tall and impressively strong, quite handsome,

and exceedingly fit, although deeply sun-burnt from his recent travels in the tropics.

Dr. Grove testified that, an hour after Mr. Quinlan was ejected from Burlington House, he and Dr. Higgins left Burlington House with the intention of taking their mid-day meal at their club, when they discovered that Mr. Quinlan had, by this time, gathered a crowd of spectators in Piccadilly, just outside Burlington House, and was expatiating upon the topic of his recent explorations in Honduras. Mr. Quinlan produced a beaker of Liquid from the warm south, which he claimed contained waters from the Fountain of Youth; and, with a magician's flair for the dramatic, quaffed the Liquid in a single gulp, before announcing that his Discovery would forever "change the world, for people will now live for many centuries, if not forever."

Then suddenly the beaker slipped from Mr. Quinlan's hand and broke on the paving stones; Mr. Quinlan bent over double at the waist, as if in the grip of a great Ague; his face became extremely florid; and without another word, Mr. Quinlan collapsed upon the paving stones. Dr. Grove examined Mr. Quinlan on the spot, and determined he had succumbed to a raging tropical fever, which had caused his heart to stop beating.

Mr. Quinlan's wife Kathleen, a young woman of remarkable personal attractions, although deeply sun-burnt

from accompanying her husband on his travels in the tropics, was barely able to speak, due to her deep distress at witnessing the recent untimely death of her young and vigorous husband. Mrs. Quinlan testified that, for the past two months, her husband had been imbibing small quantities of the waters from the beaker, which he collected during his explorations in the jungle at Lamanai, without any noticeable ill effect upon his health. She testified that she had not drunk the waters from the beaker, but in all other respects, she imbibed the same food and drink as her husband, the past two days. Thereafter Mrs. Quinlan broke down in a paroxysm of sobbing and had to be excused from the proceedings.

The Coroner said that the lamentable case was without a doubt a death resulting from an exotic tropical poison, which originated, apparently, in a previously undiscovered fountain of death, which Mr. Quinlan unfortunately mistook for the fountain of youth.

The jury concurred with the Coroner, returning a verdict "that the deceased explorer expired from the effects of a disease of unknown origin, most likely contracted from imbibing an unknown native poison, acquired during his recent travels in Honduras."

The Coroner thanked the Members of the Royal Society for their humanitarian efforts, and concluded the Inquest by noting that Mrs. Quinlan

had donated all the deceased explorer's papers and plaster casts of Indian writing to the British Museum; and assuring the public that all necessary sanitation measures had been taken in Piccadilly, including the covering of

the Liquid, accidentally spilled by Mr. Quinlan, with several cubic yards of fresh soil, to ensure that the venomous Poison spilled there would not endanger the public health.

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Detective-Inspector Foulds looks up from reading. "Is everyone in your family a Mayan scholar, Miss Kerr?"

"Huh? Oh – no, Daddy's an engineer." Joyce waves an absent hand in the air, as she recognizes, too late, her inadvertent verb tense error. "Was, an engineer. And I'm a paralegal."

Idly Foulds paws through the other books and papers Justin left scattered on the desk. "But these all seem to be about the Quinlans, and their search for lost Mayan cities."

As Foulds is talking, Joyce notices that one of the books Foulds just overturned – a handwritten diary by Roger Quinlan's wife, Kathleen Quinlan – now lies open, exposing a stamp inside its cover which was previously not visible: 'Property of the British Library'.

Since the British Library is *not* a lending library, the presence of one of its books here, in the Southwark Hilton Hotel, is irrefutable evidence that Justin must've stolen it yesterday. But – much as the sharp-eyed Foulds chose, presumably from discretion, not to rub Joyce's face in the ample cleavage of buxom Tiffany, lying there on the floor – so, too, sharp-eyed Foulds now appears not to notice the incriminating library stamp, inside the cover of Kathleen Quinlan's diary.

Joyce isn't sure why she feels a need to cover-up her father's latest crime. After all, Justin's stone cold dead. So it's not like anybody's going to charge him, posthumously, with misappropriating an obscure national treasure from the British Library. If Kathleen Quinlan's diary even qualifies as a treasure. Which Joyce sincerely doubts.

But still. It's bad enough the police know all about Justin's fatal obsession with Tiffany. Joyce sees no need to drag her father's name further through the mud, with official recognition that Justin was also, apparently, a book thief. Taking a deep breath, and trying her best to look casual, like an absent-minded grieving daughter, Joyce answers the detective's implicit question, while at the same time closing shut Kathleen Quinlan's diary: "Roger Quinlan was Daddy's great-grandfather. Daddy was hoping we could learn more about Roger on this vacation to London."

Foulds seems to accept this explanation, and prattles on awhile about Fiona Young and Roger Quinlan, and the 'Mayans', as he calls them, though Joyce knows, from her cousin Fiona Young – once a Professor of Central American Studies at the University of Michigan, who helped raise Joyce before she stopped speaking to her – that the original residents of the Yucatan Peninsula and Guatemala are properly known as the 'Maya', not the 'Mayans', and that 'Mayan' is an adjective used only for the language of the Maya. But Joyce listens to

Foulds with only half an ear, because she's trying to reconstruct how and when, exactly, her father filched Kathleen Quinlan's diary from the British Library.

Justin must've swiped it as they were leaving yesterday afternoon, when he made such a fuss about needing to use the toilet. Vaguely Joyce remembers Justin opening his briefcase at the security desk, and then abruptly hurrying off to the restroom, pleading an urgent need, while Joyce alone passed through the security detector, with Justin's briefcase. Then, when Justin came back from the restroom, he must've avoided going through the detector – unbeknownst to Joyce.

Who knew her father was such an adroit and talented thief?

Justin Kerr was a brilliant engineer, and an idealist who used what even he admitted were extreme tactics to try to save the small laser company he co-founded in the 1960s from being sold to a big conglomerate by his greedier partners. Those 'extreme tactics' were later deemed, by prosecutors and juries, to constitute embezzlement. Which Joyce has no doubt is exactly what they were – even though Justin only misappropriated corporate funds to try to weaken the balance sheet and prevent the sale of the company he loved, rather than for personal profit.

Still and all, though, Justin Kerr was no crook. So far as Joyce knows, Justin only broke the law once in his life, and that was part of a complex corporate battle. He was no thief.

Or was he?

Obviously, there were many things Joyce never knew about her father. Ruefully Joyce glances at Tiffany the cover girl, still lying on the floor, directly beneath the man whose dying thoughts were, presumably, all devoted to Tiffany's deep *décolletage*.

"It might be best if you wait downstairs, Miss Kerr, for the Honor Oak men to come." Foulds looks sincerely concerned about Joyce. "Sitting in here alone with the body could be a bit—"

Joyce starts to argue – but then she imagines the sweet relaxation she would feel, deep in her brain, from a cigarette, were she to leave Justin's no-smoking room. There must be someone downstairs she can bum a smoke from.

"Yes, thank you, I will wait downstairs. But would it be okay if first I collect all my father's things? So I don't have to come back in here later?"

Respectfully Foulds nods assent.

Joyce collects everything from the closet and the bathroom – leaving only the empty airplane-size bottles of Scotch, which Justin left littered around the sink – and throws it all into his suitcase. Then she sweeps all the books and papers off the desk into the suitcase, too. She can return the stolen diary to the British Library tomorrow morning, before her afternoon flight.

But seeing the diary causes Joyce to wonder: why in the world did Justin Kerr think Kathleen Quinlan's diary was important enough to risk stealing?

## CHAPTER TWO

# The Way of All Flesh

Monday 27 December 2010

When the sun rises above the trees along the western shore of the New River Lagoon, Kip Hunter decides he's had enough of the ominous buzzards circling overhead. Time for action.

Pistol drawn, Kip creeps three steps sideways and grabs the handle of the wood door the 19<sup>th</sup> century archeologists cut into the tomb at the base of the Mask Temple at Lamanai.

What the hell. Time to grip it and rip it. Let the chips fall where they may.

Lightly Kip tugs on the door handle. But it's locked. *Shit!*

Pistol still drawn, Kip scrambles backwards across the open swath of wild herbs between the Mask Temple and the jungle, eyes glued on the door. When he reaches the shadows where Bruce Tobin and the guide stand, Kip says: "New plan. Both of you, come with me. Real quiet."

Back across the open swath of herbs the three men walk, Kip and Bruce with guns drawn.

When they reach the temple, Kip pulls one block of C-4 from his pack, loops it over the door's handle, and lights the detonator. Then he opens his arms, wide as the wings of the circling buzzards, and hurls Bruce and the guide up onto the stone steps of the temple behind the door.

With a deafening blast, the C-4 blows a huge hole in the wood door of the tomb.

Acrid smoke fills the air. At once, a thick cloud of insects emerges from the tomb.

Kip and Bruce leap up from the stone steps, guns drawn. Bruce reaches one arm with his AK-47 through the four-foot hole in the door, and blindly sprays a few rounds into the tomb.

No one returns Bruce's fire.

Kip grabs the guide, and shoves him first through the hole in the door. Still, no one fires.

So Kip pulls a flashlight from his backpack, and follows the guide through the hole in the door, with Bruce right on his heels. As soon as he enters, Kip's nostrils are assaulted by a putrid, sickly stench – not the C-4, but something much nastier, like rancid sweet-and-sour pork.

At first there's no time to wonder what the foul odor is because, from somewhere across the tomb, Kip hears boots tromping. He shines his light towards the footsteps, ready to fire; but just in time he sees it's Harry Benz, AK-47 drawn, emerging through the door from the stairway.

Kip exhales a sigh of relief, but with his next breath, he realizes what's causing the awful stink in the tomb. He smelled it many times in the Gulf. He's smelled it in Belize a few times, too.

It's the fetid smell of death.

In a fast sweep, Kip shines his flashlight around the tomb. Everywhere the air is thick with insects. And strewn across the floor, in a diorama straight out of Dante, are myriad Maya corpses, twisted into the unnatural positions only the dead can assume. Some are prone; some are supine; some are curled in the fetal position. But no one in the tomb is moving, except Kip and his team.

"Mother of God!" The guide makes the sign of the cross. "You bastards killed them all."

In the flickering light of his flashlight, Kip stares in disbelief at the slew of Maya bodies sprawled across the floor. No way one block of C-4 could do this much damage. Did Bruce really squeeze off enough rounds to kill every last one of the Maya, shooting blind through the door?

Impossible. Kip peers into the gloom, wondering if these crafty Maya are playing possum, lying still as death, just waiting till Kip and his mercs put their guns away, before jumping them.

Bruce turns and retches, his vomit splattering onto the face of the nearest Maya, sprawled there on the earthen floor. The Maya doesn't flinch. Doesn't even twitch a single muscle.

A well-trained man can discipline a lot of muscles in his body to stay still, in spite of many provocations. But not the facial muscles – at least not when splattered with human vomit. No way.

These guys aren't playing possum. They're dead as doornails.

A loud thudding noise shakes Kip – which turns out to be Kip's own heart, beating very fast from a sudden surge of adrenaline, overpowering his beta-blockers. Then the light moves very fast across the tomb's floor, straight at Kip, stopping right at his feet – because his wrist has gone limp.

Kip pulls himself together, and sweeps the tomb again with his flashlight. The tomb is empty, except for the dead bodies, and an old stone sarcophagus in one corner. But this time Kip sees, in addition to the insects hovering over the bodies, that the bodies are crawling with maggots.

"We didn't kill these guys." Kip lets his flashlight linger, for the benefit of his young mercs, on the maggots eating one of the corpses. "Maggots hatch fast down here – but not *this* fast."

Having reassured Bruce and Harry they committed no atrocity, Kip sweeps the tomb again with his flashlight, in a slower arc. This time, besides the maggots, he notices, perched atop the closed stone sarcophagus in the corner, a small jade statue. Kip's flashlight projects the statue's silhouette onto the far wall, the projection exaggerating every feature. Most prominent among the silhouetted features are a grotesquely oversized penis, erect and curving upwards like a lethal scimitar, reaching above the statue's shoulders – and the fact that the little statue has *two heads*.

Bingo! Kip strides across the tomb, seizes the two-headed trophy he came for, and stuffs it in his backpack. Mission accomplished.

