

PROLOGUE

I, Friar Sylvestre de Palma, the least faithful of the Order of Our Blessed Father Saint Dominic, am charged to document the events of the voyage of Captain Alejandro de Baza, a nobleman of Spain, and to declare the truth of everything about it, from the day said Captain and forty-eight of his companions entered the mouth of the Orinoco River in search of gold, cinnamon and diamonds, to the day only six of us returned.

Relación del Descubrimiento
(Account of Discovery)
Seville, A.D. 1561

CHAPTER 1

The storm came out of nowhere. Thunder rolled. Lightning forked across the night sky like incandescent snake tongues.

Cradling his guitar, Jerry Pace peered up through the trees. A gust rattled their branches. “Think it’ll rain?”

Northern Yellowstone hadn’t felt a sprinkle in five years, which was the official reason he was here: drought research for the USDA during his summer break from teaching. Plant specimens and soil samples from the first week of work lay bagged and tagged in a pile behind him, ready to haul out to the Forest Service Bronco he’d parked a mile up the hill.

His unofficial reason sat cross-legged beside him, her brown eyes and auburn hair glowing in the light of their Coleman lantern. Three weeks with Judy, alone in the wilderness, had been too good an opportunity to pass up. The perfect prequel to their wedding and honeymoon next month.

“I don’t smell rain.” She smiled flirtatiously. “But if it does come, we can get naked and dance in it. I’ll play ‘In the Hall of the Mountain King.’ ”

Jerry pictured them gamboling in the forest, Judy bobbing and weaving, her flute to her lips playing Grieg’s famous dance of the trolls. God, he loved her. Not only the wild streak she hid beneath the formal demeanor of a concert musician, but the way she made him feel just being with her. He loved every strand of her flowing hair, all the flavors of her skin. Plus her mastery of the flute constantly inspired him to improve his own skill on the classical guitar. Literally and figuratively, they made music together.

Leaning over, he nuzzled her ear. “Why don’t we play it now?”

“In a minute.” She reached for her Baggie of cocaine. “I want to do another line.”

He grasped her wrist. “Judy, you had some an hour ago. Maybe you should—”

“I just want to keep the buzz going.”

“I wish you wouldn’t.” She’d been using coke for a couple of months, claiming it got her through the stress of rehearsals, performances, and wedding planning. Having tried it himself once with no ill effects, he hadn’t been too worried. Until she missed work after a party one night. Now her use was escalating.

But he held his tongue, not wanting to break the mood. After the wedding, with the ice

sculptures, champagne fountains, gifts for guests, and other crap her society parents kept foisting on her, she'd be a lot more relaxed. They'd honeymoon in Tahiti, and if she didn't stop then, he'd toss her stash in the sea and have a serious talk with her.

Judy flashed another of those smiles he couldn't resist. "Don't look so serious, baby. I'm just having fun."

More thunder. The wind picked up, pelting them with twigs and pinecones from the forest canopy overhead. Unable to see beyond the light of their lantern, Jerry listened for rain.

Nothing, not even crickets. Strange.

She put her hand on his thigh. "One little line."

The words had barely left her lips when an explosion knocked them flat.

Stunned, Jerry twisted around, ears ringing. Forty feet away, a fountain of fire shot skyward, a towering conifer struck by lightning. "Holy Christ."

Flying debris ignited the parched undergrowth. Dry saplings erupted like Roman candles. A boom of thunder shook the ground. In that same instant, another crack of lightning shattered the air behind them.

His skin prickled with static electricity. Struggling to his feet, he pulled Judy up in front of him. "We have to get out of here. Now!"

"My flute. It's in the tent."

"No time." Driven by wind, the flames fanned out at frightening speed, racing through the treetops. "It's turning into a firestorm. We'll suffocate."

"I need it." She headed for the tent.

Jerry yanked her arm as a shower of embers cascaded around them. He slapped some off her shoulder. "We've got to get to the river. Open air."

"No. The truck."

"It's too far away."

"We can make it."

Was it the coke talking, or could they really do it? Only one mile.

An enormous cracking noise made them both look up.

Wrapped in fire, half a tree snapped off, plummeting to the ground and striking another tree, which toppled into a third. Jerry shielded his eyes against the blast of scorching air.

