

A Burning of

PRAYERS

A NOVEL

Paul Sullivan

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*For Paul and Kathy,
with love*



This book is a novel. It is a work of fiction. Names, characters, locations, and events either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or places or events is entirely coincidental.



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Chapter 1

Walker Davis was troubled. Watching the shadow of the small plane skip over the lush green forest below, he reminded himself one more time that he was too old for this sort of thing. He should have been 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, specifically the tomb of an ancient Mayan ruler. It was an area bitterly contested in a bloody civil war, held one day by government soldiers and the next by rebels. But Walker didn't consider the war his primary 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 that project 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. "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 he 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 a church tightly surrounded by red tiled roofs, and miniature figures moving about in the plaza.

"You want to see?" the pilot asked again, shifting the cigar to the opposite corner of his mouth.

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

"Okay. We will see," said the pilot.

Walker felt the little craft tilt nose-down, aiming directly for the plaza. His 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 and started to pull the plane up, but 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 that the man was a priest because of the garments he wore. They were hurrying for the church door. There was a donkey standing alone, its owner running for one of the big trees that shaded the plaza. There was a dog at the door of a house, and Walker almost swore he could hear the dog barking, jumping into the air and snapping its 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. They followed the river up the valley between 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 at Walker, then back out over the nose of the plane. “She is bad sometimes,” he explained, talking about the plane as if it were a living thing. “Sometimes she is not good. Often she likes to tease me.” With a lighter voice, he asked, “Would you like to go back and see the camp where *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,” said Walker.

“You are sure?”

“Very sure,” replied 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 asked.

Walker had been told that 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, until they reached a place where the valley became wide; 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. At the end of the landing strip, in the trees, were 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 said, “This is a place where the army brings in supplies. The bridge is 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.” The pilot shrugged his shoulders indifferently. “Later, perhaps. But not at this moment.”

As they touched down, Walker noticed that the trucks had been pulled back under the trees, and a few soldiers lounged about in the shade. There were several large tents, open 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 him. Then he began unloading small crates and bundles from the back of the plane. He was still unloading as an old flatbed truck pulled out of the shade and rattled toward them. Two young boys standing on the back held to the sides with casual athleticism. Walker’s attention turned to the truck but not completely away from the pilot. He was amazed at the amount of cargo the small craft had been forced to carry—all of the added weight that he had been

unaware of. By the time the truck was beside them, the pile had grown 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 outreached hand.

“*Señor* Davis?”

“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 asked Carlos, “How long will it take us to reach the camp?”

“We will arrive before night comes,” Carlos 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.” He turned

away and began loading cargo, tossing it up to the boys, who were now on the flatbed. He 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,” he said, taking the cigar from between his teeth, “I have come to the conclusion that you are a cautious man, but you 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 replied 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,” replied Walker.

They shook hands, and the pilot returned to his plane, ducking under the wing and climbing up into the cabin on the opposite side. It was clear that 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, and as Walker 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."

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

Chapter 2

Walker 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 his 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 on the land. Despite bouncing over the ruts, 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 that it would never disclose. This land once belonged to the ancient Maya, and it remained home for their descendants.

Walker also studied Carlos. 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 he thought, *Indian with a hint of Spanish*. He looked back through the back window toward the two boys, who were 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, Walker realized that the man had said little since leaving the airstrip. For the sake of conversation, he asked, “How long have you worked for Miss Thompson?”

“Two seasons,” Carlos replied. “Last season and this one—this one the very best.”

“Why is this one the best?”

Carlos looked Walker's way with a half-smile. “It is because we have located the tomb. For this the boss is very happy.”

“How close are they to the burial chamber?” asked Walker.

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?” asked Walker.

“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,” said Walker.

“This is a better thing,” Carlos went on. “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 had been aware that in closing down the project, he would take away Carlos’s job, along with that of several others. Now, with Carlos beside him, it was an uncomfortable reality. He wondered if Carlos had any idea why he had come and the decision he had to make in the next few days. He 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 a checkpoint a few moments later. Carlos slowed the truck down—not that he had been going at any great speed—and leaned out the window, his arm hanging out over the door. It was clear that he knew the three soldiers—

one standing in the middle of the road and 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. 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 side of the cab. 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 man adjusted the rifle on his shoulder and moved on.