Hanging from the ceiling above the sarcophagus Kip sees two metal spikes, and scratched on the wall behind the sarcophagus is some Maya graffiti. Briefly he wonders: *Why is the Maya writing so close to the ground? And who put metal spikes in this ancient Maya tomb, since metal was unknown on this continent before the Spanish Conquest? And what were the spikes used for?*

But as fast as these questions enter Kip's mind, he dismisses them as the kind of useless academic questions that geeks like Ron Graham waste their lives trying to answer. With so many dead men lying around, in a room he just broke into, Kip lacks time to ponder old mysteries.

For although Kip's young mercs may be relieved to learn they didn't kill all these guys, still, there's a whole lot of bad shit going down here – shit which will hit the fan next week, at the latest, when Lamanai is opened back up to the public, and these bodies are discovered. Kip's gloved crew won't leave fingerprints; but the crime scene hounds also won't miss the AK-47 bullet holes in the walls, much less the big hole in the door from the C-4. And if the cops somehow find Kip's guide and question him, the guide'll fold faster than a flimsy house of cards.

Kip swings his light away from the sarcophagus, and looks at the trembling guide, standing beside Bruce and Harry in the middle of the tomb. All three of them are staring glassy-eyed at the corpses. Without deciding what to do about the guide, Kip joins them in inspecting the dead.

Kip's eye is drawn first to the two older men, clad in thin red robes, open at the chest. Kux Ahawis, Kip presumes, and the other elder. These two old guys are much more damaged than their young novitiates. In fact, what happened to Kux and his mate is straight out of *Indiana Jones*. Both chests are hollowed out, like dugout canoes, with gaping holes where their hearts should be.

By contrast, as Kip plays his flashlight across the splayed corpses of the young novitiates, he sees no signs of violence, no marks of any kind on their remains, other than the damage from the feasting maggots. Kip's no coroner – and he's sure as hell not going to examine these gruesome corpses up close and personal – but he's seen men dead from bullets, knives, and even strangulation, and he knows these young guys in the Mask Temple died from something else.

"Antil's Curse," the guide intones in a gloomy voice.

Since Kip has no idea what the guide's blubbering about, he ignores him.

Instead, seeing a jade amulet on the neck of the closest corpse, Kip takes a deep breath, swats away the bugs, leans in close, and yanks the guy's amulet free in one swift swipe.

The jade amulet is curved, in the shape of a horn. And it looks like it might be valuable.

Kip drops the amulet into his backpack, and then swings his flashlight across the various corpses again. They all have similar curving jade amulets round their necks.

But before he can order Bruce and Harry to confiscate the other amulets, Kip's gut warns him, something's not right here. What's the body count? Across the corpses Kip swings his light again, this time not lingering on any one corpse, but carefully counting all the dead in the tomb.

Eleven young guys, plus the two elders. Thirteen total. *Shit!*

"Harry!" Kip hisses. "You kill any guys coming in here?"

"No, sir."

"You see anyone on the stairs, dead or alive?"

"No, sir."

"Then there's four young Maya still alive out here somewhere. Time for us to move out."

"Yes, sir." But Harry hesitates. "Sir, with respect, the other four guys probably ran away when their mates died. Or they might be lying dead, in one of the other temples out here."

"Or they might be out hunting, or just sleeping somewhere else, away from all these corpses," Kip retorts. "We have no way of knowing. But what we do know is, we got what we came for. And we just made more noise than a Mexican on the Day of the Dead. So it's time to move out."

The four men climb out the hole Kip blew in the door, and set off on a dead run, two miles through the teeming jungle, clamorous now with morning noise. By the time they reach the guide's skiff, still tied to the ceiba tree, they're all deeply winded.

The whole time, they haven't heard a peep to suggest anyone's tracking them.

But like anyone with any sense in Central America, they fear the reputation of the Maya.

So they just keep moving, fast as they can. They shove the skiff out into the New River Lagoon, and clamber into it. The young mercs paddle furiously, while the guide fires up the motor. Kneeling low in the prow, pistol drawn, Kip scans the silent mangrove along the bank.

The motor kicks in and, swiftly accelerating, the skiff leaps a few lengths out into the river.

Bruce and Harry stow the paddles beneath the thwarts.

And then, without a sound, Bruce and Harry both keel over, sprawling across the thwarts.

At once Kip dives even lower, so his entire body is beneath the top of the skiff's gunwales.

A second later, the guide kills the motor, and also dives below the top of the gunwales.

In the deathly silence of the floating skiff, Kip leans his head back to where Bruce lays, blood spurting from both sides of his throat. Protruding from Bruce's throat are two short sharp wooden spears, still quivering from the force with which they were launched from unseen *atlatis*.

Kip yanks both spears out, but Bruce is dead, for each spear hit a carotid artery, stopping all the blood to Bruce's brain. Keeping below the gunwales, Kip jerks his head across the skiff to Harry, and sees two more spears, in the same two fatal locations, on either side of Harry's throat.

Jesus! These four Maya are as good as any snipers Kip ever saw in the Gulf.

"Antil's Curse," the guide croaks, from his scug at the back of the skiff.

Kip grabs Bruce's AK-47 and, reaching only the rifle and his hands above the top of the port side gunwale, sprays dozens of rounds wildly at the mangrove up and down the western bank of the New River Lagoon. In the air above the skiff Kip sees shards of tree bark spitting up from the hail of bullets. Only after emptying the clip does Kip pull the rifle and his hands back in the boat.

From the mangrove comes no reply.

Kip grabs Harry's AK-47, and rasps at the guide: "This time, when I start firing, reach up and start that motor, and get us the fuck outta here."

"I'll be a sitting duck," the guide says. "I can't start the motor without exposing my head."

Kip points Harry's rifle at the guide. "You're already a sitting duck, AI. If you don't start that fucking motor before I empty this clip, I'll cap you myself with my pistol. *Comprende?*"

Kip glares at the guide a few seconds, to be sure his message got through.

Then he lifts Harry's AK-47 over the portside gunwale, and starts firing.

The guide lifts his head and reaches for the cord on the outboard motor. But before the guide can pull on the cord, four wooden spears appear, silent and quivering, in the guide's throat.

The guide keels over backwards, dead.

Kip's seen enough. Staying below the gunwale, he empties Harry's clip at the trees, tosses his pistol into his seamless submersible waterproof backpack, zips the pack shut, and puts it on his back. Then he takes a deep breath, slips over the starboard gunwale, and plunges into the deep warm water of the New River lagoon.

Kip swims underwater as long as he can, pulling for the east bank. When his need for air grows desperate, he wills himself to stay under longer, by imagining four wooden spears lancing his throat, the instant he pokes his head above water. Finally, with his lungs about to burst, Kip contrives, by rolling his body 180 degrees, to let only his mouth and nose break the calm surface of the lagoon. After gulping fresh moist air into his lungs, he goes back under, and keeps swimming.

When at last he reaches the east bank, Kip grabs hold of the mangrove roots, and hauls himself up from the lagoon into a dense thicket of mangrove. He looks back across the lagoon, half-expecting to see the four Maya using the guide's skiff to cross the water in pursuit of Kip.

But the guide's skiff is still drifting aimlessly along, near the west bank of the lagoon.

Still, Kip knows better than to celebrate. The Maya are legendary trackers.

His only hope is to hike back fast to civilization. And pray they don't hunt him down there.

\* \* \*

As he accepts another glass of champagne, Dr. Clive Phelps gives the comely young Belizean waitress at the cocktail party his most winsome smile. The young lovely returns the smile, her lips as moist and luscious as a newly-replicated cell, laid out in a Petri dish beneath Clive's microscope. As she departs, Clive casts what he believes to be a surreptitious gaze upon her receding form, her shapely backside undulating beguilingly with every joyful step.

Surely, Clive thinks, our Maker – He, She or It – was sending us a very clear message, by designing young women with such enticing forms. If only we could decode that message.

"She's too young for you," Gemma Murray scolds.

"Alas, I fear you're right," Clive admits.

"But not if what you told us this afternoon about telomerase proves true!" exclaims a young man standing nearby, whose name tag proclaims that he is 'Samuel Rivera, Belize Coroner'. "If we all learn to live forever," Rivera continues, "then age won't matter anymore, will it?"

Clive smiles. "Age already seems not to matter to you, Dr. Rivera."

Rivera cocks his head in puzzlement. "I don't know what you mean."

"Well, I hope you don't mind my saying so, but you are very youthful looking, Samuel, for a man who is already Coroner for Belize."

"I'm a rare commodity here in Belize," Rivera says with pride. "A Guy's man."

Gemma raises a perplexed and uneasy eyebrow at this queer remark. But Clive smiles.

"A Guy's man," Clive explains to Gemma, "is a doctor who studied at Thomas Guy's Hospital in London." He turns back to Rivera. "One of the finest hospitals in the world."

Rivera beams. "May I ask: how do the new therapies for aging we read about, like Juvenon and Resveratrol, compare with the telomerase therapy you plan to unveil in the next decade?"

"Like tiny plasters on a war wound." Seeing the pretty young waitress approaching, Clive quaffs down his champagne, and signals for a refill. Truly, she could make any man an alcoholic, for if the only price for perusal of her lovely brown skin and voluptuous form be an empty glass, who wouldn't drain his glass as fast as liquid can pass down the esophageal passageway?

"Tiny plasters on a war wound?" Rivera repeats. "I don't understand."

The lithesome young waitress refills Clive's glass, while Clive indulges a passing fantasy about what it must have been like to live in Belize in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as one of the rough-and-ready Englishmen then running the colony, who reputedly took regular advantage of the luscious native girls, whenever they felt the need to release the kind of raw animal desire Clive feels now.

"Juvenon is just a band-aid on the aging problem," Clive says. "All it does is try to slow the decay of mitochondria, the organelles in cells that give us energy. So if you take Juvenon, you may *feel* younger – and my Berkeley colleagues will certainly feel *richer* – but you're still aging at the normal rate. What's the good of that? Resveratrol actually has more potential, but what they're selling now doesn't have much more impact on your longevity than a glass of red wine every day."

"Whereas," Dr. Rivera says, "you hope to stop the aging process dead in its tracks?"

"Exactly." Clive drains his champagne, to be ready in case the very avatar of youth and sexuality passes by again. "With these human hands, I plan to put an end to death by mitosis."

"Sorry," Gemma interjects, "but I don't know what 'mitosis' is."

"Sex," Clive says. "Aristotle was basically right when he said, 'death is the price we pay for sex'. Not in the literal sense medieval Christians believed, where each sex act supposedly shortened your life span by a day. But in the broader sense that all creatures who reproduce by mitosis eventually die. The beasts in the field, the birds in the air, the fish in the sea, and, alas, us – we all die because we reproduce by sex."

"What other way is there to reproduce," Gemma asks, "besides sex?"

"Binary fusion. That's what amoebae and bacteria do. Amoebae and bacteria never die 'naturally', though they can be killed if their food supply is cut off, or if violence destroys them."

"So," Gem teases, "if you find a way round 'death by mitosis', will that be the end of sex?"

"I certainly hope not!" Clive says. "I'm not looking to alter human reproductive mechanisms – I just want to make us immune to organic death. But sex is definitely part of the puzzle, because the human organism is, right now, programmed, from birth, to die. From the moment a girl is born, she carries the next generation in her womb. It's almost as if those unfertilized eggs were pushing her along, towards death's door, before she even gets to wear her first mini-skirt. What I'm seeking is the right combination of enzymes to unbind the telomerase—"

Gemma looks like she's warming up for a frisky retort – but suddenly everyone's attention is diverted by a serious-looking waiter who rushes in, and pulls Rivera off to one side. When Rivera emerges from his private chat with the waiter, he looks very grave – and is focused on Gemma.

"Dr. Murray," Rivera says, "could I have a word with you, and Dr. Phelps, in private?"

Clive exchanges 'why not' glances with Gemma, and they adjourn to a corner with Rivera.

"I need your help," Rivera murmurs to Gemma. "The police have discovered 16 deaths."

"*Sixteen deaths!*" Gemma whispers. "From what?"

"Three were found in a boat, with *atlatl* spears in their throats." Rivera turns to Clive. "*Atlatls* are an ancient Maya weapon. Ten years at this job, I've never seen death by *atlatl* spears."

"And the other thirteen?" Clive asks.

"Worse." Rivera's eyes dart around the room. "I need complete confidentiality here."

"Of course," Clive says. Gemma nods her head in assent also.

"The other thirteen victims were all full Maya. Very rare, these days." Rivera lowers his already soft voice. "Preliminary reports indicate it may have been something, ah, ritualistic."