"I have to get that flute. My brother played it."

Shit. She idolized her older brother who tragically had died of AIDS. Jerry was no match for her stubbornness, but his legs were longer than hers and a lot faster. "Okay, go. I'll get it and catch up with you."

"Hurry," she pleaded and took off. Uphill, toward the Bronco.

Jerry turned to their tent. Flames streamed up one side from a fallen limb. Melting nylon shriveled a gaping hole, exposing their sleeping bags inside. He inched forward. She kept her flute in the right front corner. Stooping, he reached through the door flap and instantly pulled back, the hair of his arm singed. He steeled himself to try again. But suddenly another limb fell, cratering the tent in a crash of sparks. Hell with it. He lit out in a sprint.

Arms pumping, he pounded up the trail. Fire roared all around him. Blistering heat, cinders swirling.

A minute later he had to stop. He couldn't get enough oxygen. The firestorm sucked it up like a voracious beast. Hands on knees, Jerry tried to catch his breath.

"Come on," Judy yelled.

He lifted his head to see her beckoning from a rise, silhouetted against shimmering orange and yellow. They'd never make it to the Bronco. They had to go to the river.

Judy turned and disappeared.

"Wait!" Jerry chugged up the rise. He reached the top just in time to see another big conifer keel over. He saw Judy look up in mid-stride, trip, and tumble to the ground, raising her arms as the conifer crashed on top of her.

Panic-stricken, he launched into a dead run.

Flames leapt from the fallen tree. Its branches glowed like a neon skeleton.

Jerry tore off his shirt to cover his face. He found her thrashing under a foot-thick section of upper trunk. Their eyes met. Judy opened her mouth, but no sounds came out.

He dropped his shirt and dived in with both hands. He could do it. He could lift the tree, pull her out to safety. Knocking aside branches, squinting against the flying embers, he grasped the trunk. Searing pain. The acrid stench of incinerating flesh.

With a massive heave, he hoisted the trunk. Waves of fire washed over him like billowing silk. And the pain disappeared.

CHAPTER 2

Four years later, 1999

Jerry barely heard her the first time. His eyes were glued to the microscope, his mind focused on microsurgically inserting an altered chromosome into the germ cell of a coca plant.

“Doctor Pace,” Denise repeated from behind him, “you have a letter from the District Attorney’s office.”

“Open it.” He punctured the nuclear membrane.

Now came the hard part, implanting just one chromosome. He flexed his webbed fingers and felt for the dial that operated the syringe. Turning it ever so slowly, he watched through the oculars as a dark thread of genetic material migrated down the hair-thin tube.

“They convicted that guy—”

“Hang on, Denise.” A second chromosome, unwanted, was advancing behind the first. Cautiously, he rotated the dial another quarter turn. Just a touch more. Got it.

Feeling for the knurled knob that retracted the syringe, he gave it a twist. “Okay.”

“It’s a thank-you note for your evidence and testimony.”

Jerry straightened on the metal stool and swiveled to face her. All around them, glassware and stainless steel glistened in the UCLA botany lab he’d spent a year putting together with DEA money. “Anyone could have done it. The guy had pollen in his hair that could only have come from the murder scene.”

“Anyone?”

“Certainly *you* could have.” He saw an appreciative smile spread over her face and smiled back. As well as being his part-time assistant, Denise Thompson was Jerry Pace’s best grad student, one of the bright lights who made the teaching part of his job a pleasure. An attractive woman with dark-chocolate skin and a rich southern accent, she always struck him as remarkably graceful for someone weighing two hundred and thirty pounds.

He knew her weight because a graph of its erratic decline hung from the reagent shelf above her lab bench.

“There’s a check, too,” she said, holding it up.

“That’s better. Maybe I can pay the rent this month.” He took it from her outstretched hand. “Ahh. Two months’ rent. Plus enough left over for dog food. Bentley will like that.”

Denise’s smile brightened at the name of his dog, then faded. “You talk that way, but it isn’t true, is it? The money, I mean.”

“Believe me, Assistant Professors do it for love.” He folded the check and slipped it into his shirt pocket. “Nothing from the National Science Foundation?”

