



# A BURNING OF PRAYERS

A NOVEL  
BY PAUL SULLIVAN

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*For Paul and Kathy*  
– with love.

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'We are history, the stuff these pages  
are made of.'

—Walker Davis

# Chapter 1

Walker Davis, watching the shadow of the small plane skip over the lush green forest below, was troubled. He reminded himself one more time that he was too old for this sort of thing. He should be back in his office in Chicago, or spending a pleasant afternoon with his grandchildren, perhaps sitting by the pool, or working on his boat, not bouncing around in the sky above Central America.

His destination was a valley deep in the northern highlands of Guatemala and the tomb of an ancient Maya ruler, into an area bitterly contested in a bloody Civil War, held one day by government soldiers and the next by the rebels. But Walker didn't consider the war his major problem. His problem was twenty-seven years old and held a doctorate in Archaeology. He had once heard her described as tall, blonde, and impossible. She had been his student, and he the admired teacher. But that seemed like a hundred years ago. This was now, painfully now, and looking out the window of the plane, he shook his head thinking about it. The site he was going to was her project, and on his word alone it would continue or shut down.

The plane's shadow skipped over a wide river, fast and muddy from the mountain rains, twisting away like a snake through a narrow valley. The pilot pointed below. "There," he said, in broken English. "There is the village like I told you. But we cannot land there. There is no place to land. But I will show you. And I will show you the mountain place where the lady works." He looked at Walker questioningly. "You want to see?" he asked, and waited, a ragged cigar hanging at the corner of his mouth.

Walker peered down again at the river. He could see a narrow bridge and looking closer terraced fields climbing up to a small village. There was a road leading into the village, a plaza and church tightly surrounded by red tiled roofs and miniature figures moving about in the plaza.



“You want to see?” the pilot asked again, the cigar shifting to the opposite corner.

Walker nodded. “Sure. Why not?” But even as he replied, the plane was starting to dive.

“Okay. We will see,” the pilot said.

Walker felt the little craft tilt nose down, aiming directly for the plaza. Walker’s fists tightened as the valley floor rushed up to meet them. In seconds the church was not as small, the plaza was growing larger, and the miniature figures were scurrying away into the shadows.

“The village is called San Gabriel,” the pilot said. “It is a very old village.” He smiled again, started to pull the plane up, but then the engine coughed and sputtered, and the smile left his face. He mumbled something under his breath, looking at the fuel gauge and tapping it with his knuckles several times. Walker could feel the plane hesitate.

Down below there were children and a priest, at least Walker thought the man was a priest because of the garments he wore. They were heading for the church door. There was a donkey standing alone, his owner running for one of the big trees that shaded the plaza. There was a dog at the door of a house, and Walker could almost swear he could hear the dog barking, jumping into the air and snapping his teeth. Then the engine coughed again, purred smoothly, and the little craft leveled out.

They skimmed the tops of the trees in the plaza, just cleared the red tiled roofs, and flew out over the river. Then they followed the river up the valley between the two high mountains.

Walker asked uneasily, “Are we okay?”

“Now, yes,” the pilot said firmly. He tapped the fuel gauge a few more times. “Now there is no worry.” He took the cigar from his mouth, spit a piece of loose tobacco away, and returned it. He looked evenly at Walker, then back out over the nose of the plane. “She is bad sometimes,” he added, talking about his plane as if it



were a living thing. “Sometimes she is not good. Often she likes to tease me.” And with a lighter voice he asked, “Would you like to go back and see the camp where the Señorita Thompson works? It is on the mountain, across the river from the village. I am sorry we missed it. I will turn back if it pleases you.”

“No. No thank you,” Walker said.

“You are sure?”

“Very sure,” said Walker.

“It will take very little time.”

Walker shook his head. “It’s not necessary.”

The pilot looked disappointed. “Then I will make us land, if you wish?” he said.

Walker had been told this pilot was a little crazy, but he needed to be a little crazy to fly into such an area. “Landing sounds like a good idea,” Walker told him.

They stayed above the river for what Walker figured was about ten miles, to a place where the valley became very wide, and then they left the river. As they turned away, they started to gain altitude again, climbing slowly, and made two full circles high above the valley floor. Below Walker could see a landing strip of hard red earth and at the end of the landing strip, in the trees, several trucks and a few tents. Spanning the river was a solid looking bridge. A road disappeared into the heavy forest that covered the mountains on the far side.

The pilot offered, “This is a place where the army brings in supplies. The bridge is very important to the army. It can be crossed with big trucks. Not like the old bridge at San Gabriel.”