"You mean," Gemma gasps, "*human sacrifice?*"

"That's what I fear," Rivera says. "And if that happened, in this part of the world, a violent backlash against the Maya is possible. So your absolute discretion is essential to public safety."

"Of course." Gemma says. "But why are you telling us all this?"

"The Belize Police, like my office, have no one who speaks Mayan. You do."

Gemma gapes. "Oh, Dr. Rivera – the Mayan language has over 30 dialects. I know three."

"Well, that's three more than I have now. I need you to come to Lamanai with me tonight, Dr. Murray, and stay two days. Accommodations will be rough. But we'll compensate you for all the inconvenience. Basically, you send us a bill, and it'll be paid, no questions asked."

Gemma turns to Clive, a wild surmise in her eyes.

Clive shrugs acquiescence, already thinking of the journals he'll now get to read in peace.

Gemma turns back to Rivera. "Can Dr. Phelps come, too?"

"We can't pay Dr. Phelps for his time," Rivera says. "But of course we'd be honored to have such a world-famous doctor on site, to observe the autopsies."

Gemma turns to Clive. "Will you come? It'll be far more interesting than Altun Ha." Inwardly Clive groans. But he can see the writing on the wall. "Why, of course."

\* \* \*

Joyce Kerr opens the mini-bar in her room at the Southwark Hilton. Any other night she'd opt for the cheap wine in the screw-top bottles – the kind of light-bodied wine she drank all through her courtship with Michael, back in the day. But today's been such a long bad day, Joyce finds herself reaching, as her father evidently did last night, for those fiendish little bottles of Scotch.

After emptying two of the little bottles into a plastic cup, and deciding the ice machine is too far down the hall to bother, Joyce toasts herself in the garishly-lit hotel mirror, and bolts down the double Scotch in three gulps. The smoky fumes cause her to choke and cough a bit, but she smiles, thinking how proud her father'd be, that at least she's not smoking her 'cancer sticks'.

And why shouldn't she trade one addiction for another, after a day like this?

Honour Oak Crematorium promised to deliver Joyce her father's ashes, neatly packaged in a mock-Grecian urn she selected, no later than 8 a.m. tomorrow. Delta Airlines agreed not to assess any extra charge when she hauls her father's suitcase back to Detroit tomorrow afternoon. And David Burns drafted a poignant death notice about Justin Kerr for the Michigan newspapers.

Even Double-G Tiffany has, presumably, by this time been retrieved from the floor beneath Justin's death-bed, and appropriately inventoried. By this time, surely, all the reports've been filed, and all the bureaucrats have signed off, on what was, after all, just one more death in the big city.

All the loose ends have been tied up. Except for one.

The diary of Joyce's great-great-grandmother, Kathleen Quinlan.

The little leather-bound diary with its yellowed pages from another time, sitting there across the desk from Joyce – its stamp denoting that it is now, and has been for 142 years, the official property of the British Library. The diary which Joyce's father, barely six hours off the overnight plane from Detroit, and just eight hours before his appointment with Death – assuming the Coroner was accurate in his estimation of the time of Justin's death – went to such great risk to steal, for reasons Justin never bothered to disclose to Joyce, even though he dragged her all the way over to England for his little Christmas holiday investigation into the lives of the Quinlans.

The diary which Joyce really should return to the British Library tomorrow morning.

Joyce cracks open one more little airline bottle of Scotch, quaffs it neat, in a single gulp, and then cracks open the 1868 diary, to find out what the hell is in this little book, worth stealing.

The instant she opens the diary, several pieces of dried leaves, pressed in the book, fall in her lap. As a paralegal trained to preserve evidence, Joyce reflexively scoops the particles into a tissue and puts them in her purse – with no idea why she is saving 142-year-old vegetable detritus.

To Joyce's dismay, the diary is written in tiny spidery handwriting, as old and black and intricately curly-cued as the wrought iron on a fire escape. Yet in spite of the strain on her Scotch-addled eyes, Joyce reads the 23-page diary from beginning to end, escaping into a long lost world.

### *The Journal Of Mistress Kathleen Allen Quinlan*

*Tuesday 10 March 1868*

*Today my life begins anew.*

*The story I have to tell is a simple one: that of a young girl who yearned with all her heart for nothing more than the freedom to live with the only man she ever loved; who recklessly despoiled her once-spotless Virtue to pursue her passion across sand and sea, to the very ends of the earth; yet about whose ill-starred path Fate hurtled one terrible obstacle after another, along with all the throbbing dilemmas of a restless Age; until at last, after many travails, she came to the New World at the age of twenty-four in the company of the man whom she loves more than life itself, and whom at last she may call 'husband', to start afresh.*

*But who will read my story, and judge my actions? This haunting question derailed my last attempts at journal-keeping, in London, and again during our New Zealand days; for telling my tale required me then, as I fear it may again, to record certain deeds of mine which, in Mr. Browning's dolorous phrase, were better left undone; and as my imagination conjured my unborn children and their children, reading my journal in some distant, happier time, I could not bear to think of their opprobrium directed at me across the generations; and so I was reduced to staring, hour by hour, day by day, at a blank page blackened with skeins of scored-out words and phrases.*

*I could have lied. By the simple expedient of altering a few key facts, here and there, and omitting a few unsavory deeds, I could have spared myself all that vexation over my unborn heirs' harsh censure. Yet had I lied to mine own journal, and written a fictional story of my life in London and Australasia, for my future readers, then I feared I might lose all contact with reality, and sink irretrievably into the shadowy world of madness and dreams, from whose seductive bourne few travelers e'er return.*

*So whenever I caught myself shading the truth, in my London journal or my Australasia journal, I over-scored mine own false words, and compelled myself to*

*write the truth; but then, reading the bald record of mine own dark deeds, I overscored those true words, too, replacing them with new fictions. The result of all my revisions and indecisions was that, after a few days, I abandoned each journal altogether, consigning my London memories, and my Australasia memories, to begin their slow descent into the realm of the forgotten and unrecorded, where I myself shall doubtless one day join them.*

*But that was another life. Today in the Bay, my life begins anew!*

*For now I am a completely different person. Gone is the young girl who could not bear to face her former journals; and truly, ever since I paid 'Doctor' Hackett to commit his little murder in his Melbourne surgery, I've had no real cause to fret about the disapproving eyes of my unborn heirs, who might have judged me harshly for my many malfesancies. For 'Doctor' Hackett made it brutally plain that, medically speaking, it is now highly improbable there will be any further issue from my womb; and thus am I, trapped in my barren childlessness, now, in a strange sense, free from all the doubts that previously inhibited me from keeping a journal.*

*Yet even the loneliest writer, starving in her romantic Chelsea garret, labouring at her art purely for the sake of Truth and Beauty, even she still needs must have some imagined reader, or else why set pen to paper? So how shall I summon now the Will to write, when the only auditor for whom I care was left for dead in that puddle of fluid and blood I discharged onto the grubby floor of Dr. Hackett's sordid back alley surgery?*

*There can be but one answer to this horrid question: I shall write this journal for the child whose life I wickedly agreed to abort. For of all the crimes and misdemeanors committed in my past life, she is the only one I truly regret. I shall call her Persephone, after the Greek goddess of Spring, because I am myself reborn; and also because, to strike a darker chord, Persephone also means, if I recall my Greek, the murdered one.*

*So Persephone, my murdered child, may you live again through the words I, your tender murderess, write for you on these pages; and may I always tell you the entire, unadulterated truth; for after all, which of my future sins could possibly shock you, who already know of my cowardly complicity in your murder?*

*And so, I begin anew:*

*Dearest Persephone – We came today to the Bay, your father and I, two weary survivors of an awful shipwreck in the Southern Ocean, and an even more desperate eighteen months when we were marooned with thirteen other miserable souls on a barren outcrop of volcanic rock called Auckland Island. Our hardships there were too numerous to record here; and besides, as Mr. Marlowe's famous saying goes, that was another country, and the wench is dead. I mention these past adversities, dear*

girl, only because they must have colored my eyes as I took in the sights this morning on passing the great guns of Fort George and arriving here at the port of Belize, in this Colony formally named British Honduras, but called by all who dwell here simply: the Bay.

To most visitors I should think the Bay must look a very poor, squalid colonial outpost, with streets of deep wet mud, thick swarms of noxious mosquitoes, and an obscene riot of flimsy wooden shanties, which a strong man could push to the ground with one hand tied behind his back; But to my weary eyes – and R's, too – the tropical ambience of Belize, with its exotic bright flora and soft Caribbean breeze, and its picturesque thatched-roof marketplace perched on the Belize River, teeming with colorfully-clad Indians and half-naked Negroes plying dugout wooden canoes they call dories, seemed as fresh and new to us as Eden must have seemed to the original sinners.

R and I disembarked just as another ship discharged itself of a dozen Americans, refugees from the vanquished Confederacy of the Southern States; and R, who has traveled extensively in the Western Territories of America, engaged these Americans in conversation, with the result that we were directed to a rooming house frequented by Confederate refugees, that of Mistress McDougal. There R and I succeeded, by dint of our well-bred manners and upper-crust accents, in obtaining a room, without revealing the most awful secret one can harbour in a British Colony: i.e., we have no money.

For you see, Persephone, almost all your father's hard-won Australian gold rests on the floor of the Southern Ocean, alongside our ill-fated shipmates and their gold; and the little gold R carried away from the wreck, on his person, was extracted from us by a horrid coachman in New Zealand, as the exorbitant price of effecting our abrupt and clandestine departure from the Bluff, as well as his book-keeping at the very last hour our passage from Wellington to Kingston, and thence to the Bay, before our departure could be discovered. So until R obtains employment here in the Bay, or I muster funds by the more circuitous stratagems I have set in motion, we must live on credit; and therefore didst R stop only long enough here at Mistress McDougal's this afternoon to don a clean shirt and collar, before setting forth urgently to seek a position.

In R's absence, I wickedly enjoyed a long bath, basking in the luxury of having our own private room, instead of being packed in with the poor in steerage, as we were these past three months; and I filled this glorious quiet time by commencing this journal – taking pains to write so small that even with his spectacles R shan't be able to read my words, should he chance upon this journal some time when I am away. But now the time has come when I, too, must summon up my courage and

present myself at the local branch of the Bank of England, hoping to acquire money for us, independent of R's exertions, through the stratagem I set in motion behind his back in Wellington, prior to our hasty departure, when I sent a communiqué to London, requesting that a Letter of Credit be sent to me here in the Bay from the Reynolds Foundation.

Faint hope, of course, for it is highly unlikely the Winds of Chance have blown my request home to England and back to the Bay faster than our own ships crossed the same three Seas; yet my errand today is not entirely perfunctory, for I have resolved that whilst I am at the Bank, I shall deposit our last valuable possession into their care.

Adieu for now, Kathleen

12 March 1868

Dearest Persephone –

After two days of worry and unpleasantness, I have finally persuaded the Bank to accept for safe-keeping the wondrous little Codex which Mistress Reynolds entrusted to me in London. Words cannot express my relief!

The delay was occasioned because, unlike our hotelier, the trusting Mistress McDougal, the Bank of England requires genuine coin of the realm, rather than a well-bred woman's elegant manners, before a resident of the Bay may entrust valuables into the Bank's care. So as my wild Irish uncle Padraig used to say, I had to raise a bit o' the ready – and behind R's back, at that. Since opportunities for a woman of Virtue to earn income in the Bay are available only to domestic servants and shop girls, I resorted to taking a pretty keepsake of R's, which I detest as much as the woman whose memory its picture preserves, to the sole pawnshop in Belize City.

Unfortunately, the pawnbroker, Jahlmer Patrous, proved most difficult to run to earth, for he spends his days deep in drink, and engrossed in hazarding his niggling fortune in games of Chance, rather than tending shop; so for two days I tracked vague rumors and faint clews of the gentleman, which took me on a Grand Tour through the Bay's most pernicious taverns and opium emporia, where I gather unscorted ladies normally fear to tread. What an adventure! I could practically hear poor Mum rolling over in her grave in horror at the sights of depravity I glimpsed over the shoulders of the seedy porters guarding the doors of these dens of iniquity. And as for Father – well, had he not already disavowed me, I'm sure he'd have been most pleased to do so again.