Fidgeting with the buttons of her lab coat, Denise shook her head. “You want me to call the mail room? It could come by special delivery.”

“No. They’ll call us. Or maybe NSF will call.”

“It’s after five in Washington.”

“Don’t worry.” He had two grant applications outstanding, but this one with the National Science Foundation would not only allow him to pursue a fresh approach to wiping out coca

crops, it would also fund Denise's thesis research and provide her with a stipend for the next two years. NSF had promised a decision by the end of April. "They still have one more day."

The phone rang in his office.

"Maybe that's them now." Jerry strode into his office and caught it on the fourth ring.

"*Amigo*, my book just arrived. You must come and see it." The voice belonged to Hector Cevallos, a history professor and Jerry's best friend.

Shoving NSF out of his mind, Jerry tried to recall what book Hector might have been waiting for. "The journal?"

"What else? You must come immediately."

Jerry glanced at his wrist, a habit that wouldn't die. "Damn," he mumbled, reminded yet again that his skin was still too sensitive for a wristband. Digging the pocket watch out of his jeans, he saw three-thirty. "Uh ... how about half an hour?"

There was a moment of silence. Then, "Is something wrong?"

"No. I just have to put away some things."

"*Madre*. Do you know what I've been through to get this? My phone bill would pay the chancellor's salary."

Eager though he was to hear from NSF, staying in his lab wouldn't make a difference. And Hector's excitement obviously needed sharing. "Okay, I'll be there in a few minutes."

Jerry pulled his tweed sport coat off the door hook and told Denise, "I have to go up to the History Department. Could you transfer that coca cell to a vial with five percent B-six nutrient and incubate it for me?"

She rose from her stool. "Any news?"

"Not yet." He saw her lips purse and sympathized with her anxiety. At age thirty-two, he was only six years removed from being a graduate student himself, as dependent on his own advisor as Denise was on him. "Keep the faith. I have a good feeling about this one. And if we do get a call or a letter, you know where to reach me."

Outside it was a glorious spring afternoon on the UCLA campus. Bright sun, flowers blooming, a light breeze off the Pacific. Jerry slipped on his sunglasses which, together with the reddish-brown toupee, concealed the worst of the scar tissue covering his head and face. But at six-three, he still tended to stand out. During the trek from south campus to north campus, he noticed several double takes in addition to outright stares. Too bad he couldn't grow hair.

Judy's hair had been glorious. Until it ignited.

Suddenly he felt nauseous, the heart-crushing vision burning in his brain just as vividly as in his nightmares.

If only he'd been stronger, stood up to her coke-induced delusion that they could outrace the fire—uphill, for God's sake. And more basic than that, his misguided, tragic decision not to fight harder against the crutch that so obviously was becoming an addiction.

It wasn't your fault. But that mantra, drummed into him by a shrink who looked like Lenin, had never rung completely true.

One thing *was* true. The blaze that consumed five thousand acres of Yellowstone and the only woman he ever loved, had changed the course of his research—his mission—to ridding the

streets of cocaine by destroying the coca crop at its source.

On that single positive note, he walked on to Bunche Hall.

Better known to students as “the waffle,” Bunche Hall was a narrow, eleven-story building pockmarked by a grid of square, brown-shaded windows. Avoiding its undependable elevators, Jerry climbed six flights, turned down the hallway, and poked his head into the office marked: Hector Cevallos Vera, Associate Professor.

“What took you, *hombre*?”

“I came as fast as I could.”

“Poor form. You should try foreplay.” Hector grinned and rose to shake hands.

As usual, the Ecuadorian was impeccably dressed—French cuffs, designer tie—his badge of disdain for what he termed “the uniform of academic sloth.” Reared in privilege, he was stockier than Jerry, four years older, and a head shorter, with a small paunch that his wife Mikio was trying to reduce with traditional Japanese cooking. “Sit down,” he said.

Jerry tossed his jacket on one of the leather chairs facing Hector’s desk and plopped himself into the other. He always felt relaxed here—floor-to-ceiling bookcases, a huge globe, the smell of old paper and of the Cuban cigars Hector smoked against university regulations. It was like an enclave of Old World graciousness, about as opposite as Jerry could imagine to his own, clinically sterile lab.