Walker nodded. “Are we permitted to land here?” he asked. “Is there any problem with the military?”

“Do not worry. There is no trouble. Not at this moment.” He shrugged his shoulders indifferently. “Later, perhaps. But not at this moment.”



As they touched down, Walker noticed the trucks pulled back under the trees and a few soldiers lingering about in the shade. There were several large tents, opened at one end and revealing fuel drums and crates of supplies. Beyond these were some smaller tents. Then the plane turned away and taxied back again. Seconds later the pilot killed the engine, and the prop kicked back once in protest as Walker opened the door and climbed out over the wing. He dropped to the ground, grateful for the good earth under him.

The pilot walked around the back of the plane. Looking her over carefully. He came up to Walker. “She is still good, yes?”

“Yes,” said Walker.

The pilot pulled Walker’s bag from behind the seat and passed it to Walker. Then the pilot began unloading small crates and bundles from the back of the plane. He was still unloading as an old, flat-bed truck pulled out of the shade and rattled toward them. Two young boys standing on the back held to the sides precariously. Walker’s attention turned to the truck, but not completely away from the pilot. He was amazed at the cargo the small craft had been forced to carry, all the added weight he had been unaware of. By the time the truck was beside them, the pile had grown very high, and the pilot was still unloading.

The truck halted near the plane. The driver left it idling, its old body shaking to a tired rhythm. The two boys jumped off the back almost in unison. Immediately they started loading the cargo onto the truck. The driver, a small but solid man, climbed out of the cab and approached Walker with an out reached hand.

“*Señor Walker?*”

“Yes?”

“My name is Carlos. I have been sent to take you to the camp.”

The two men shook hands. Then Carlos reached for Walker’s bag. “*Por favor.*” he said, and taking the bag he passed it to the



boy nearest him. The boy tossed it up on the back of the truck with the other items being loaded and it quickly disappeared under the pile. Motioning toward the boys, Carlos said, "This is Luis, and that's Rodrigo. They are good boys. And hard workers. They belong to Father Marcos at the orphanage."

The boys nodded toward Walker but didn't slow their pace.

Walker nodded in return and then he asked Carlos, "How long will it take us to reach the camp?"

"We will arrive before night comes," he replied. "And that is good. I do not like to be on the road at night. But first we must stop at the mission in San Gabriel." With that Carlos turned away and began loading cargo, tossing it up to the boys who were now on the flat-bed. Carlos appeared to be a man in a hurry.

The pilot came over to Walker, took hold of his arm and led him a short distance away. "My friend," the pilot said, taking the cigar from between his teeth. "I have come to the conclusion that you are a cautious man, but you truly know very little about this place. I wish you the best of luck but advise you to be careful in these mountains."

"I've been to Central America before," Walker told him.

"Yes. But was that a time like now with such a war?"

"No," Walker said honestly. "There was conflict of sorts. But no civil war."

"Conflict is nothing," said the pilot. "Here, there is always conflict of sorts. But this is different. Be careful. The Indians in these mountains are good people but don't trust them. The rebels have a cause, and perhaps a just cause, but don't trust them. And the army, well, you trust them least of all."

"I'll remember," said Walker.

The pilot nodded. Looking at Walker with uncertainty. "Good luck to you," he said. "*Buena suerte.*"

"And you," said Walker.



They shook hands, the pilot returned to his plane, ducking under the wing and climbing up into the cabin on the opposite side. It was clear he had no desire to stay on the ground any longer than necessary. The engine came alive with a kick of the prop, and the little plane hurried away. Seconds later it lifted off the ground and began to climb as Walker watched, and as he watched an uneasiness came over him. Again he reprimanded himself, "I shouldn't even be here."

But he was, standing in a mountain valley surrounded by unknowns. And he still had to face Nickole Thompson, he reminded himself.

He looked at Carlos, and Carlos said, "We are ready."

Then Walker looked again at the little plane high up in the sky, vanishing into the clouds.

## Chapter 2

He had been to Central America some thirty years before, as a young archaeologist working in the 1950s, but never in the highlands. He had spent that time in the jungle and along the steamy coast from Honduras to the Yucatan. But this land was immediately different, with a spine of high mountains running down the center of the country, with low hills, and distant volcanoes shadowing quiet river valleys, with thick cloud forest, and terraced fields. This was a country with a deep, troubled beauty.

For most of the first hour on the road, his attention was given to the land. Despite the truck bouncing over the ruts and the smell of gas and oil seeping up through the floorboards, he studied and admired the land, the mountains and shadows, the low passing clouds, the secrets in the folds it would never disclose, this land that once belonged to the ancient Maya and remained home for their descendants.