But this afternoon I finally located Mr. Patrous, who is a ludicrous rofy-poly caricature of a man, straight off the pages of one of Mr. Dickens' novels. Mr. Patrous was stinking drunk, yet still remarkably garrulous; and therefore it was only after

*protracted and complex negotiation that I succeeded in persuading the inebriated yet loquacious gentleman to return to his shop, whereupon he gave me three crowns for R's detested keepsake. With this, I was able at last to hire the use of a safe deposit box for the Lamanai Codex, thereby granting myself peace of mind.*

*For four years I've carried that odd little book with me, literally around the Globe, it being the only possession I troubled to save from the shipwreck (which I accomplished by placing it in an oilskin pouch, and then trussing the pouch inside my corset); but here, in the Bay, for the first time in the four years I've possessed the Codex, I suddenly fear that my trunk's lock is no longer security enough for this uncommon treasure. I cannot find any rational basis for my fear, for although thieves and cutthroats certainly abound here in the Bay, yet so too did they abound in steerage aboard both the steamers on which we slept whilst journeying from Wellington to the Bay; and yet somehow now, perhaps because we are so much closer to Lamanai than ever before, I cannot rest for fear of the Codex being stolen by someone who might then beat us to the fountain whose revivifying secrets, according to Mistress Reynolds, the Lamanai Codex unlocks.*

*But hark! I hear R's heavy footsteps!*

*Monday 16 March 1868*

*Dearest Persephone –*

*Your father and I just had an awful row, precipitated by his discovery that I pawned his detestable keepsake. We made such an awful noise, it is a wonder that Mistress McDougal, who still awaits our first payment, did not come upstairs and evict us at once out onto the muddy streets of Belize, where we should then have had to sleep out of doors with the ruffians at the edge of town, and feel what the wretches feel.*

*Yet despite all the harsh things R just shouted at me, before slamming the door in my face on his way out, I am ecstatic! The source of my great joy is this: This afternoon, before our row, our 'marriage' was finally consummated!*

*O it was so sweet and tender, and unexpected. I had just emerged from a bath, wrapped only in a towel, to find R back early from business; and in the looking glass I saw him looking at the graceful line of my long bare neck, which candor compels me to admit is my finest feature, save my dramatic decolletage; and then reflected in the glass I saw that concupiscent gleam in his eye, which I had not seen since before the Wreck. At the same instant Roger caught my eye, and held my gaze, longingly, in the glass. Mindful of how many times these past three years I've been accused of 'pressuring' R by 'leering' at him, I looked down, demurely, though this is not my true Nature, nor is it how I won R's love in Oxford; and yet – it worked! No*

sooner did I look away than he made three paces cross the room, caught me in his arms, and held me in a tight embrace, whose passion I had not felt since that awful night the General Grant sank,

Modesty prevents me from recording more of the lubricious details, my darling daughter; so let it suffice to say that our commingling was as delicious as the night you were conceived! At last I am free of her spell – the rival whose name I cannot bear to speak, even to you. At last your father is free of her spell, too, and at last he is enough at his ease to love me again as he did in the days before we determined to call ourselves ‘husband and wife’, when we defied Society’s rules with a passion as wild and untamed as that of Heathcliff and Catherine. Except that now, with my rival lying in her watery grave in the Southern Ocean, and with the dark spell that she and her family’s money cast over R finally and forever exorcised, R is totally and forever mine!

I should have thrown that locket away months ago, when we were marooned and R first lost his passion for me; only I believed it was to our mutual benefit that he wear it, since everyone always said that she and I were dead ringers. For I shall believe, to my grave, it cannot be mere coincidence that, just four days after I pawned it, the passion pent-up between R and me the past twenty-two months finally burst the dam.

*I can write no more; I am delirious with happiness!*

18 March 1868 Wednesday

Dear Persephone –

Today I am sorely vexed with R, who has gone away on unnamed business, for seven days. Before leaving, he was very excited, almost raving with excitement, because he has obtained good employment and an advance of income, enabling him both to pay Mistress McDougal, and to open a savings account for us at the Bank of England, so that we might begin to put aside the sterling we shall require to achieve the purpose which brought us here to the Bay: i.e., to mount the long Expedition into the jungle we both yearn to make, to discover if Mistress Reynolds’ magical little Codex really does hold, as she promised me, the secret of living a much-extended Life. Yet in spite of my persistent entreaties, R would confide in me neither the name of his employer nor the nature of his position. Instead, he departed in an enormous hurry this morning, kissing me on the forehead as if I were a child, until I insisted on a proper kiss on the mouth; and telling me only that he shall be gone on his employer’s business for approximately seven days, and that upon his return we shall be much the richer for his labours.

So here I sit, like a poor little church mouse, with nothing to do but swelter in this beastly heat, and wait. I shall go mad with idleness!

19 March 1868

*What joy! Today on the way home from my daily fruitless errand to the Bank, asking for the Letter of Credit which never comes, I discovered a bookseller in Gabourel Lane, just past the Crown Prison; and using a few shillings of the new money R deposited in our account before departing, I purchased two volumes of verse, by Messrs. Arnold and Shelley; along with two of my favorite novels, Ivanhoe and The Count of Monte Cristo.*

*So now I shall pass this tedious week, the way I like best, completely lost in the romance of far-away places and long-ago times, where red-cross knights forever kneel to the ladies in their shields, and bravely joust to win the affection of their beloved damsels; and therefore the secrets which R, so discourteously harbours from me shall bother me not one whit!*

Saturday 21 March 1868

*Without R the days pass slowly. I am nobody's fool (except Fortune's); so I recognize that R's new position, which he refuses to name, is, in all likelihood, illicit. I hope I shan't shock you, Persephone, but to be candid, lawlessness per se does not disturb my conscience, for I long ago ceased to be the good little Angel my mother yearned for me to be; and indeed, I am rather flattered to think R is devoted enough to our cause, and to me, to run certain risks. But I love R so deeply, I cannot help but wonder: how much risk, precisely, is he running? Is he Gaming? Poaching? Smuggling? Pandering? Or something altogether darker? Thieving? Buccaneering? Slaving? Murdering?*

*To attempt to answer this vexatious question, I walked all round the Port today, calling at the Offices of the Harbour Master, the Post Master, and all the Lumber Companies. At each Office I engaged the clerks in idle chit-chat, before casually inquiring about R and his whereabouts; but in each case, my queries provoked only denials from faces blank as the sea. Worse, I'm sure I saw, twice, lurking behind the bland official denials, a slight twinkling of patronizing pity, as they took me for yet another pathetic woman, abandoned by her beau here in the wilds of the Bay.*

*For it is common practice here, Persephone, amongst the coarse white men this outpost attracts, to eschew the structured world of domesticity, in favor of the darker freedom of life in the jungle, where, as Mr. Darwin says, the only law is Nature's one immutable law: survival of the fittest. So they come out here, these rowdy refugees from the slums of London and Liverpool and Dublin, and the blighted fields of Ireland, to cut mahogany in the most distant reaches of the rain forest; and they live out in the wild for months, eating and sleeping in uncivilized camps under the stars, hunting wild game and fishing bountiful rivers, and working shoulder to shoulder with boors and brutes like themselves, white men grunting the vilest*

*English imaginable, and Creole negroes speaking a demotic patois that blends the fractured English they learned as slaves with their own atavistic African tongues; and so, not surprisingly, when these white ruffians return to town, they often feel utterly alienated from the sedate civility their bemused wives have struggled to establish in this profligate place; and one day they just up and desert their wives, choosing to live permanently in the murky shadows at the dark margin of civilization, hunting and fishing for food, and showing up for work in the logging camps only when their money for drink runs dry.*

*So will R succumb to this same savage seduction? I tell myself I am not at all like those pitiful women, whose drab domestic lives the rude men flee; and that R, still burning with ambition to become the famous discoverer of lost cities in the jungle, is not at all like those barbaric louts who descend into a bestial existence at the outer edges of civilization. But since I am nobody's fool, I also tell myself: the woman in my place is always the last to know.*

23 March 1868

*Last night I dreamed I was alone in the jungle. Wildly through the vines I hacked my way with a machete, trekking deeper and deeper into the dark, until at last I saw, through the trees, my beloved husband, squatting Indian-style with several men round a campfire in the dark, swigging cane liquor from a gourd they passed, and playing at cards. Since R was winning each hand they played, he had amassed a huge pile of silver; but then one of the men leaped up, calling R a cheat, and challenging him to a duel.*

*Before my dreaming eyes R and the other man each pulled a vicious hunting knife from his belt, and they wrapped themselves in a single cloak, the way Mistress McDougal told us the Creoles here do; and then they tore at each other, and all I could see was the chaotic pattern of their limbs jousting against each other within the bulging, pulsing cloak, until R finally emerged alone, soaked in blood, but victorious.*

*I rushed across the ground to throw my arms round him, but R looked at me without recognition; and then there was something worse in his eyes, something closer to hate or even contempt, and then we were no longer in the jungle, instead we were bobbing in the icy waters of the Southern Ocean, the crashing waves trapping us in that awful cave, the screams of the dying echoing off the rocks – and I awoke, drenched in cold sweat, alone in this blank room, my prison in the Bay.*

*I tried losing myself in the lush cadences of Mr. Arnold's poems awhile, but I am distracted by overwrought fantasies about the black work R must be performing to bring us money. My frenzied imagination envisages R crouching in the dark,*

on a muddy landing by a steaming river in the jungle; then springing, like a jaguar, onto some unsuspecting traveller, and slitting the man's throat with his wicked hunting knife, before casually cutting his victim's money belt away from his waist and disappearing back into the jungle, to await his next victim. O please God may it not be like that!

When R returns I shall make him tell me exactly what labour he is performing that takes him away from me so long.

24 March 1868

Thank God, R has returned, safe and sound! But we've had another awful row.

He's returned with more sterling than any honest man could make in three months, let alone a week. So I demanded to know what dread work he's done, and what dread hands he's joined forces with, to make so much money so fast. Maddeningly, R still refuses to disclose what he's done this past week; but he assures me that, in the eyes of the Bay, his work is entirely lawful. In fact he claims he is working with the Lieutenant Governor himself, on a matter of the utmost secrecy, which he promised to maintain in the strictest confidence. This, R insists, precludes him from confiding the nature of his mission even in me, his faithful 'wife'.

I told him with more venom than I intended that he must think me a perfect little fool, to expect me to swallow such a silly fairy tale. R responded very angrily, calling me an ungrateful woman, who should be praising him for his success rather than pestering him with unfounded accusations; and suggesting that the only reason I am so quick to accuse him of criminal conduct is because of mine own intimate familiarity with lawless behavior. Needless to say, from this point, our discourse descended even deeper into mutual recriminations, which did neither of us any credit.

I am too agitated to write any longer. I gather R intends to rest a few days, and then to go away again, for another seven days of secret work,

Saturday 28 March 1868

I am so ashamed of myself. I am a foolish and untrusting woman, utterly unworthy of Roger Quinlan. When R left before dawn this morning for another week of mysterious labour, I followed him, deceitfully, at a distance, slinking through the sleeping streets of Belize, like Mister Collins' Woman in White.

And where did R go? Straight to the Government House; where the Lieutenant Governor resides! After half an hour there, R went to the docks, boarded an Indian dory with a huge Negro, tall and strong as R, and together they paddled away to the north.

*What else can I conclude but that his business must be legitimate after all? Thus have I misjudged and wronged him. Thus was all the turmoil I caused these past four days unwarranted. Thus am I an unworthy 'wife'.*

*Truly, Persephone, when I stand before the looking glass, I cannot bear to look in the eye the woman reflected there. When blessed with a child, I destroyed you; when blessed with the death of my rival and R's undivided love, I dishonored that love with four days of petulant attacks.*

*O I deserve to lose the love of this fine man and live out the rest of my days as one of those pathetic women of the Bay, whose husbands have decamped for the woods!*

30 March 1868

*Dearest Persephone:*

*An embossed invitation has arrived from Mistress Longden, the Lieutenant Governor's wife, inviting us to dine at the Government House with them upon R's return!*

*Upon reading the gilt-edged card, I fell into a paroxysm of hysterical laughter. Four long years, since the ugly scandal R and I created at Oxford, with our 'shameless love affair', I have assumed that at least I would never again be subjected to the tedium of a high society dinner. Even in Australia, Land of the Convicts, honourable women there shunned me, as a fallen woman; and I assumed social ostracization would be our lot the rest of our lives, no matter where in the Empire R and I chose to go.*

*But here in the Bay, no one seems to know of our scandalous past; or else what passes for High Society here is still so rough round the edges, it can't afford to shun a useful man like R. But whatever the reason, I must now go buy a suitable gown and hat, along with gloves, shoes and jewellery.*

*It's been so long since I've been shopping! I confess, my darling, with sinful pleasure my vanity anticipates an afternoon at the mercer's and the milliner's, being fussed over and complimented by envious shop girls, on my pulchritudinous face, and my still fair skin, and my hourglass figure. What a vain and wicked woman I am!*

*Adieu my lost child, Kathleen*

2 April 1868 Thursday

*Dearest Persephone –*

*Time passes slowly here in the Bay. I am restless to the point of distraction.*

*Shall I tell you why we came here? To find the Fountain of Youth.*

*Laugh if you like, my darling. I almost laughed, too, when Mistress Reynolds first told me the Fountain of Youth is real; and when she rambled on about how the Indians here in the Bay, the Mayans, were once as mighty on the American continent*

as the Romans on the European; and how the Mayans mastered many strange arts, including the art of extending human youth far beyond its natural term.