In the middle of Hector’s desk lay a volume half again as large as a student notebook. It was bound in plain, cream-colored vellum that looked stained and a little warped. “Is that it?”

Hector closed his office door. “You won’t believe what a treasure it is. Acquiring that journal is the best thing this department has ever done.”

“Better than hiring you?”

“Equal, perhaps,” Hector said with a twinkle. “Without me, we never would have got it. Do you know I competed against the Prado and the Smithsonian?”

“No, I didn’t. Congratulations.” What he did know—because Hector had told him—was that the book chronicled an ill-fated, 16th-Century Spanish expedition up the Orinoco River in Venezuela. There’d been a fever of excitement when it came up for auction, and Hector somehow had secured financial backing from a Spanish philanthropist for the department’s bid. “So let’s see it.”

“A moment, please. Do you not wish to savor the drama?”

“What drama?”

“My friend, we possess a piece of history that was thought to be lost for four hundred years.” He moved Jerry’s jacket aside and sat next to him. “It’s at least as important as the chronicle of Orellana’s discovery of the Amazon. And the mystery surrounding it is fascinating.”

This had the earmarks of turning into a longer story than Jerry had bargained for. But no way would he rain on his friend’s parade. Stretching out his legs, he said, “Okay, fascinate me.”

Hector drew the volume toward them. “First, you must realize that Friar Sylvestre recorded three journals during the expedition of Alejandro de Baza, and a summary two years later. The first and second volumes survived, but the third one disappeared. We only knew about it because Sylvestre noted it in his summary.” Hector placed his palms on the book as if it were a

holy relic. "And now, here it is."

"Is that the mystery? It was lost, and now it's found?"

Hector gave him a pitying look. "Have you no patience? That's only the preamble. The mystery, the real mystery, was twofold. Where did Baza go, and what did he find? We know they left the Orinoco and traveled up one of the tributaries, but Volume Two ends before they did this. As to what they found, the summary mentions gold, diamonds, and Amazons."

"Amazons?"

"Which," Hector continued without pause, "scholars would have written off as fairytales, except for one thing—Friar Sylvestre wrote very soberly. His first two volumes contain maps, drawings, and descriptions we can verify today."

"So the real mystery is why he strayed into fantasy at the end."

"You're hopeless. I don't know why I put up with you."

"Because I'm so good-looking?"

Hector threw up his hands.

"Actually, I was serious," Jerry said. "Gold and Amazons sound like wishful thinking, to use a kinder term than fantasy."

"Ha! That's where you're wrong." Hector opened the book to a page near the back, then made a sheepish smile. "As with detective novels, I started at the end."

Leaning forward, Jerry saw a page of finely penned script. "If it's so valuable, shouldn't you be wearing gloves?"

Hector blew out a disdainful puff. "That's for curators. You can't feel history through gloves. Besides, body oils help keep the vellum supple. It's skin, you know. Calfskin."

Keeping his finger in the page he'd selected, Hector closed the journal and bent its front cover to nearly a forty-five degree angle. "See? This is because people have handled it for centuries. And look at this." He pointed to five thongs of leather that pierced the covers and wrapped around the spine. "See how loose they are? That allows you to lay the book open flat." He opened it again to his selected page and, sure enough, the journal did lie almost flat. "With most books this age you can't do that. But this one was intentionally made that way so Friar Sylvestre could easily write in it." Hector shook his head slowly. "Just imagine. He would have received this as a fully formed book filled with totally blank pages. What a responsibility he must have felt."

Sorry he'd triggered one of Hector's lengthy elucidations, Jerry said, "Okay, I get that you don't have to wear gloves. So, you started at the end, and..."

"Do you read Latin?"

"Only enough to understand genus and species names."

"Then I'll translate for you." Hector lowered the glasses perched in his hair and read:

" 'Holy Mother, protect us.

'We have today encountered the Amazons, which heretofore we had regarded as pagan myths. Few of us, if any, I fear, may survive.

'Our party was preparing to ascend a high mesa, which the natives call Tepui Zupay, when they appeared upon a ridge above us, as naked and

shameless as the other wild creatures of the forest. All were female, much taller than the natives of this region, with golden skin and golden hair. As the morning sun was at our backs, they presented a phalanx of blinding brilliance.