He looked at Carlos finally. Carlos was working hard at the wheel trying to keep the truck on the road, and Walker found himself following the lines of the man's weathered face, the cheek and nose, the strength in the jaw, and Walker thought, *Indian with a hint of Spanish*. Then he looked back through the back window at the two boys, nestled in deep with the cargo. But they were hidden away, and he saw only the dust kicked up by the truck.

Turning again to Carlos, he realized that the man had said little since leaving the airstrip. For the sake of conversation, Walker asked, "How long have you worked for Miss Thompson?"

"Two seasons," he replied. "Last season and this one. This one the very best."

"Why is this one the best?"

Carlos looked his way with a half-smile. "It is because we have located the tomb. For this the boss is very happy."

Walker thought about it. Then he asked, "How close are they to the burial chamber?"

Carlos shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "I only drive the truck. But I know it makes the boss very happy that the work is going well."

After another moment of watching the country pass by, Walker asked, "Is it a good job, Carlos?"

"Oh, yes. Very. For all of us."

"How many work at the dig?"

Carlos counted in his mind. "*Catorce*," he replied. "Fourteen. Nine of us from San Gabriel. And five who came with the boss. But it is best for the young men from San Gabriel. It is very good for them."

"Why?" Walker asked.

"If there was not this," Carlos explained, "they would go off to Guatemala City to make money, or join the rebels, or the army. And nothing good comes from any of that."



“I understand,” Walker said.

“This is a better thing,” said Carlos. “Better for them to be near their own village, their own people.”

After that, for a long time, Walker said nothing, and Carlos concentrated on his driving.

Walker was aware that in closing down the project, he would take away Carlos’ job along with others. Now, with Carlos beside him, it was an uncomfortable reality. Walker wondered if Carlos had any idea why he had come, and the decision he had to make in the next few days.

Walker looked at Carlos again, studied him for a moment, but said nothing. He wanted to say, *I have a job to do. I hope you understand.* But he said it only in his mind.

Carlos turned his way once, smiled and turned again to the road.

They came to the check point a few moments later. Carlos slowed the truck down, not that he was going at any great speed, and leaned out the window, his arm hanging out over the door. It was clear that Carlos knew the three soldiers, the one standing in the middle of the road, and the two sitting in the jeep behind the machine gun far back in the shade. The one in the road came up to the truck and peered into the cab at Walker, then he looked at Carlos questioningly.

“A friend,” Carlos said. “He has come to visit the *Señorita* Thompson.” And with as little as that the soldier nodded and stepped back, adjusting the rifle on his shoulder. Then he moved to the back of the truck where the boys were sitting. The boys had climbed up on top of the load and they watched the soldier as he poked around the back, looking into one crate and shaking another. He moved all the way around the back and came up on the passenger’s side of the cab and there he stopped a second to look up at Walker, and for that second only they were eye to eye. The soldier’s expression was blank, not even curious, not anything,



just empty. The emptiness bothered Walker. Then, again, the rifle was adjusted on his shoulder, and the soldier moved on.

Walker turned to Carlos just as Carlos was reaching for something under the seat. It was a movement that made Walker very uneasy. Then Carlos came up with a package in his hand.

He looked at Walker and gave the slightest nod. "Everything is fine. Don't worry."

When the soldier again approached the door on the driver's side, Carlos passed down the package. The soldier tucked it under his arm and stepped away. "*Bueno*," he said and waved them on.

Carlos put the old truck in gear and gave it a little gas. Slowly it rattled forward. Looking back, Walker watched the soldier crossing the road to join his companions in the shade, the rifle hanging from his shoulder, tearing open the package as he walked. On the opposite side of the rear window, the two boys were also watching, one of them making hand gestures that definitely worried Walker, with both of them laughing, but fortunately the soldier's back was to them.

After they had gone a short distance Walker turned to Carlos. "What was in the package?"

"Marlboro," Carlos said easily. "The same thing all the time." Then he hesitated and corrected, "No. Sometimes it is Winston. But this time, Marlboro."

Walker nodded. "I understand," he said.

"It is the way it is done," said Carlos.

"Yes. I understand," Walker said again. And Carlos gave a slight nod, accepting that he did.

Shortly after crossing the river, the road had started to climb into the mountains. It wasn't so much a road, Walker soon realized, as a challenge. In places it was so narrow Walker worried they wouldn't make it between the trees. In other places, where small streams washed down from above, the ruts were so deep the



old truck leaned into them precariously, once causing the boys to jump off the back, walk along side, and climb on about a mile later.