It was July of 1864, and we were sitting in Mistress Reynolds' art studio in Southwark, with its view of London Bridge; and I recall saying, in an effort to keep from laughing in the poor old dear's face, that her reference to 'strange arts' brought to mind Mister Arnold's fine poem, "The Scholar Gipsy", about the Oxford scholar who ran away with a band of gypsies and learned strange arts from them. Since Mistress Reynolds was unfamiliar with Mister Arnold's work, I offered to recite it, for my vanity leaps at any chance to exhibit my recitation talents. She agreed, but after several stanzas seemed to doze off (it being rather a long poem), and so I stopped; but at once she insisted I finish, and at the end she clapped her hands and cried "just so!"

Then she showed me a painting of hers she had never publicly displayed, titled 'The Fountain of Youth'. The painting shows a band of pirates, an Indian priest with a jade amulet round his neck, and a lovely red-tressed young woman in a white gown, all standing in and around a shallow underground river, in a dark cave lit by pine torches. In the near background rough-hewn rock steps lead up and out of sight; and in the distant background, at the top of the steps, a stone door opens up into an empty room with mysterious marks scratched onto the wall. By the river is a small fountain, but it is not the focus of the picture; instead, the Indian priest holds in one hand a bowl full of grey matter, reminiscent of R's anatomy books' depiction of the human brain, and in the other hand, an odd little book, on whose pages the viewer sees mysterious cramped glyphic symbols; whilst the young woman lifts the top of her gown above her thighs and plunges an aboriginal bone needle savagely down towards the region of her own sex.

The painting was macabre, and indecent, but also hypnotically powerful; so I asked Mistress Reynolds why she never displayed it. The old dear cackled and reminded me that, in the world in which we live, she has always had to display even her most demure paintings under a man's name, because patrons and critics are so leery of women painters, and sensual themes; so how could I imagine she could display something as overtly libertine as 'The Fountain of Youth' under any name, male or female?

Then she opened a cupboard and got out an odd little book, bound in jaguar hide, which she called the Lamanai Codex. She said this was the book the Indian priest was holding in her painting, which contains a map to the hidden cave where the Fountain of Youth flows; and if I were to take the Lamanai Codex to the Bay, and ask for an Indian priest near Lamanai named Xhuxh Antil (pronounced 'Shoosh Onteal'), then I would be taken to the temple near the Fountain of Youth and shown what to put in that bone needle so that I could live twice as long as any other woman.

*Burningly it came on me all at once: Mistress Reynolds herself was the red-tressed young woman in the painting! So I asked her, when and where was she born? She replied, in perfect seriousness, that she was born in Port Royal, Jamaica, in 1706.*

*Well, Persephone, as you can imagine, I judged this whole fantastical tale to be naught but the fond imaginings of an old woman; and this time I could not help laughing aloud. Mistress Reynolds, looking injured by my lack of credence, repaired to the same cupboard; and produced a yellowed parchment entitled 'Record of Live Birth', certified in 1721 by Clement James, a Magistrate of Jamaica, for one India Shaw, born 12 August 1706 in Port Royal. She told me Shaw was her maiden name, before she married Damien Reynolds, her deceased husband; and that she had only obtained the birth record because, back in those days, there was no such thing as a 'passport'; and when her family relocated to the Bay, she needed to prove she was an English subject.*

*But the document was not what convinced me Mistress Reynolds spoke the truth. It was when she said "now you see, my love, why that poem you recited, by Mister Arnwell" – "Mister Arnold", I corrected her – "yes, dear, you see now why every one of those words rang true for me?" Honestly, Persephone, I did not see, so she recited some of Mister Arnold's words back at me, the lines about how the Scholar Gipsy lived more than two centuries:*

*But thou possessed an immortal lot,  
So we imagine thee exempt from age,  
And living as thou livest on Glanville's page,  
Because thou hadst what we, alas, have not!*

*I still failed to understand. "And yet, my dear, in spite of his 'immortal lot', your Scholar Gipsy fled from people, and from life, did he not?" I agreed this was true. "And that is how my life has been, too, dear girl. I thought long youth should be a grand thing. But instead I've lived like those 'shy traffickers, the dark Iberians' in your poem, who can only be happy when they are alone in an inaccessible place, like this studio."*

*"Why?" I asked her.*

*"Because for me to stay young so long, many others had to die, before their time; and though they were only vulgar fellows, styling themselves the Brethren of the Coast, the sort of men who live cruel and heedless lives, eagerly seeking their graves before their time, still, there was one amongst them whom I loved and married, until he died young, too; and so all their untimely deaths haunt me, to this very day. In the darkness I see them still, my sad captains, the men who died that I might live so long that I could meet you, dear girl who art so much like me – the living child God never saw fit to grant me. So now I give you this book; but I caution you, Kathleen: be very careful how you use this book, because the Fountain of Youth, paradoxically perhaps,*

*seems to sow death more often than it extends life; and therefore you must, dear girl, be sure to follow Xhuxh Antil's directions precisely and to the letter."*

*Then Mistress Reynolds gave me the Lamanai Codex. But she said no more about it; using the remainder of our time that day to brief me for my new position at the Reynolds Foundation, whose important charitable work she was entrusting to me. She originally established the Foundation long ago, to work with Reverend Clarkson and Mr. Wilberforce for the abolition of the Slave Trade; but now I was being asked to redirect the Foundation's efforts towards achieving restitution for the victims of slavery. Mistress Reynolds was exceedingly passionate about the long suffering of the 'Blackies', as she called them; and she moved me to tears with an eyewitness account of an incident in her youth, when she saw an entire galley of African slaves burnt to death after the Belize Wharf caught fire, their awful cries echoing forever in her ears, because their chains prevented them from jumping into the water, as all the free whites did.*

*Her passion about the suffering of the African slaves distracted me from asking her about her gloomy admonition regarding the need for careful use of the Lamanai Codex; yet had I known, that after that day I should never again see Mistress Reynolds in this World, I should have taken pains to tax her to elaborate further upon that gloomy admonition. But as it was, I was soon bereft; and though I had come to believe her earnest assurance that the Fountain of Youth was real, still I had naught to go upon but an unreadable book, and the name of an Indian priest half a world away.*

*Wherefore I almost sold the odd little book to the British Museum. But I was passionately in love with Roger Quinlan, who had fled to Australia to avoid the scandal our illicit love had ignited, and seek his fortune in the Victorian goldfields; yet who still burned, I knew, with passion for me, and with ambition to prove himself to the world which had treated him so shabbily; and I felt that Fate had placed this little book in my hands for the specific reason that, as the key to a quest which R could never resist, it would bring us back together. Which indeed it did; for the quest for the elusive Fountain of Youth turned out to be the lure by which I won R back to my love.*

5 April 1868

*I am miserable and distraught. Our dinner last night with the Longdens was not the tedious high society gathering for which my foolish vanity yearned; it was something far worse. Four other couples were present; all four men were in the same position as R, which is to say, performing labour of an undisclosed and presumably dangerous nature for Lt Gov Longden; but otherwise these four men were as different from R as stone from marble. Everyone sensed immediately that R was the star of the evening; and R of course basked in all the attention, thereby heedlessly exposing us to scrutiny.*

One of the lesser lights recalled hearing of R attempting to swim the Channel eight years ago; and this provoked discussion of R's past, and awkward questions about where R and I first met. No one said anything publicly; but when I went out to the privy, I overheard Mistress Baxter and Mistress Clare gossiping furiously in the garden.

"Surely Mistress Longden would never have invited Mister Quinlan to her home, had she known of his past!"

"Expelled from Oxford, my husband said, for robbing graves!"

"Those medical experiments were only the beginning of his infamy!"

"O pray tell, tell!"

"Some years after he was expelled, Mister Quinlan had the bad taste to return from his exile in America and appear, uninvited, at an Oxford garden party, where he seduced two young girls from good families – and then became betrothed to them both!"

"Oh I didn't realize he was the same dark man! As I recall, those two girls were the best of friends, till he drove them apart; and their families were threatening legal action, but – how did it all end?"

"Mister Quinlan eloped to Australia with one; whilst the other fled to London in shame. Propriety forbids me from imagining the life she must lead now: a kept woman on Randolph Street, or, if Fate has been cruel, a madame in a Southwark stew."

"So Mistress Quinlan – she's the one with whom he eloped to Australia?"

"No telling, with a man like that. He might have abandoned the Oxford girl in Australia, and this Mistress Quinlan is a new conquest."

"She does seem somewhat underbred, with that heaving bosom of hers, and those voluptuous eyes, with their heavy lids."

"We must discover more about her background!"

As you can imagine, Persephone, I was in agonies whilst these vicious shrews plotted to dredge up our old troubles; but as I told R later, we have only ourselves to blame for this peril in which we are placed. When we were content to live obscurely at Mistress McDougal's, we were invisible, indistinguishable from all the other human flotsam and jetsam that washes up on the shores of the Bay; but now, because our foolish pride drove us to dine with the Longdens, we shall soon be notorious again.

Never again shall we attend a Society Affair.

Never again shall I let my vanity overwhelm my common sense.

Monday 6 April 1868

Thank the stars, and Roger, that later today we shall quit this miasmatic town, built, as everyone in the Bay loves to say, on a tottery foundation of loose coral,

stray logwood chips, and discarded rum bottles; to embark on what promises to be a great adventure.

R's next mission for the LG requires him to travel deep into the jungle, up the New River. By happy coincidence, the New River is also where R believes the lost Mayan city of Lamanai was located, so he's decided to make his initial search for Lamanai and its Fountain of Youth now, even though we still lack sufficient funds to mount a full-scale archeological Expedition.

At first R declared, for safety's sake, that I should wait here for his return; but the vehemence of my objections surprised him, and like the good man he is, he agreed to reconsider the matter. How could I be in graver danger at my husband's side, I argued, than left here alone, in this lawless outpost, teeming not only with black guards and thugs, but worse, with nasty gossips who will soon be circling round me like ravenous predators feasting on a bleeding deer? And how could R think it fair to go looking for the lost city of Lamanai without me, who first procured the Lamanai Codex for him, and then traveled halfway cross the world to persuade him that it is his Destiny to find the fabled Fountain of Youth, whose location the Codex reveals?

The mention of how I chased R to the Victorian goldfields opened old wounds for us both, so we sat a space in silence; but then suddenly he agreed, remarking that it might be prudent for us now to move away from Belize City altogether, and that in the event, traveling with a woman would be 'good cover' for his mission. I was so happy to win R's agreement to take me with him, that it was only much later, in the middle of my restless tossing and turning last night, that I awoke wondering: why should an honest man, engaged in a mission on behalf of the LG of British Honduras, need 'cover', whilst traveling up a river within the borders of the Colony?

Yet should a loyal wife, already humiliated once for her unjust suspicions, even dare to ask such a question of her 'husband'? I think not.

11 April 1868

Dearest Persephone:

We've had so many wild adventures the past five days, I can scarcely record them all. I write now on a rickety wooden table R built under a canvas tarpaulin, as the sun sets over an amazing Mayan temple – yes, we found the lost city of Lamanai!

But as the light is fading fast, I must be brief.

R's mission for the LG turned out to be running guns to rebel Indians!

R presumed I would be frightened away from the trip, once I arrived at the Belize wharf, and saw the long dugout dory loaded with crates marked BSA (which I surmised in a trice stood for 'Birmingham Small Arms', since R was standing there with ammunition belts criss-crossing his shirt); but I decided not to give him the

satisfaction. Instead, I walked right up to the dory, and held out my hand to R's Creole guide, Caesar (IF that really is his name, which I doubt), who is the same well-muscled Negro I saw with R two weeks ago. Caesar, naked machete dangling from his waist, helped me find a seat in the middle of the dory, perched on several boxes of BSA guns.