‘Our natives fled immediately. Had we done the same, there might now be enough of us to counterattack. But General Baza is dead, and only one of his officers and a handful of his men are safely in camp tonight.

‘The Amazons each carried what appeared to be a staff but in actuality was a terrible weapon. These, when lifted to their mouths like trumpets, let fly a hail of tiny sticks which struck our men like a swarm of wasps, piercing their skin and causing horrible agony. Some fell immediately, some a few paces later. None so struck survived an hour, even if pierced on an extremity where the ball from a harquebus would not be fatal.’ ”

Hector paused. “A harquebus is an early version of a matchlock rifle. Very heavy and usually fired from a support.” Continuing, he read:

“ ‘A party of us who escaped and returned in the afternoon found a tableau of ungodly carnage, for the heads had been severed from our fallen companions, and insects of all descriptions infested their bodies to a degree that scarcely flesh showed.

‘Such blood had flowed that it stained the stream below, proving the truth of yet another myth, that the rivers of this region owe their red color to the savagery of the Amazons and the multitudes of their victims.

‘What shall become of us now only God can know.’ ”

Hector glanced up over the top of his glasses. “That was the last entry.”

Leaning back in his chair, Jerry tried to decide how honest he should be. Did Hector want his opinion or just someone to share his enthusiasm? Best to be truthful. “I hate to say it, but your mystery sounds like a case of psilocybin intoxication. Golden women? Rivers of blood? I think your man was eating mushrooms.”

“He was a friar, for Christ’s sake.”

“You think friars live on wine and wafers? Surely they were eating what the locals ate. How do you suppose Europeans learned about potatoes and corn? Or coca, for that matter?”

Hector stabbed the page with his finger. “This doesn’t read like the writing of a drug-crazed monk. Besides, Orellana ran into Amazons also, in fifteen forty-two. He named the river after them.”

“Golden women?”

“Not golden. But ferocious female warriors. They nearly destroyed his expedition.”

Recalling a bit of South American history, Jerry sat up straighter. “Maybe your friar was thinking about Incas. Didn’t they cover themselves with gold?”

“The nobles did. But they were gone by then. Pizarro wiped them out in the fifteen thirties, twenty years before Sylvés—” Hector stopped, grabbed up the journal, and reread, “Tepui Zupay. I didn’t catch that before.”

“Teh ...?”

“Teh-POO-ee,” Hector said, “is a steep-sided, flat-topped mountain. But Zupay is a Quechua word. It means devil.” He narrowed his eyes. “And it’s totally out of place in Venezuela.”

“What’s Quechua?”

“An indigenous language in the Andes.” Removing his glasses, Hector frowned. “It was the language of the Incas.”

“Maybe there was some kind of commerce between the Incas and the Indians of Venezuela.”

“If so, it would be news to historians.”

“Then your purchase could be paying off already.” It was the first upbeat comment Jerry had been able to make, and Hector’s reaction—a thoughtful nod—pleased him.

“Ah.” The thoughtful look vanished as Hector adjusted the knot of his already-perfect tie. “Speaking of paying off, a representative of Señor Varga, our financial backer, is arriving tomorrow. A young lady from Holland. You should meet her.”

A red flag went up in Jerry’s brain. Except for the gift of Bentley, Hector’s efforts at matchmaking had been embarrassing, to say the least. “You *know* I’ve given up blind dates. Unless,” he added in an attempt at humor, “the girl really is blind.”

“Who said anything about a date? For all I know, she looks like a cow.” Then a smile crept over his face. “But maybe she doesn’t.”

“Hector!”

“Okay, okay.” He stood from his chair, muttering something about gringos, before saying, “You should meet her anyway. The department is giving her a reception at the Faculty Club tomorrow afternoon. And I invite you.”

“We’ll see.” Tomorrow was the notification deadline NSF had promised. Chances were, he’d be waiting in his lab to hear from them. But if he’d heard by late afternoon, a few drinks would be a good way to celebrate. “A Dutch woman, huh? I thought you said your benefactor was Spanish.”

“He is.” Hector pulled a leather-bound volume from one of his bookcases, opened it, and selected a cigar from the hollowed-out cavity inside. “But a man of his wealth probably has people of many nationalities working for him.”