What Walker had estimated to be some ten miles looking down from the plane, was more like a very difficult forty on the road. And when Walker remarked that the road was best suited for a horse or a donkey, Carlos returned with, “It is usually so.”

Past mid-day Walker again sighted the river. Shortly after that signs of human life returned. They came first with the sweet smell of charcoal fires from the outside kitchens that were common in the country, drifting back from San Gabriel and the surrounding farms. Then they passed a young Indian boy walking along the road. Tagging along beside him was a scruffy looking dog. Following behind both of them, at the end of a short rope, was a small pig. The boy waved, and Walker waved back. The dog barked eagerly as the truck rattled on. Moments later two men were walking toward them. They wore short pants and loose shirts of thin, sun-bleached cotton, with sashes about their waists. One had a machete hung from his belt. The other a long hoe over his shoulder. As the truck passed, they nodded to Carlos, who lifted his hand in reply.

Soon the road became a wide cobblestone street entering the village. The sun fell brightly on one side leaving the opposite in shadows. Carlos looked at Walker. “*Bienvenido*,” he said. “Welcome to San Gabriel.”

The village climbed up hill, away from the river. The street lead down to the main plaza. Small whitewashed houses with low roofs of earthen-colored tiles lined both sides of the street. There was an absence of windows in the thick walls, but widely-spaced doors of competing colors were prominent. On occasion the solid white of a wall was broken with a border of soft yellow, orange or blue coming up from the walk to half the height of a door.

San Gabriel was a poor village. Those who lived there were merchants or artisans carving out a meager living. The village



was thinly populated mostly by people of mixed, Spanish and Indian blood, but surrounded by many small corn-farms, each farm made up of an extended Indian family, a community in its own right, most of them still practicing many of the customs of their Maya forefathers, speaking their own language, freely blending their old gods into Christianity, coming into San Gabriel only on market days to double its population.

Though it was the center of things for the local people, Walker realized San Gabriel would have no real interest to the outside world if not for the ancient ruins of the two Maya cities along the river, one directly below the village, and the other a full day's travel north by foot.

They entered the plaza, shaded by heavy trees that stood like old warriors, their twisted trunks fixed solidly in the cool earth. Thick shrubs lined the worn pathways and, flowers grew in brilliant colors where the sun fell. Long Spanish colonial buildings, originally built as stables and barracks, but now part of the market, formed three sides of the plaza. On the fourth stood the church, its whitewashed corners falling away to expose crumbling stone walls. The old walls supported three bell towers with the largest, though not significantly large, in the center.

Beyond the church, set back in the shade, was a low wall with gates of elaborately worked iron. There was an entrance just wide enough for the truck to pass through. Once inside trees as old and sturdy as those in the plaza cooled the facade of a Spanish-style house that was apparently centuries old. A priest and several children stood on the steps watching as the truck approached and came to a halt before them. The boys jumped off the back as Carlos opened the door and slid down from the driver's seat. The priest, an old man with the sculptured face of an Indian and thick, white hair, was coming toward them as Walker got out.

Carlos said, "*Padre*, this is Mr. Davis. He is from the United States. A place called Chicago."



The priest held out his hand and greeted Walker warmly. “*Bienvenido*,” he said. “Welcome to our house,” he added in English.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you Father,” Walker replied in Spanish, as he looked about. “And this is a lovely old place you have here. Built back in the late colonial period, I would guess?”

“Yes. You are correct. For a very rich family. And your Spanish is most fluent, Mr. Davis.”

“Thank you, Father.”

“Please? Follow me. We have prepared some food and drink for you.” And with this he had returned to Spanish himself.

“But how did you know I was coming?”

“We have known for many days you were coming. But we did not know exactly what day until we saw the plane this morning when you flew over the plaza.”

“Oh. Yes,” Walker said. “Sorry about that.”

The priest held up his hand. “It is an all the time thing with this pilot. But one time soon I think God will call him home to discuss it.” The priest smiled. “Please follow me.”

Walker looked at Carlos questioningly. “Is there time?”

Carlos nodded. “There is time,” he offered. “There are some things to be unloaded from the truck. And some to go on to the camp. I will see to the unloading and join you when it is finished.” With this Carlos called for the two boys, Luis and Rodrigo, to help him. And when they came running, he pushed them toward the truck jokingly. “You piled all of those things on my truck,” he said. “Now you must take them off.”

Luis climbed up on the back of the truck laughing. He tossed the first box down to Rodrigo.