Walker turned to Carlos just as Carlos was reaching for something under the seat. It was a movement that made Walker uneasy. 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 over 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, bucking, then moving. 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." He hesitated and then 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," said Walker again. And Carlos gave a slight nod, accepting that he did.

Shortly after crossing the river, the road 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 that 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 that the old truck leaned into them precariously, once causing the boys to jump off the back, walk alongside, and climb on about a mile later.

What Walker had estimated to be about ten miles looking down from the plane was more like a difficult forty on the

road. And when he remarked that the road was best suited to a horse or a donkey, Carlos returned with, “It is usually so.”

It was late in the day when 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 the truck 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 around their waists. One had a machete hanging 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 side in shadow. Carlos looked at Walker. “*Bienvenido*,” he said. “Welcome to San Gabriel.”

The village climbed uphill, away from the river. The street led down to the main plaza. Small, whitewashed houses with low roofs of earthen-colored tiles lined both sides of it. 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 it was surrounded by many small corn farms, each made up of an extended Indian family—a community in its own right. Most of the corn farmers still practiced many of the customs of their Mayan forefathers, speaking their own language, freely blending their old gods into Christianity. They came into San Gabriel only on market days to double its population.

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

The truck entered the plaza. Heavy shade trees 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 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 of the house, 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—came 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."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Father," Walker replied in Spanish as he looked around. "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." Father Marcos was again speaking in Spanish himself.

"But how did you know I was coming?" asked Walker.

"We have known for many days," the priest told him, "but we did not know exactly what day until we saw the plane this morning when you flew over the plaza."

“Oh. Yes,” said Walker. “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.” He smiled. “Please follow me.”

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

Carlos nodded. “There is time,” he said. “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.”

He called for the two boys, Luis and Rodrigo, to help him. 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 containing 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, and in the spray of water that caught the sunlight at the fountain.

The priest led Walker to a table under a tree. No sooner had they settled at the table than an Indian girl brought out a small tray of sandwiches and a pitcher containing a

cold drink. She was wearing a *huipile*, the elaborately embroidered blouse that Mayan women wore daily, and a 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 tray and pitcher on the table quietly.

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

Father Marcos lifted the pitcher and filled Walker’s glass with cold juice. Looking at the doorway into which the girl had 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 remarked.

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

“How did she do it?” 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. There was nothing to say.

The drink was sweet but cold, and though Walker knew it would do little to help his 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 helps 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,” said Walker. He wondered if those supplies were 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 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 a chance that the supplies were coming 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 that 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, of the fighting that was taking place all around the site. Every time the Institute questioned Nicki about them, she simply brushed them off or gave no reply at all. In fact, she hadn't replied to anything directly in almost a month—not one word.

Walker sipped the juice, feeling it cool his throat. He looked at Father Marcos. "What do you think will happen here?" he asked. "I mean, with the war?"

"It will get much worse." The priest's 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 an enemy with time on their side."

Walker looked evenly 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 gave him 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. 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. It was like a curtain was closing over the earth.

As the truck started to climb the mountain road, Walker got a clear view of the ruins of the ancient Mayan city: the temple complex, the acropolis, the great plaza, even the ballcourt. It was far more impressive than he had 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 is, the city will 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 Mayan cities on the Río Hondo, though he never took the time to visit the valley. The story of the two cities had been handed down by the Indians and recorded by the Spaniards: two city-states that were ruled by two powerful warrior kings. But for many years, archaeologists didn't take the stories seriously. They were passed off as local legends, mostly because the second city just didn't appear to exist. There was only the one, consisting of those scattered ruins below San Gabriel.

It wasn't until good aerial photographs in the early 1960s and the first satellite images in the early '70s were available that archaeologists realized that the course of the Río Hondo had been altered. More than a thousand years ago, one of the many earthquakes to reverberate through the land had changed the river's course. And near the old bed of the river, the ruins of a second city were discovered. For the next several years, archaeologists 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 exception 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 moved along the edge of the mountains, lengthening the shadows in the valley.

“The camp is just 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 previously thought.

Soon the road swung away to a place of level ground. Underneath the trees, several pole-sheds and large tents formed 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 and stepped 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 led 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, wooded 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 removed 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. It was at that moment that she saw him, and she gave a sudden smile and a 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—not older after the lost years between them, simply matured. "You're a dirty mess," he said jokingly.

"Yes, 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 onto something, but now...!" She stopped and 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.