“Well, he certainly didn’t waste any time sending someone to inspect the goods.”

Hector clipped the end off the cigar. “It cost him a lot of money. And he’s lucky the Getty heir in England wasn’t allowed to bid, or it would have cost him more.”

“Not allowed to bid?”

“The owner would only accept bids from recognized, scholarly institutions. No individuals or private foundations.”

“That’s strange. Who was the owner?”

“Anonymous.” With a wooden match, Hector lit up. “The rumor is that the journal was in private hands in Venezuela. An old family who’d had it for generations and fell on hard times under the last few governments.”

Jerry inhaled a second-hand lungful of the rich smoke, then realized the journal still lay open. “Should you be smoking around such a valuable document?”

“Smoke rises. Besides, Venezuelans smoke like volcanoes. One more cigar won’t hurt.”

Jerry let it ride. The journal was Hector’s. If he wanted to risk staining it with nicotine, that was his business. “So this Dutch woman is coming to look at the journal. Then what? You’re not going to give it to her, are you?”

“No, no. The university had to sign an agreement. We can’t even have it reproduced. But other scholars can study it and take notes. I believe that’s what she plans to do. And you’ll never guess why.” Hector let a trickle of smoke drift out of his nostrils. “It seems that Señor Varga is a direct descendent of Alejandro de Baza, the slain leader of the expedition. Evidently, he wants to establish his family’s rightful place in history.”

Jerry could understand that. It reminded him of his own pride in the role his forebears had played in the American Revolution.

“What’s more,” Hector said, installing himself in the chair behind his desk, “I believe he wants to retrace the expedition’s steps. Wouldn’t *that* be exciting?”

The phone interrupted them.

Hector glared at it, then snatched up the handset. “Denise. Certainly, one moment.”

Jerry took the phone. “What’s up?”

“The letter from NSF just arrived.”

“Great. Go ahead and open it.” Jerry winked at Hector, as he heard paper tear on the other end of the line.

“Oh, no,” she said.

Jerry’s fingers went cold. “Denise, if this is some kind of joke, it isn’t funny.”

“Doctor Pace, I’m sorry. They turned you down.”

CHAPTER 3

Feeling gut-punched, Jerry tramped back to the Botany building, barely aware of the students passing by or sunning themselves on the lawns. In his office, he found a departmental memo about preparing for the “Y2K computer apocalypse,” which he tossed in the trash, and a note from Denise saying she’d gone home. Good. She shouldn’t see him in this state of mind.

How could NSF have rejected him?

He pulled his copy of the grant application from a file cabinet drawer, reread the abstract, and thumbed through the remaining forty-odd pages. This was good, dammit. The proposal, the work program, the fact that his results would be significant whether they came out as predicted or not. Everything about it was rock-solid.

It deserved to be funded.

Snatching up the phone, he stabbed NSF’s number, determined to make his case to someone in the life sciences. He got a recording. Of course. It was after hours in Washington. But the recording gave several options. He hit option four and got another recording. Maybe some bureaucrat was still at his desk. Two recordings later, he slammed down the handset. No choice but to wait until tomorrow.

Time to blow off steam. He grabbed his motorcycle helmet, went down to faculty parking, and fired up his Norton. The engine growled. Jerry revved it, then roared out of the parking lot and shot up Hilgard Avenue to the intersection with Sunset Boulevard. Turning left, he jammed it.

In seconds he was doing ninety.

Uphill, just ahead, lay the infamous “dead man’s curve.” He’d taken it at fifty before, but just barely. Downshifting, he dropped his speed to fifty-five and leaned into the turn, knee out, elbows in. Suddenly an oncoming Mercedes came flying around the far bend, crossing the centerline into Jerry’s lane. *Fuck!*

Instantly Jerry’s years of training took over. He rolled off the throttle and rocked left into the opposing lane. The Mercedes shot past his elbow on screeching tires. Jerry counter-steered right and rocked back into his own lane, his foot peg scraping asphalt before he finally straightened the bike.

“Chee-rist.” His hands trembled, his mind’s eye still filled with a vision of the car’s grille coming straight at him. He hoped the driver had crapped his pants. But in truth, both of them had been idiots.