Walker followed Father Marcos into the house, down a wide hallway and into an interior courtyard where high balconies with rich ironwork overlooked a large fountain. Big clay pots, contain-



ing assorted plants native to the valley, lined the inner walls on all sides. Open doorways vanished into dark secluded hallways. There was a musty coolness to the place, and a sense of history. Walker could feel it in the worn tiles, old wood, and ivy, in the spray of water that caught the sunlight at the fountain and in the ironwork.

The priest lead Walker to a table under a tree. No sooner had they settled at the table than a young Indian girl brought out a pitcher containing a cold drink and a small tray of sandwiches. She was wearing a *huipile*, the elaborately embroidered blouse the Maya women wore daily, and skirt of *corte*, a cotton woven of mixed colors. She looked at Walker, her dark eyes hesitant and sad, then looked away. She placed the pitcher and tray on the table quietly.

“Thank you, Isabel,” the priest said. The girl nodded, backed off, then as fast as she had appeared, she turned and was gone.

Father Marcos lifted the pitcher and filled Walker’s glass with the cold juice. Looking at the doorway into which the girl fled, he said softly, “You must excuse her. She seldom talks. And, of course, like most of the Indians in these mountains. she speaks only *Quiché*. But even with that she hesitates.”

“She has the saddest eyes I have ever seen on a young girl,” Walker said.

After filling Walker’s glass Father Marcos filled his own, then set the pitcher aside. “Her parents, all of her family, were killed when the military attacked their farm. Only she survived.”

“How did she survive?” Walker asked.

“When the shooting started she hid in the woods just as her parents had taught her to do. When the soldiers left, she went back to the farm. They had killed every living thing there, even the animals. Some people from the village found her wandering on the road days later, and brought her here. She’s much better now. She hardly spoke a word when she first came.”



Walker shook his head. "How old is she?" he asked.

"I don't know. Thirteen. Fourteen, perhaps."

Walker said nothing. He looked at Father Marcos evenly. There was nothing to say.

The drink was very sweet, but cold, and though Walker knew it would do little to help a thirst, it cooled his throat. The sandwiches were of thin bread with some kind of meat-spread. They were delicious.

Looking at Father Marcos again, Walker asked, "What happened to the family who owned this house?"

"Nothing. It is still their house. But since the war has become so bad in the mountains, they no longer come here. They have a lot of money, many houses, and several large coffee plantations. This place they would often come to in the summer. But not this summer, or the last."

Walker smiled slightly, "So the church borrowed it?"

Father Marcos nodded. "Yes. God was in need of it. He made it an orphanage."

"And you helped?"

"Of course. I am a priest. I do God's work."

Walker nodded and laughed. "And how many children did God place here?"

"So far, we have nine. The child you just saw, and the two boys working with Carlos. The others are working in the fields."

"In the fields?"

"We need to grow most of our own food. How do you say, God only provides for those who help themselves?"

"God helps those who help themselves."

"Yes. Exactly. That is what I thought to say."

"Or God help those who get caught helping themselves."



“Yes. Exactly again. But that is only for thieves.”

Walker looked questioningly at the sandwich in his hand.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Davis,” the priest assured him. “We are not going hungry. We help ourselves, but we also get help from others.”

“Like who?”

“*Señorita* Thompson is one.”

“Nicki?”

“Yes. She has been very generous to us. Always, when supplies come in for the camp on the mountain, she has something on the truck for us also. Just as there is now.”

“I see,” Walker said. He wondered if this was coming out of the funding for the excavation that was already into a second season. But he held that thought only briefly. If it was, he really didn’t want to know about it. There were times when a person didn’t need to know, and his reason for coming had nothing to do with funding. There was also that chance it could come from Nickole Thompson’s own pocket. She came from a family that could well afford it, a family that could afford most anything she decided to do.

Walker’s reason for coming had nothing to do with money. All those at the Institute who were involved with the project felt it was well managed financially. Nickole Thompson had done a fine job last season and appeared to be doing as well this season. It was the risk that was now a question. Reports were coming back of the war, the fighting that was taking place all around the site. Every time the Institute questioned Nickole Thompson on this she simply brushed it off, or gave no reply at all. In fact, she hadn’t replied to anything directly in almost a month, not one word from Nickole.

The decision Walker had to make had nothing to do with money. He took a little of the juice, feeling it cool his throat. He



looked at Father Marcos. “What do you think will happen here? I mean, with the war?”

“It will get much worse.” His reply was direct. “There will be no quick end to the fighting. The government is strong. They have a strong military. And, of course, much support from the United States. The rebels are determined. And they also have support. From Cuba. From other places. But most of all, the rebels have time. It is difficult to defeat time.”