And off we went. Two hard days we navigated the rough seawaters along the coast to Corozal. The first night we slept at an old pirate camp on Ambergris Caye; the second night we slept in the woods outside Corozal. Caesar is an absolute wonder, as strong and indefatigable as R, and he knows the country as well as the Indians. He was born a slave here, in the logging camps; but was freed when he was a teen, by the Emancipation Act. He bears upon his back many wicked scars, and on his arm his former master's brand; but claims to feel no ill-will to whites, an attitude laudably Christian, though not entirely credible, given the black looks he sometimes casts at us.

Somewhere along the coast the Mayan Balche beer loosened R's tongue, and he finally confided in me: we were delivering the BSA guns thirty miles up the New River, near the Mexican border, to a tribe of Indians, the Santa Cruz Mayans, who are at war with Mexico. R also mentioned, off-handedly, that a rival tribe, the Ixaiche Mayans, who are aligned with Mexico, routinely watch the river at Corozal, to try to interdict gun-runners like us. I gathered the Ixaiche murder gun-runners on sight. With spears.

To elude the fatal eyes of the Ixaiche, we rose two hours before dawn the third day, and passed Corozal Town in darkness. Caesar alone rowed, his oars dipping the New River waters as silently as Indians tread the forest paths. The loudest sound we made those two hours was the beating of my heart, Persephone, so wild was my fright.

But I never let the men see my fear!

Once we were several miles past Corozal, we ducked into a small tributary, and tied up at dawn in the shade of a giant ceiba tree. All day we sat there, dozing a little, and talking less; R drinking copious quantities of Balche beer, and smoking a cigar to ward off insects; Caesar drinking from a gourd containing some kind of sweet liquor made from sugar cane, and smoking corn-husk cigarettes; and I, poor I, drinking bad water, smoking nothing, and sweltering like a pretty little pig, in my long calico dress.

When night came, we rowed furthur up the New River, which Caesar says the Mayans call The River of Strange People, after Europeans like us who travel up this river into the deep heart of the jungle. There was no moon, and the clouds dimmed the faint starlight; so most the time I held a pine torch to help Caesar guide us up the river.

It was so exfularating, Persephone!

*The jungle at night is deeper and more mysterious than life itself. It's –  
O my light is all gone. I'll resume tomorrow, if I can find the time.*

14 April 1868

*Dearest Persephone:*

*For every three days that pass, I find only thirty minutes to write; and so I fear if I don't speed up my tale, I shall fall hopelessly behind in my story.*

*But I have no complaints. This soul-stirring adventure is precisely the reason I yearned to marry Roger Quinlan the first moment I laid eyes upon him, at the Oxford garden party that provided so much grist for the gossip mill. All my old Oxford friends may look down their noses at me, all they like; but I know that, with R by my side, I am living life to its very top, whilst they are not living at all. They worry about wearing the wrong fashion in the wrong season, or being trapped in a tedious conversation with a person they deem socially inferior; whilst I worry about wearing the wrong sidearm, in case I am trapped in a lonely corner of the jungle by a jaguar!*

*I wouldn't trade one minute of my life now for their entire miserable existence.*

*So where was I, in my tale? We made it up The River of Strange People without the Ixaiche detecting us, though much of the time Caesar navigated without the benefit of the pine torch flickering in my tremulous hand, deeming it safer to proceed in just the dim starlight. When we neared the rendezvous point, we searched the jungle for a sign of the Santa Cruz; and as fate would have it, I observed the tell-tale movement of a branch! (Caesar later said I have eyes in the dark like a forest cat.) But how R knew, in the gloaming, with his weak eyes, that the man moving the branch was Santa Cruz, and not Ixaiche, he would not tell. All I know is I nearly fainted when I saw, in the dim starlight, a full-sized red-skinned Indian emerge from behind the branch I'd seen move, his body decorated with ferocious war paint, his eyes brooding and dark as the jungle itself. I was not the only one disquieted by the sight of the fierce red man in full war paint, for in that same instant, Caesar reached for his rifle. But R shook his head no at Caesar, raised his hand in a peaceful salute, and we rowed to shore; and there we unloaded our crates of Birmingham's finest small arms to our Santa Cruz Mayan allies.*

*Then Caesar guided us much further up the river, deeper into the jungle. On the morning of our fifth day, we came to a very large lagoon. R instructed Caesar to take us slowly along the western shore of the lagoon, because the old Spanish reports, which R found buried deep in the basement in the Government House archives in Belize, indicated that Lamanai was on the western shore of the lagoon.*

*And then we saw it: an enormous stone temple, covered in moss and foliage, yet still rising out of the jungle, like an antediluvian beast escaping green netting, its*

*distinctive roof comb as unmistakably Mayan as those on the Palenque temples sketched by Catherwood, rising taller even than the tallest trees in the jungle.*

*Dear girl, I cannot describe the wild emotions I felt seeing that ancient temple, so fabulous and huge and majestic that it defies imagination to think who built it here in this remote jungle – and when! – and yet there it is, an inexorable fact, rising up out of the forest like nothing else on earth, except perhaps the ancient pyramids of Egypt.*

*We are taught that the New World was peopled only by primitive savages, before we Europeans graced them with our civilization; yet it is plain as the old whip scars on Caesar's back that savages never raised a temple this magnificent, and savages never carved the elaborate drawings that we can see on the ancient stones of this temple, peeking through the centuries of foliage that have failed to obliterate them. Truly, Persephone, our Lamanai temple is worthy of anything that was ever built in Greece or Rome, or London; and more to the point, our temple is as magnificent as any of Catherwood's drawings of the temples he and Stephens discovered at Palenque.*

*And Roger Quinlan, with a little help from Caesar and me, is the man who has discovered it!*

*Even Caesar, who seldom shows emotion, was thunderstruck, gaping at the huge temple; and R was more animated and ecstatic than I've ever seen him. For this discovery vindicates all his early Promise, his early brilliance; it is R's revenge against Carver and all the other dons who conspired to expel him from Oxford eight years ago.*

*But again my light fades, and there is important work to be done.*

24 April 1868

*Dear Persephone:*

*We have settled into a hard routine here, R and Caesar and I. We work from dawn to dusk, clearing all the ivy and moss and vines and shrubs that have grown through the centuries into the interstices of the stones of the pyramid we call Ozymandias' Temple. Then we fall into a deep sleep, only to wake at dawn, and work again.*

*Alas, archeology is not only the exhilarating discovery of lost cities in the jungle; it is mostly painstaking drudgery. Occasionally I feign the exhaustion to which men suppose the weaker sex is prone, and grant myself a brief respite, to collect local flora and herbs, which I press into this journal; but mostly I just work, and work, and work.*

*We call our principal discovery Ozymandias's Temple because, in the course of cleaning we exposed, on the pyramid's west face, a giant ten-foot mask of a human face, carved into the stone, whose fierce demeanour recalls the 'sneer of cold command' on the 'shattered visage' of Shelley's Ozymandias. The face we uncovered is not handsome, indeed, I find it quite foreboding; but it is a fascinating face for, as Caesar was*

first to remark, it looks more like the face of an African than an American Indian. R thinks this may be an extremely important find, because it may buttress the argument of certain maverick scholars whom R admires, that the continents of Africa and South America were once conjoined, as one continent; and it may inspire cross-cultural study of aboriginal peoples in Africa and the Americas, to support the compelling hypothesis that perhaps the American Indians are descended from earlier Africans. Or vice-versa.

Yet important though our find may be, archeologically, I confess that the face on Ozymandias's Temple still spooks me. To me, he looks primitive and blood-thirsty. R says I am being foolish, but I will not walk alone by this temple, even in daylight.

R says Ozymandias's Temple must have been built by a very advanced civilization, because of its size and complexity, and the perfect alignment of its stones; and R believes the other large mounds close by must conceal other temples, suggesting Lamanai may once have been the capital of this advanced civilization. I'm sure R is right, because he has already scraped away some of the moss covering another temple, and discovered fascinating, though indecipherable, glyphic inscriptions; yet I still can't shake the feeling that, advanced or not, the people who built Ozymandias's Temple had many inner demons with whom they had failed to come to terms.

In the event, dear girl, you're all caught up now on my adventures – except the one big disappointment, which is that Xhuxh Antil, the Mayan priest whom Mistress Reynolds said could interpret the Lamanai Codex for us, and show us the way to the Fountain of Youth, is dead. We went to the closest Mayan village, Guinea Grass, and asked, in Spanish, for Xhuxh Antil, which inspired great wonderment amongst the Mayan villagers there, who were astounded we knew his name; however, they reported that Xhuxh had gone to Xibalba. When we offered to call upon Xhuxh again, perhaps next week, the villagers explained that Xhuxh would not be returning from his journey, for Xibalba is the Mayan name for the Land of the Dead. Apparently Xhuxh didn't drink deeply enough, from his own fountain, and so he has gone the way of all flesh.

So all we know is, the map to the Fountain of Youth is hidden in the Codex only Xhuxh Antil can read; and the Fountain of Youth itself is in a cave whose hidden entrance only Xhuxh can locate. In short, our only hope of finding the legendary fountain is to conduct a Séance, replete with bi-lingual mystics who speak Spanish and Mayan, and consult with Xhuxh from beyond the grave.

Monday 27 April 1868

R, is elated, for he has discovered a burial chamber deep within Ozymandias's Temple. A stone sarcophagus lies on a slab, decorated with beautiful carvings of serpents, which we take to be Mayan Gods; but, alas, it's empty. Evidently tomb raiders looted

*it clean, bones and all, preventing us from learning what treasures the ancient Mayans placed in such coffins. Other than the sarcophagus, the tomb is empty, save for strange markings scratched on the back wall, near the floor; and rusted metal spikes, hanging from the ceiling above the sarcophagus. R surmises the spikes were used by the tomb raiders, for it is historical fact the Mayans knew nothing of metal before the Spanish Conquest; and the placement of the spikes suggests they were used to hoist open the sarcophagus.*

*Yet even with an empty serpent-decorated sarcophagus, and the inscrutable writing on the wall, R is positively giddy with joy, because he says none of the Mayan temples discovered by Del Rio or Stephens has ever contained a tomb. R says this means Lamanai was clearly once a very important place, almost certainly the capital of the Mayans in this region; and if we can only manage to decipher the writing on the wall, we may unlock the key to one of history's greatest lost civilizations.*

30 April 1868

*We had a disquieting visit today, from an Englishman named Randolph, who says he works at a sugar mill close by. He came to warn us that one of the mill workers was killed last night by a jaguar. The disturbing thing was, we've never seen hide nor hair of the sugar mill workers; and yet they obviously knew we were here, all this time.*

3 May 1868

*Well, our adventure is coming to an end, because Caesar wants to go home. He says he is no longer a slave; he is a free man, whose services are valued by many, and command a fair price in the Bay. He says he has faithfully discharged both commissions for which he was paid, by LG Longden acting for the BSA, and by Roger (using his BSA advance): he guided us safely to deliver the guns to the Santa Cruz Mayans, and he guided us safely here, to this lost city in the jungle. But now Caesar is tired of working for no pay in the hot sun, clearing foliage all day for weeks on end, on nothing more than R's promise to pay him well when we return to Belize. Who will supply the money, Caesar asks? Who will care so much about an old Indian temple in the jungle, that suddenly sterling crowns will rain down from the heavens on R?*

*He has a point, our Caesar.*

*R tried to persuade Caesar that our discovery of Lamanai is the most significant archeological discovery of the century; but with each of R's hyperboles, Caesar's eyes shrank deeper into their sockets, blank and cryptic as the eyes of the scary idol carved*

on Ozymandias's Temple. Then Caesar interrupted R to say: "In two days time the heavy rains begin. It will be much cooler on the river then. The next morning I will take the dory back to Belize. You and your lady may come with me or not, as you choose. I will leave at daybreak." And with that, Caesar was gone, leaving us alone in the gloaming.

4 May 1868

Dearest Persephone –

Early this morning R took the last of his plaster molds of the inscriptions on the two temples we have cleared. He has taken so many molds, I fear they may sink Caesar's dory; but R says all his plaster casts weigh less than the guns we brought up the river, and they are critical to our enterprise, as they will substantiate his discovery claim.

Then R said we shall use our last two days here to find the Fountain of Youth.