Loosening his grip on the handlebars, he settled into a sensible cruise speed. Thank God for his super-soft racing tires. Without them he’d now be roadkill.

#

Thirty minutes later, he pulled up beside the one-bedroom bungalow he rented on Venice Beach. Built of clapboard some time in the Fifties, it had a kitchen and living room down and a large bedroom up. No garage, quirky plumbing, but it faced directly onto the beach, and that

counted for a lot.

He opened the door and was instantly greeted by an eighty-pound Old English Sheepdog, a shaggy ball of gray and white hair wagging its tailless butt so hard it could barely stay balanced.

“Bentley!” Jerry squeezed the dog’s jowls, a daily routine. Then he changed into jogging shorts, grabbed a plastic poop bag, and took Bentley for a late-afternoon run on the beach. As usual, it was stop-and-go, Bentley finding innumerable things to sniff and pee on before sprinting another dozen yards to the next irresistible smell. “Nose anchor,” Jerry called it, because the dog would dash along then suddenly flip its head to the side and stop.

This went on for a mile or so, interrupted only by the ritual checking out of other dogs and a few play romps with those whose owners were agreeable. Finally, Jerry clipped on the leash and turned up to the promenade that snaked past beachfront houses, apartments, and shops.

Venice Beach was about the only stretch of southern California seaside where plain folks could still afford to reside. As such, it drew a menagerie of New Agers, body builders, and old hippies. Jerry felt like he fit right in.

Walking back along the promenade, Bentley did exactly what Hector had predicted when he bought Jerry the dog—he attracted girls. The animal was mercilessly cute, and women stooped to “ooh” and pet and say he looked like a teddy bear. Smitten by Bentley, they seemed not to care about Jerry’s scarred face and arms. Some had struck up conversations. One had even spent the night with him.

But he was in no mood today to try capitalizing on canine charisma.

Back at the house, while Bentley rested, Jerry plugged in his Stratocaster and put on his headphones, determined to purge the National Science Foundation from his mind. Besides, he had a gig tomorrow night, Friday, with the band he played in whenever he had time.

The Yellowstone fire had wrecked his fingers, leaving small webs between most of them and destroying his dexterity on classical guitar. But flat-picked rock was easy. And the groupies who came to their performances thought the weirder the band members looked, the better. They loved Jerry.

After half an hour of practice, he fed Bentley then opened a can of beer and ordered in pizza. As he ate, his anger at NSF’s rejection flared again. Not only did it severely damage his research aspirations, but it also hurt his efforts at promotion, since securing grants was a major factor the tenure committee considered.

Politics, Hector had told him. Jerry regarded the man as a master without being an ass-kisser. And his acquisition of that journal would surely get him promoted to full Professor. The bounty yet to come—scholarly papers, invited lectures, international notoriety—would pave his way toward the dean’s office. At thirty-six, Hector’s goals were within his grasp.

Jerry was happy for him, but also envious. Despite Hector’s efforts to coach him, Jerry just wasn’t very good at politics.

He reached down and scratched Bentley’s head, getting a moan of appreciation in response. “You don’t care about politics, do you? You only care about the important stuff. Like food.”

Bentley’s eyes popped open.

“Settle. You’ve already eaten.”

But Denise Thompson might *not* eat, if he couldn’t support her financially. Or more likely, she would have to drop out of school—her bright future tragically aborted.

Since procuring funds from the Drug Enforcement Agency to build his lab, it seemed that money for botanical research had all but dried up. And realistically, there was no chance NSF would cave in to his pleadings.

That left him only one grant application still outstanding, a fairly modest thing with Archer Daniels Midland. ADM, if he spent it all on Denise’s work and stipend, would at least see her through the end of next year. Assuming he got it.

No. There was no assuming. “I *will* get it.” He crushed the beer can in his hand. Tomorrow he’d call them, feel them out, tell them how important the project was, offer further documentation if they needed it. Politics. He could do it.

But what about his own work? He had to find a way to pursue the research he’d proposed to NSF. He owed it to Judy, to his own sense of self-worth. And to legions of potential addicts whose lives he might save.