Walker looked at Father Marcos and for a moment saw him only as an old man, his hair—white, his face lined and tired. He asked, “But isn’t it dangerous for you here, Father?”

Father Marcos nodded. “Yes. I suppose it is.”

“I read that several clergy were killed.”

“Yes. By the military. Some have sided with the rebels. Some have even supported them with money and prayers. A few have denounced the government openly in church, even though the Vatican has warned against it.”

“And you, Father?”

The priest smiled, a worn smile. “I side only with God. I support only the children here.”

“Perhaps you should leave.”

“What will happen to the children?”

“Find a different place for them.”

“And the ones to come? There will be others you know. Others like Isabel. Many, I think.”

Walker was quiet, reflecting on it all.

Father Marcos said, “I am where I should be. Where God wants me.”

Carlos came into the courtyard, the two boys with him. “We are ready,” he told Walker. And to Father Marcos he said, “You can have your boys back, Father. They finally did an honest day’s



work.” He pushed them forward gently, and they looked back at him laughing.

It was late in the day when the truck finally rattled across the planks of the old bridge below the village. The sun lay on the surface of the river like polished bronze. The river flowed slow and serene. The far side of the valley was already drifting into shadows, like a curtain closing over the earth.

As the truck started to climb the mountain road, Walker got a clear view of the ruins of the ancient Maya city, the temple complex, the acropolis, the great plaza, even the ballcourt. It was much more impressive than he thought it might be, even though much of it was still buried in the forest. And now, he reasoned, with local politics the way it was, it would probably stay buried for a long time.

The river was the Río Hondo, a deep, wide river. Even back when Walker was a young man doing fieldwork, he had heard stories about the two Maya cities on the Río Hondo, though he never took the time to visit the valley. The story of the two cities was handed down by the Indians and recorded by the Spaniards, two city-states ruled by two powerful warrior kings. But, for many years, archaeologist didn't take the stories seriously. They were passed off as local legends, mostly because the second city just didn't exist. There was only the one, consisting of those scattered ruins below San Gabriel.

It wasn't until the early nineteen-sixties, with good aerial photographs, and early seventies when the first satellite images were available, that it was realized the course of the Río Hondo was altered. More than a thousand years ago, most likely by one of the many earthquakes to change the land. And near the old bed of the river the ruins of a second city were discovered. For the next several years archaeologist poured into the valley, clearing the forest, digging up the ground. But when burial site after burial site was opened and found to be looted, their money and time went elsewhere. There were locations far more inviting than the Río



Hondo. With the exceptions of hangers-on, like Nickole Thompson, the sites were abandoned.

The truck rattled on up the mountain road, and the ruins began to fade away. The sun moving along the edge of the mountains lengthened the shadows in the valley.

“The camp is just up ahead,” Carlos announced. “As I promised, we will arrive before dark.”

“That’s good,” said Walker. He looked at Carlos, whose face edged in the setting sun was as bronze as the surface of the river. At that moment he appeared much more Indian than Walker had thought earlier.

Soon the road swung away to a place of level ground. In the shade of the trees were several pole-sheds and large tents forming a rough circle. It was a cool, sheltered place with a clear view of San Gabriel and the river below. Carlos pulled the truck up to one of the pole-sheds, shut off the engine, and said, “We are here. A good ride, yes? No problems?”

“Yes,” said Walker, “No Problems. Thank you, Carlos,” and he pushed open the door, stepping down to the ground.

It appeared to be a busy place. Several people worked over long tables in the sheds, others moved along the forest trail that evidently lead to the excavation higher up the mountain. There was smoke lifting from an open cook tent where two women were just taking a large pot off the fire. Several men had already begun unloading the truck, one jumping onto the back.

Carlos pulled down Walker’s bag and passed it to him. As Walker turned, Carlos pointed toward the trees. “There she is,” he said. “There is the boss.”

Walker turned to see Nickole Thompson coming down a steep, tree shaded path. For the first few seconds she didn’t appear to notice Walker. She was walking with her head lowered, lost in thought. She pulled a glove from one hand, then the other. The jeans and thin cotton shirt she wore were sweaty and dirty. She re-



moved her straw hat, revealing a dirty, sunburned face. She shook her blonde hair down, stopped for a moment, and wiped her forehead with the back of her shirt sleeve. At that moment she saw him with a sudden smile and cry of excitement. “Walker! Walker Davis!”

She came running toward him. Walker dropped the bag just as she dove into his arms. She gave him a large hug and a kiss on the cheek. “I’m so pleased you’re here!” she cried.

He held her away slightly, looking her over. She looked tired but the same Nicki, not older after the lost years between them, simply matured. “You’re a dirty mess,” he said, jokingly.