We laughed, of course, as this has been the lone disappointment of our trip: despite what Mistress Reynolds promised, we have been unable to use the Lamanai Codex to locate the fabled fountain.

Still, R is in high spirits, with all the important discoveries he's made here; and this has been a very happy time for us, vindicating my long perseverance in the face of all the slings and arrows of haphazard Fortune (and malicious gossip) which I've endured these past four years, to arrive finally at this happy place.

5 May 1868

The rains have come, exactly when Caesar said they would; and they are truly Biblical in force. So I'm sheltering inside the creepy tomb in Ozymandias's Temple, but now R is at the door which he blasted through the stone wall of the pyramid, for easier ingress to the tomb, and he's beckoning me with a concupiscent gleam in his eye; so that I have no doubt the man intends for us to go make love in the jungle in the torrential rain!

Wednesday 5 May 1868 (later)

As God is my Witness, we found it!

The Fountain of Youth is real; it's here at Lamanai; and we found it!!

R forbids me to record exactly where it is, or what it is, or the embarrassing yet humorous events that led to our discovery of it, or what we did when we found it, in case our writings are lost or stolen. Since R surprised me writing in this journal earlier today, he emphasized that I must not record any details here; and of course I needs must honour my husband's wishes in this crucial matter, as in all others.

So all I can tell you is: we found it!

*And now Roger Quinlan – and I, too, I suppose – shall go down in History as the discoverers of the Fountain of Youth!*

10 May 1868

*Dearest Persephone:*

*We are back in Belize.*

*In our absence, the Letter of Credit arrived from England, although there are complications with its precise language, which have prevented me converting it into coin of the Realm. But we used most of our meagre savings to pay Caesar in full for all his time assisting us at Lamanai. Caesar has no idea of our great discovery the last day there; but he is mightily pleased with us, all the same.*

*We've booked passage to London, where R plans to assemble the leading London newspapers outside the Royal Society in Piccadilly, and there announce that he has discovered the Fountain of Youth. He has a beaker full of the precious liquid, which he carries with him at all times, for display on that momentous day.*

*R is walking on air, so enthused is he by his incredible and momentous discovery. R talks of being nominated to join the Royal Society, or at least the Archaeological Association; and even of being Knighted. But to my delight, R also talks of our future; and thus he willingly accompanied me yesterday to St. John's Cathedral, where, after a brief ceremony, we completed the paperwork needed for our protection, now that we shall be so much more than ever in the public eye.*

*Exciting though all these developments be, however, I am distracted by an event that may prove even more miraculous, for me, than finding the Fountain of Youth.*

*I realized, upon our return, that during our entire five week trip, I never once had to contend with the Woman's Curse. Since I am normally as regular as the Moon, I ruminated about it, until I recalled the last time it came, which was the day I went shopping for the Longdens' dinner party – the 30<sup>th</sup> of March, according to this journal. So today it has been 41 days – too soon to tell Roger, yet I am beginning to believe that Doctor Hackett erred, when he told me I could never conceive another child.*

*Or else – dare I say it? – a miracle has occurred within my womb.*

15 May 1868

*We leave for England this afternoon. I shall pack this journal safely away in my trunk, so that I shall never lose the wonderful memories it records.*

*Today is the 46<sup>th</sup> day. I am certain I am with child. O how I pray I am right, and that no complications shall arise from whatever awful injuries 'Doctor' Hackett perpetrated inside me; and that I may deliver into this world a healthy baby!*

*As soon as we arrive in England, I shall tell Roger, for I know he will insist on placing me in the care of Harley Street's finest physicians.*

*Yesterday I completed paperwork for the Reynolds Foundation, which I shall post to Mr. Caruthers, the London solicitor to the Foundation, as soon as we reach England. Hopefully the paperwork will resolve the difficulties I have experienced here with the Letter of Credit, because R and I are, again, nearly as poor as church mice.*

*Yesterday I also tracked down Mister Patrous, and redeemed R's locket which I pawned two months ago. I'm not at all sure why I did that. Guilt, I suppose.*

*Last night R and I dined with Mister Blake, who plans to buy Ambergris Caye this summer. In spite of our shortage of funds, R entrusted a small sum with Mister Blake, to purchase us a small plot of land on the east shore of the Caye, with a Sea-side prospect. Mister Blake agreed to do so, and to post us the Deed in London once the sale is complete; yet he could not help asking, why in the world should we wish to purchase a small parcel of land, in a Colony where profit can only be made on larger tracts?*

*To my everlasting delight, R replied that he and I plan to return to Ambergris Caye one day, when we are old and gray, to live in the warm sun in our dotage, and hunt for old pirate treasure, and the odd seashell, along the strand.*

\* \* \*

Immediately upon closing Kathleen Quinlan's diary, Joyce Kerr carries the odd little book into her hotel room's tiny bathroom, closes the door, and turns both the shower and sink faucets on full blast, at the hottest settings. After a few minutes, when the air in the bathroom reaches steam bath humidity, Joyce pushes her fingertips against the British Library property sticker on the inside cover of the diary. At once the sticker comes unglued, and she flushes it down the toilet.

Joyce knows she'll never be as adventurous as her great-great-grandmother, who flouted society's rules and laws. But Joyce is pretty sure she has enough pluck to smuggle Kathleen's stolen diary back to the USA tomorrow – without a sticker to attract inquiry from UK or US customs.

Because this book is going to be Exhibit A, when Joyce sues the old bitch, her cousin.

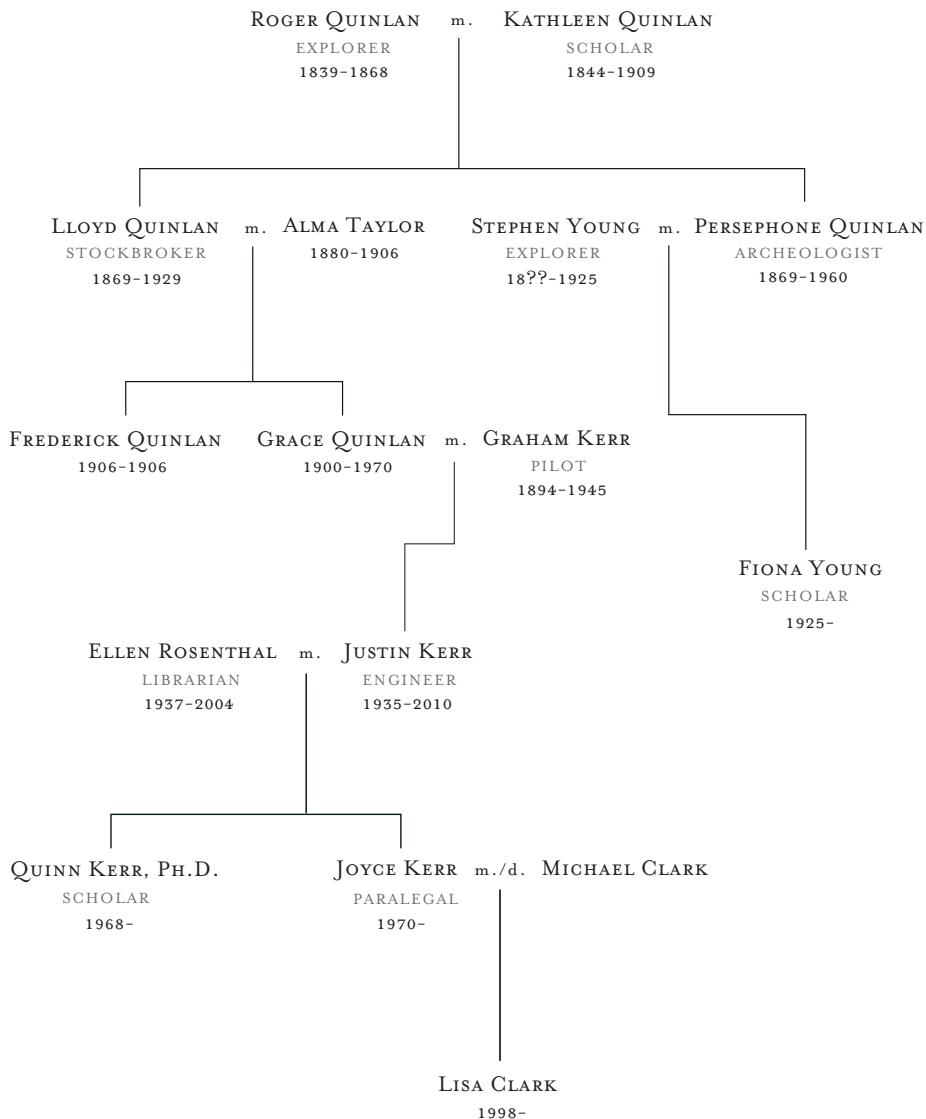
Emerging from the steam bath, Joyce writes out her family tree, as best she knows it, all the way back to the Quinlans, and faxes it to her office in Ann Arbor. Then she calls David Burns.

"I hope I'm not waking you."

"Rust never sleeps," David Burns replies.

"Then how come you sound so groggy?"

— JOYCE KERR —  
 FAMILY TREE



"That's just my vocal chords clearing the whiskey. Once the air reaches my throat, I'll be fine. Hey, I'm sorry I couldn't find you a flight home today, Joyce. Must be awful, alone in a hotel—"

"I'm okay, David. And thank you for all you did today. You're a life saver."

"You're welcome. But I only did it because I'm still hoping, after all these years, to get laid."

Joyce smiles at this old joke. "Good luck, Lancelot. But I'm calling about new business."

"Fabulous! Who's the client?"

"Me," Joyce says.

"No kidding! You're finally going to let me sue that deadbeat ex of yours?"

"No, you silly man. The defendant would be my cousin, Fiona Young."

"The crazy old Maya scholar who tried to get you prosecuted when you were in college, for supposedly trying to steal her precious ancient Maya book – what was it called?"

"The *Lamanai Codex*."

"Right. Well, Joyce, I'm sure you must realize, you can't sue Fiona now for slandering your good name 20 years ago. So what's Fiona done to harm you lately?"

"You get the fax I sent you a few minutes ago?" Joyce asks.

"No, everyone's off today for the holidays. Hang on, I'll go check the fax machine." After a minute Burns returns to the phone. "Got it. Just a one-pager, your family tree?"

"Yes. I thought it'd help, as I explain why I think Quinn and I have a claim against Fiona." Joyce grabs her copy of her family tree. "You see how my family has two branches? One branch ends with Fiona Young. The other branch goes down to Quinn and me."

"Actually, that branch now goes down just to you," Burns says. "Your father was so angry about Quinn running off to India to study with the latest Maharaja, he wrote Quinn out of his Will."

"That's awful!" Joyce says. "Though I suppose Quinn won't care."

"Doesn't matter," Burns says. "There's nothing for you or Quinn to inherit anyway."

"Actually, that might not be true. The Maya codex Fiona accused me of trying to steal back in 1990, well, Fiona told me her mother, Persephone Quinlan, found it while digging up the ancient Maya library at Lamanai in Belize. But that turns out to be a lie."

"How do you know it was a lie?"

"Because I just read the diary of Fiona's *grandmother*, Kathleen Quinlan, which says Kathleen had the *Lamanai Codex* five years before Fiona's mother, Persephone, was even born."

"Slow down a sec." Burns rustles paper. "That side of the family I don't know so well. Okay, Kathleen gave birth to Persephone, who gave birth to Fiona. Got it. But – looking at the family tree, I'm still not seeing why you think the *Lamanai Codex* belongs to you instead of Fiona. So Kathleen had it, she bequeathed it to Persephone, who in turn bequeathed it to Fiona."

"Impossible. The reason Fiona made up the lie about Persephone finding the *Lamanai Codex* while digging at Lamanai is, if it belonged to Kathleen, then it should have passed down *my* side of the family tree, not Fiona's. There was a big lawsuit about this back in 1909, after

Kathleen Quinlan committed suicide. The probate judge in Ann Arbor awarded everything in Kathleen's estate to her son Lloyd, and absolutely nothing to her daughter Persephone."

"How come Persephone got nothing?"

"Beats me, David. I wasn't around in 1909. All I know is, everything Kathleen had was supposed to go to Lloyd – and then Lloyd lost it all when the stock market crashed in 1929. So all of Lloyd's descendants – my grandmother Grace, and my father Justin – never bothered looking into probate matters, because they assumed, like you, there was nothing to inherit. But this diary I just read says there's at least one thing Lloyd never got, which really was his: the *Lamanai Codex*."