Jerry went to the refrigerator and popped open another beer. Maybe if ADM liked his current proposal they’d consider funding his coca research. They’d received some bad press recently over genetically modified crops. How about some great press from announcing their support of work aimed at using genetic modification to severely damage cocaine production?

His pitch might work. But if not, what other avenues were open?

He hated this groveling for money. All the time spent writing a good proposal, time that would be more productive doing actual research. Then the waiting, only to be turned down. Then more time wasted boning up on the peculiarities that other granting organizations required in *their* applications, right down to their differing formats for literature citations. How was anyone supposed to do real work?

Leaving the empty pizza box on his kitchen table, he plopped into an armchair and gazed out his picture window as the last streaks of crimson sunset faded to black.

Sometimes he wished he’d taken his father’s advice and become a landscape architect.

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Sometimes she wished she’d been a boy. She would have had to go live with the Chau, but anything would be better than this. All the rules, this sweaty jungle air, the children who mocked her. This stupid smock she had to wear.

Cooling her feet in the wide river, she watched one of the older boys, clad in shorts and T-shirt, pull back his bowstring as he leaned out over the edge of a boulder. His two friends crowded behind him, jabbering advice. But she knew he’d miss. Lowland people were too stupid to realize a fish was always closer than it appeared.

He let the arrow fly, then threw down his bow.

She couldn’t help giggling.

“Why don’t you go scrub the floors,” he yapped at her.

She made a triangle with her fingers and held it just below her stomach. It was a sign she'd learned from the other girls, symbolizing female pubic hair and meaning the boy was a sissy.

“Serena.”

She turned to see Sister Maria beckoning from the kitchen hut, a plastic pail dangling from her hand.

“Come fetch more water. We are having soup tonight.”

“Yes, go fetch water,” the boy taunted, at which his idiot friends laughed like monkeys.

Clamping her jaw, Serena went to do as she was told. One thing she'd learned when she first arrived here was that you never disobeyed a nun.

That evening, in the schoolroom where they ate, she balanced a spoonful of soup the way she'd been taught, carefully maneuvering it into her mouth. What a silly way to drink.

And a silly way to sit. Three rows of children faced one row of nuns, all of them seated on wooden benches with their meals lined up before them on long tables. It is the way of the world, Sister Luisa had informed her. But Serena still preferred to squat.

And she didn't much care for the name they'd given her. She certainly didn't feel serene.

At least this was not one of her nights to clean up. When the meal was finished and Sister Luisa had excused them, Serena followed the nun to her office for the evening lessons that only she received. This, for her, was the best part of the day.

Closing the door, Sister Luisa asked, “Are you bleeding?”

“How did you know?”

“Because you are more irritable than usual. You must fight that feeling. It weakens your judgment.” She touched Serena's arm. “The tea I told you about will help. Now, sit down.”

Serena wondered if she could squat on the chair tonight. But having just been chastised, she decided she'd better not take the liberty. In the flickering light of a lantern, she watched the old nun, taller even than she, take her accustomed place behind the desk. The woman had poise as well as strength, which made Serena scold herself for ever wanting to be male.

“You will learn some plants tonight which are useful for ailments of the teeth. But first, tell me about the boys who were fishing.”

Serena clenched her fists. “They're so stupid. They think they know everything, but they can't even shoot a fish. And they're mean.”

Sister Luisa gazed at her benevolently. “They are immature.”

“I hate them.”

“You do not.”

“They call me an old stick. My hair is white. I'm too skinny. My eyes squint, like yours.”

“Child, only God's most favored women have eyes like ours.”

Serena lowered her head, knowing full well her mentor spoke the truth.

“As to those boys, tomorrow you will teach them how to judge the fish's position.”

Serena's mouth fell open. She couldn't believe what she'd heard.

Leaning back, Sister Luisa folded her hands over her stomach. “It will benefit everybody. And that is something you must learn. For your destiny and your duty lie here. Now, let us

consider the common toothache.”

Later, when Serena returned to the girls’ quarters, she found a rotten fish in her hammock. I hate them, she screamed silently. But not as much as they’ll hate me. Her first impulse was to slice out their tongues. But that would get her in huge trouble.

Convulsions? Yes, that was better, more anonymous.

Picturing the culprits in her mind, she mulled over several possibilities before deciding on the perfect solution.