“Yes,” she said. “But a happy mess now. I’m so pleased you’re here,” she said again. “So pleased that you came personally. I’ve got so much to show you. To tell you. We’re so close, Walker! We’re so close! Last season I knew we were on to something, but now!” She stopped, hugged him again. “Walker Davis,” she whispered. “My teacher. My mentor. My inspiration!”

“Slow down!” he said. “Take time to breathe.”

She laughed, caught her breath, and started all over.

“You’ll see, Walker! This is the find of my life!”

And on she went. Locking her arm into his and leading him away, pulling him actually, as if she owned him.

Carlos lifted Walker’s bag, swung it to his shoulder, and followed.



## Chapter 3

Night fell fast in the mountains, too fast for Walker to make the climb up to the excavation as he wanted, and even more, as Nicki had wanted.

“We’ll wait for the morning,” she suggested. “Give you a chance to rest up.” She looked back at Carlos who was still following with Walker’s bag. “We have a place ready for you.”

She showed him to a tent that had been set up for him just that morning. It was high enough to stand in and wide enough to hold a single cot, a small table, and a folding chair. On a second table was a basin, large pitcher of water, and towels.

“It’s not the Hilton,” Nicki said. “But it’s about the best we can do up here.”

“It’s fine,” said Walker. “I’ve done with much less.”

“Later we can meet in the dining tent.” And then she added, one more time, “I’m so pleased you’re here!”

Walker nodded. “So am I,” he said, but said it uneasily.

“Maybe you don’t know, but those people back in Chicago have been giving me nothing but trouble,” she told him, her voice hardening. Then she gave a soft sigh, and that quick a slight smile came to her lips and her words were much gentler. “But now it’s all right, isn’t it, Walker?” And before he could reply she added, “I’ve got so much to show you!”

And then she was gone.

Carlos dropped the bag on the cot and turned, as Walker did, to watch Nicki going away.

“She is very happy to see you,” said Carlos.

“It appears that way,” said Walker.

Carlos nodded to himself, thoughtfully, then he too was gone. And Walker mumbled, “I’m sure they know why I’m here.”



He opened the bag but didn't empty it. He had the feeling he wouldn't be in camp long enough to need it empty. He pulled out a clean shirt and his shaving kit. There was a framed photograph of his wife and grandchildren. Walker placed it on the table by the cot. Then he took the pitcher and filled the basin with water.

A half hour later he was clean shaven, with a fresh shirt, and feeling almost human again. It had got dark enough to light a small kerosene lamp on the table. Now he turned the wick down before he stepped outside. He closed and tied the tent flap behind him.

The night air was cool, heavy with the sound of crickets, and sweet to breathe. Small lanterns dotted the tents and sheds that formed the camp's circle. Out beyond the camp Walker could see the valley and the lights from San Gabriel. On the far side of the valley the mountains were just a dark line under the moon. Beside the moon was the evening star.

The camp was quiet, except for some conversation and a little laughter coming from the dining tent. Walker made his way in that direction, taking his time, stopping on occasion to peer into a few of the open sheds where lanterns were still lit, where some tables were covered with finds from the excavation.

One table Walker came across was littered with shards, fragments of pottery. It all looked confusing, as if simply scattered about, but Walker knew there was order to it all. The fragments on one side of the table were waiting to be cleaned. On the other side they were already cleaned, numbered, and coded as to what location they had come from during the dig. On an adjoining table was a drawing detailing the strata, the deposits of earth the shards were buried in.

There were other tables. One held fragments of bone. One bone, Walker was sure, was the upper part of a human tibia. There had been a complete break, and the lower part was missing. And there were trays of smaller bones, most from birds or small rodents, though there was a large fragment of deer antler. There



were knife blades, and spear points, of obsidian. And other pieces of the stone that were probably fixed to the end of a war club, all stuff he'd seen before often enough at other sites.

In the last shed he entered, a table was covered with photographs and rough sketches. In the weak light of a lantern, to Walker's surprise, a young girl leaned over a drafting table. If she hadn't moved, he wouldn't have noticed her. She looked up, laying her pencil aside, and lowering thick glasses. There was just a second of uneasy silence, as if she hadn't expected to be interrupted. She was a plain looking girl, with short brown hair combed back on each side, no more than twenty years of age, probably a student working with Nicki for the season. As she lowered the glasses she smiled, not a friendly smile, but one of impatience. "You're Walker Davis," she said, her voice low, as if the shed were some holy place.

"Yes."

"They said you were coming."

"Oh. And who are, they?"

"Everyone."