A short pause ensues. "So – is the *Lamanai Codex* worth much?"

"Are you kidding, David? Put to one side the old rumor that the codex contains a map to the fountain of youth. Even assuming that's all hooey, it's still one of only five Maya codices in the whole world to survive the Spanish Conquest of Central America. It's gotta be worth a fortune."

"So, if I take this case and win it for you, you'll thank me by retiring on me?"

Joyce smiles, glad she anticipated this objection. "Perish the thought. I might have to go part-time, though, so I have enough time to take the codex and go hunt for the fountain of youth."

"Fair enough – as long as you bring some of the magic water back home for me."

"Beware of what you think you want, David – those magic waters killed Kathleen's husband, Roger Quinlan, back in 1868, at age 29."

"So people actually know where the fountain of youth is supposed to be?"

"No. The Quinlans never said exactly where it was. Not even in Kathleen's diary. And after Roger died so young, no one was much interested in looking for those waters anyway. They figured whatever Roger found was more like a fountain of death than a fountain of youth."

"What about the map in the *Lamanai Codex* – where does the codex say the fountain is?"

"No one knows. Fiona's hoarded that codex for 50 years. Claims she's still translating it."

"But I thought scholars cracked the Mayan code," Burns says, "like 15 years ago, and figured out how to translate all the ancient Maya glyphs."

"They did. And I'm sure they could translate the *Lamanai Codex*, too, if Fiona would ever let them see it. But Fiona refuses all requests to access, or even photocopy, the *Lamanai Codex*."

"Why?"

"Who knows? She's a stubborn old bitch, my cousin. All the other leading Maya scholars are totally pissed at her. Which doesn't bother her one whit, of course."

A pause ensues. "If the codex is so valuable," Burns asks, "why hasn't Fiona sold it?"

It's Joyce's turn to pause. "I'm trying to remember if you ever met Fiona."

"Coupla times, back in the late '80s. She was *very* attractive – I mean, for a lady in her late sixties. Amazing hooded eyes. And smart as hell."

"Right on all counts," Joyce says. "Fiona is also completely obsessed with the Maya, and with the *Lamanai Codex*. Never in a million years would she sell that book. It's her whole life."

“So if we sue her for it, she’ll fight us?”

“To the death.”

“Don’t sugar-coat it, Joyce.” Burns chuckles. “Okay, so we’ve got an 85-year-old lady in London, clinging to a book she loves more than life itself, and you want me to sue her – where, exactly? I’m not licensed to practice in the Old Bailey, or wherever London lawsuits are heard.”

“Sue her in Ann Arbor,” Joyce says. “Fiona has possession of a book the Ann Arbor probate court said belongs to my side of the family, not Fiona’s. The court should enforce its order.”

“When did Fiona last set foot in Ann Arbor?”

Joyce pauses to think. “1990. That summer she accused me of trying to steal the codex was her last year teaching at the University of Michigan. Then she retired to London.”

“Hmnn,” Burns says. “And the order you want enforced, was issued – when? 1909?”

“That’s right.” Joyce sighs, realizing maybe this lawsuit isn’t as simple as she thought.

“You’ve seen the 1909 order?”

“No,” Joyce admits, “it’s family legend. But the probate court must have a copy of it, right?”

“Not necessarily. Sometimes old records get lost. But I’ll have my paralegal check, when she gets back from London. Listen, Joyce, I’m not trying to give you grief, on the day your father—”

“It’s okay, David. I want you to ask hard questions. And don’t go easy just ‘cause Daddy died this morning. I’m doing this mostly for him. I think this is why he was so bent on coming to London to research family history. But even if I’m wrong about that, I need to know, tonight, if I have a good claim against Fiona. Because tomorrow, before I fly home, I’m gonna go see the old bitch, and demand she give me back the codex. Unless you tell me I’m barking up the wrong tree.”

“Alright, I’ll be my usual ruthless self, and cross-examine you like any new client. Let’s start with the *Lamanai Codex*. How’d Kathleen come to own the codex in the first place?”

“The codex was a gift to Kathleen in 1864, from her painting teacher in London, an old lady named India Reynolds. I have no idea where India Reynolds got the codex.”

“Any chance the codex was stolen property?” Burns asks.

“100 percent. I mean, originally it was the Maya’s. *Somebody* musta stolen it from them.”

“Fair point. Okay. But we don’t have a bill of sale, or a gift letter, or anything like that, to prove the codex belonged to Kathleen in 1864?”

“No, but the 1868 diary I’m bringing you says, in 1864, India Reynolds gave it to Kathleen.”

“And where’d you get the diary?”

Joyce pauses. “We have attorney-client privilege here, right?”

“Of course.”

“Daddy stole it from the British Library yesterday.”

A short pause. “Let’s say he ‘borrowed’ it. Sounds better. How long’s the library had it?”

“Since 1868. It was in a collection of Roger Quinlan’s papers and plaster casts from the Maya ruins at Lamanai, which Kathleen donated to the British Museum right after Roger died.”

“Well that’s probably good enough to defeat any challenge to its authenticity,” Burns says. “Now let’s go through your Family Tree, step by step. Is there anyone in the chain, from Kathleen to you, whom Fiona’s lawyer might argue was crazy, or acting fraudulently?”

“Are you kidding?” Joyce asks. “Almost all the Quinlans and Kerrs were crazy.”

Burns chuckles.

“No, seriously, David. Just go down the family tree. Roger Quinlan thought he found the fountain of youth. Kathleen and Lloyd both committed suicide. Persephone was even nuttier than Fiona – Persephone was still digging in Maya ruins when she was in her 80s. Grandpa Graham came back from World War I with battle trauma, and spent the rest of his days in a VA asylum, till he broke out, stole a plane from Willow Run, and flew east with the intention of ending World War II by killing Hitler – only to crash and die in Lake Erie. Quinn’s off chasing the meaning of life in India. Really, Grace and my parents were the only normal ones since before Roger and Kathleen.”

“And you, Joyce. You’re very stable. Well, at least there’s no fraud—” Burns pulls up short.

They both know why Burns stopped. Burns’ first client, right out of law school, was Justin Kerr, accused by his business partners of embezzlement – the charges Justin fought for years, in civil and criminal courts of Michigan, ultimately dragging his family into bankruptcy, all in a losing effort, because, at the end of the day, Justin truly did embezzle funds from his partners, although his motive was not self-gain, but rather trying to prevent a buy-out of the company he loved.

“Except for Daddy” – Joyce’s voice trembles slightly – “the only other criminal in our family was Roger Quinlan. According to Kathleen’s diary, Roger was expelled from Oxford for robbing graves, seduced his wife’s best friend before eloping to Australia, left Australia one step ahead of the law for some crime unspecified, went to Honduras and ran guns to Maya rebels in Mexico, and then drank the poisonous water at Lamanai he mistook for the fountain of youth.”

“Sounds like a fun guy.” Burns laughs. “But since Roger died before Kathleen, he’s not in the chain from Kathleen to you. He’s irrelevant. Now, Kathleen committed suicide in 1909 – how?”

“Drove off a bridge into a deep river. They never even found her body.”

“How’d they know it was suicide, and not an accident?”

“She left a note.”

“What was the reason for the suicide?”

“She was caught in a barn on the outskirts of Ann Arbor, with a married professor. *In flagrante delicto*, as they used to say. It was apparently a huge scandal, back in the day.”

“Oh, I remember hearing this story from your mother once.” Burns rustles paper. “But wait, Kathleen was what, *65 years old* in 1909? Not an age most women have aff—”

“Reportedly Kathleen was even better looking in her sixties than Fiona was at that same age,” Joyce says. “All the women in my family age very well – and we’re all great-looking.”

“No argument from me there.” Burns snorts. “What else do you know about Kathleen?”

"Not much. She came to Ann Arbor right after Roger died in London in 1868. She was one of the first women lecturers at the University of Michigan, in the 1870's."

"What subject?" Burns asks.

"Central American studies. The Maya, our family's obsession. Also – I doubt this matters, but to me, it's really strange. Kathleen addressed her 1868 diary to a daughter she says she aborted, around 1865. She calls the aborted daughter 'Persephone'. But then in 1869, when Kathleen gave birth to a live daughter, she gave her live daughter that same name, Persephone."

"That *is* odd," Burns agrees. "But probably doesn't matter. More relevant is what went on in the 1909 court fight between Persephone and Lloyd, after Kathleen killed herself in 1909. Have you ever seen any records at all from that probate case – like the asset inventory?"

"No," Joyce admits.

"Then I'll have my paralegal look for it, in the old court files, once she returns from London. Because Joyce, we really need to know if the codex was listed as an asset of Kathleen's estate."

"Okay. I'll go as soon as the court reopens after the holidays." Joyce frowns. "But – just so I understand, which is better for us: if the codex *is* listed on the asset inventory, or if it's *not* listed?"

A pause ensues. "Well actually, as I think about it, I suppose it doesn't matter much, either way. I mean, if the court order truly says all the assets go to Lloyd, then if the codex *is* listed as an asset, that's one more good thing for us. But if it's *not* listed, we'll just argue that Lloyd – who presumably prepared the asset inventory – never knew the codex existed. So either way, we rely on the court order – and on Kathleen's diary. But tell me about Lloyd. How'd he kill himself?"

"Shot himself in his library," Joyce says, "while reading Conrad."

"*Heart of Darkness*?"

"Is that the one about Central America?"

"No," Burns says, "that's *Nostromo*."

"That's it, *Nostromo*. About a guy who shoots himself on an island off Belize. So the family story is, the stock market had just crashed, the creditors were at Lloyd's door, he was reading *Nostromo*, and he just pulled out his pistol and put an end to it all, *Nostromo*-style."

"Was there probate litigation over Lloyd's estate, too?"

"I don't know," Joyce admits. "Another thing your paralegal will have to investigate."

"Check. But the end result, as far as you know is, Lloyd had nothing left to leave Grace, and Grace had nothing left to leave Justin, and Justin had nothing to leave to you?"

"Correct. So do all the suicides and lunatics in my family somehow defeat my claim?"

"No, although it truly is amazing you turned out as well-balanced as you did, Joyce. Especially with Justin in and out of bankruptcy the whole time you were growing up. But here's the biggest danger I see to your claim: is there any reason to think Justin, or Grace, or Lloyd, knew the other side of your family had the *Lamanai Codex*, and yet *acquiesced* in their having it?"

“Well, I never met Lloyd, or Grace,” Joyce says. “But if Daddy’d known, given how desperate he always was for money, I gotta believe he’d’ve said or done something.”

“Fair point. From all my years representing Justin and hardly ever getting paid, I’m sure he never knew he might’ve had a claim to a valuable Mayan codex. But – just to play devil’s advocate here – what if we sue Fiona, and she answers by claiming Grace or Lloyd knew all along that Persephone and Fiona had Lloyd’s codex, and it was all okay with Grace or Lloyd?”

“But how could Fiona say that now?” Joyce asks. “She told me Persephone dug the codex up at Lamanai while excavating the famous Maya library there, back in the ’20s or ’30s.”

“Fair point,” Burns says. “Okay then, the bottom line is, I think you might really have a good claim to the *Lamanai Codex*, Joyce. Which is why I would rather you *not* go see Fiona tomorrow.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re still in shock from your father’s death. Not the best time to—”

“I’m going, David. I’m sorry. I get to London about once every ten years, if that; and I haven’t seen Fiona in twenty years, since she made such a fuss accusing me of trying to steal a book she must’ve known full well belonged to me all along. Yet she’s also the woman who raised me, as much as my technical mother, who was always too busy for me. So I need to – I need to look Fiona in the eye and tell her I know she done me wrong.”

A pause ensues. “Alright. But please be careful when you talk to Fiona. Admit nothing, Joyce, while trying to get her to commit to as many specifics about the codex as you can – where it came from, who knew about it, what they knew and when they knew it, etc. You know the drill.”

“I’ve read a few of your cross-examinations over the years, yes,” Joyce says. “But tell me, David, will it be a problem to sue Fiona in Ann Arbor, since she lives in London?”

“A big problem. But we’ll find a way across that bridge when we come to it. Please be careful tomorrow, Joyce. In my experience, little old ladies are the most dangerous foes.”

Joyce hangs up. She resists her first temptation, to call Lisa. The Judge told Joyce, since she complains about all Michael’s encroachments on her time, she better not encroach on his.

But the second temptation she knows she can’t resist. So she lights up a cigarette.