"And who are you?"

"Margaret Hunter."

Walker moved closer to look at the drawing on the board. "Very good. You do nice work, Margaret Hunter."

"Thank you. I enjoy the work I do." She looked at the drawing, then back at Walker with a little hesitation. "I read one of your books. *Lost Civilization of the Maya*."

"And?"

"I disagreed with a lot of it."

"For example?"

"I think you underrated the Toltac influence at Chichen Itzá. Along with other things."



“Well, you’re probably right. I wrote that book almost twenty years ago, with the material available at the time.”

She thought about it. “That’s true. I hope I didn’t insult you.”

Walker shook his head. “No. You didn’t. But I have to ask you a question.”

“Sure.”

“Why read a book that’s more than twenty years old instead of more recent works?”

Again she hesitated. She took up her glasses, like she was ready to go back to the drawing.

“Well?” Walker pressed.

She sighed uneasily. “It was part of the curriculum. I had no choice. I had to read it.”

Walker straightened up. “Oh.”

“Now you *are* insulted, aren’t you?”

“I’ll survive,” said Walker.

“Sorry. But at least the professor thought it important enough for his class.”

“Yes. That’s true.”

Margaret shrugged her shoulders.

Walker said, “It was nice meeting you, Margaret.”

“Maggie,” she said easily. And turning to her drawing, again took up the pencil.

Walker left her in a thin circle of light, with her head lowered, concentrating on the fine lines of her drawing, a very detailed plot of the excavation. He went away thinking he liked this girl. It was evident, even with their short conversation, that she was honest and uncomplicated.



He crossed to the dining tent and to the sound of voices. The voices mixed with a thousand crickets in the low, star-filled night. He was half way between the shed and the tent when he sensed a movement in the moonlight. He stopped, his first reaction, turned and waited. After a few seconds he could just make out the figure of a man, and then the man stepped forward, just close enough to speak in a low voice. "It is okay, *Señor* Davis."

"Who are you?"

"Estaban. It is all okay. You are not to be concerned."

Then he turned and went away. But as he turned, Walker could clearly see the shape of a rifle slung on his shoulder. He went away, but Walker sensed he did not go very far. He simply melted back into the darkness with the thousand crickets and the stars.

Walker continued on toward the dining tent.

The dining tent, powered by a small generator, was brightly lit. There were two long tables under the lights. Nicki and two men sat at one of them. At the other were four young men from the village. When Walker entered Nicki announced in a loud voice, "Walker! We were starting to worry about you."

The two men stood up, Nicki didn't.

"I just took my time getting here," Walker said. "Anyway, there's a fellow outside watching everything. So I guess there's no need to worry."

The biggest of the two men with Nicki, going an easy six foot plus, and wide at the shoulders, said, "That must be Estaban."

"Yes. That's the name he gave," Walker said.

Nicki said, "Walker, I'd like you to meet Mac."

Mac held out a powerful hand, and Walker shook it, feeling the grip as it crushed his palm. Mac offered, "Estaban works for me. So does Diego. Diego is up at the excavation. We keep a man in camp and a man at the dig every night." He dropped his hand away.



Walker looked at Nicki. “Looters,” she said. “You remember how big a problem that is down here.”

Walker thought about it. “Yes. But the government usually takes care of that.”

“Normally,” said the second man standing. “But not in this case.”

Nicki said, “Walker, this is Arturo Vargas. He’s the only government representation we have at this moment. He also holds a degree in archaeology and is an expert epigraphist.”

Arturo Vargas held out his hand. It was a friendly handshake. Arturo explained, “The army pulled back from here several weeks ago. We are totally on our own.”

“I see,” Walker said, and again he looked at Nicki.

Nicki glanced away, dumping a large spoonful of sugar into a cup of black coffee.

Arturo turned to the second table and announced in Spanish to the young men, “This is *Señor* Davis.” With that each man greeted Walker in turn, and he replied in Spanish.

The men sat down. And no sooner had Walker sat than a young girl came out of the back. Nicki introduced her only as Alicia, and immediately she began to serve him, first with a cup of rich black coffee, then a plate of warm rolls, and shortly after a full plate of black beans and rice with two heavy pieces of chicken in the center.

Alicia moved in and out of the back of the tent almost unnoticed, at times her coal-black hair catching the lamp light. She was so quiet Walker hardly knew she was there until she suddenly appeared at his shoulder.

Twice a very old woman, with a face rugged from age, poked her head in. But the old woman said nothing. She just looked about worriedly. Walker eventually learned that she was called Emilia, and she ran the kitchen. He assumed she looked in to see

