

## Chapter 1: Departure

Heaving lines and swelling tides of restless travellers greet Emilio Winters and Karl Deadshore as they walk through the giant silver and glass automatic doors into terminal four of New York City's JFK airport.

'This is it, Karl! We're actually on our way!' Emilio announces with pride, as he turns to look at his ever-present companion.

'Emilio, why exactly have I been lugging your suitcase around for the last hour?' Karl responds wearily.

'God dammit, Karl, do you ever listen? I told you, I sprained my wrist feeling up Sophie Atkins 40 DD's.' Shaking his head, Emilio gazes up towards the enormous bright blue departures and arrivals monitor. Every listed flight has been delayed, except flights to Lima, Peru.

'Great, you see this Karl? It must be our lucky day.'

Emilio lowers his Ray Ban sunglasses and glances at his chubby friend, shaking his head slightly at the combination of flip flops, bright yellow Bermuda shorts and gray and white striped T-shirt.

'Looks like we have time to kill. I need a soda.' Karl struggles to keep up as Emilio darts through the crowds. The companions stand together watching the passing mad parade of pedestrians as they cough up four dollars each for an ice cold Pepsi. Just before they start guzzling the drinks, Emilio notices a pretty blonde at the other end of the magazine stand. The girl is absorbed by her potential purchases. Emilio looks over at Karl in dastardly thought and challenges him.

"Hey Karl, the last one to down their drink has to go and ask that girl over there for her number."

Karl reckons he can down his drink faster than Emilio anyway, so he agrees, although he knows the penalty would prove challenging for him.

"Ok Emilio on 3. 1, 2, 3!"

Emilio tilts his bottle and twists it slightly, allowing the carbonated drink to sink quicker, finishing before his overweight friend.

"Ha! Looks like you gotta try your luck, Karl. You better get over there before she walks off, oh, and take one of these!"

Emilio holds out a stick of peppermint gum.

"Go on Karl, take it, trust me, you need it!"

"Damn you, E, my breath doesn't stink, and anyway, how the hell did you finish that drink quicker than me!"

"It's all about technique Karl, it's all in the wrist!"

“You said your wrist was sprained!” Karl responds in annoyance.

“My other wrist Karl! I have two, if you hadn’t noticed. Now quick, get your ass over there.”

Taking a deep breath, Karl reluctantly walks up to the blonde, who is even prettier close up than he had first thought. Karl walks up beside the girl, unseen, and looks back at Emilio gesturing with his hands 'what do I do?' Emilio just waves him on and takes his camera phone out to film his friend's antics. Emilio predicts he will capture a spectacular rejection. Karl picks up a magazine without looking at it and pretends to be reading, before smiling at the girl, trying to get her attention. She notices Karl looking in her direction and turns to address him with a wry smile.

“Are you ok?” She asks.

“Oh yeah, fine, I'm fine, you know, cool. So, you like magazines?”

The girl smiles and replies sarcastically.

“Yeah, I like reading. So you’re into women’s health, it seems!”

Karl hasn’t a clue what she’s talking about until he notices he has picked up a copy of a Woman’s World Weekly magazine.

“Oh this, this isn’t for me, it’s for my aunt, she loves this magazine, it’s her favourite. No, I’m more into fast cars, you know, that kind of thing.”

“Oh, so where’s your aunt and what car do you drive?” Says the blonde playfully, realizing he’s lying through his teeth.

Karl pauses, racking his brain, with a blank expression on his face.

“My aunt’s at home and I have a Porsche!”

“So, you’re going to take your aunt’s magazine on holiday with you! Nice! Wow, and you have a Porsche! You must be rich, do have any pictures of it on your phone?”

“You know what, I think I do!”

Karl is panicking and pats down his outfit in an attempt to pretend to find his phone, which is in his back pocket.

“Damn, you know what, I think I left my phone at home! It’s a really cool car though!”

The blonde finds Karl sweet, but she doesn’t believe the lost phone routine, so she makes an excuse to escape the situation, which is becoming increasingly uncomfortable.

“Ok, well, nice meeting you. I gotta catch a plane.”

Realizing she’s about to leave, and desperate to complete his mission, Karl blurts out, “Could I get your number and maybe call you sometime?”

She looks at him for a moment, and takes pity on him, figuring he will never remember it anyway.

“Ok, it’s 555 98431. Nice meeting you! Bye!”

Karl stares after her as she walks away, repeating the number, trying desperately not to forget it.

“555 98431, 555 98431”

Emilio waltzes over, still filming, having captured the entire catastrophe from a distance.

“So what was that number again, Karl!”

“It was 555 89131 I think, no wait, 555 98113. No, that’s not it, darn, I’ve lost it!”

“Ha, you lose buddy! Man, this is some hilarious footage! I have to upload it to the internet dude! Woman’s World Weekly, classic!”

“Hey, she gave me her number, Emilio! You saw that!”

“Forgetting a number is as bad as not getting one at all! And Karl, your phone’s in your back pocket, buddy. Wait, I’ll call the girl back so you can show her your Porsche!”

Emilio is cracking up, and shouts out to the young blonde who’s walking away.

“Yo lady! Come back! I’ve found his phone!”

The girl turns back toward Emilio, but is too far away to understand what he is shouting, and keeps walking, eager to get away.

Karl is frustrated, while Emilio basks in his friend’s pathetic attempt.

“Yeah, well, she smiled at me at least!”

“She was probably pushing a fart out, Karl. Anyway, you lose, stupid! Come on, let’s go to the departure lounge and grab a seat.”

Emilio walks off and Karl picks up their luggage and drags it, dropping Emilio’s suitcase on purpose and kicking it a few times. They enter the busy departure lounge, which is fizzing with people, eventually managing to find a couple of seats free and make themselves comfortable. Karl shuffles around nervously in his seat, unable to get comfortable.

“So Emilio, how long’s this flight going to take?”

“Karl, that’s the third time you’ve asked me the same question!” Sighs Emilio.

“Sorry, there have been a lot of things to remember today!”

“I got us direct tickets to Lima. The flight is eight hours!” Emilio replies abruptly.

“Whoa, eight hours, we should have gone to Europe, it would have been quicker!”

Karl begins to tap his fingernails against the plastic sides of the grey chair. His erratic and annoying behaviour starts to get on Emilio’s nerves.

“Can you stop tapping, Karl? I’ll be honest, it’s starting to piss me off.”

“Oh yeah, sorry buddy, my bad!”

Karl starts playing with his phone, which eventually leads him onto a search engine. He looks around his surroundings for inspiration before entering JFK international airport into the web portal. He clicks on one of the many search results. After a few minutes of reading he slowly becomes frantic.

“Holy mother of God! I’m sorry, Emilio, but you’re flying to Peru on your own, buddy!”

Emilio rolls his eyes and folds his arms waiting for the outlandish reason Karl is about to come up with.

“Listen to this! As recently as 2001 a flight from JFK en route to the Dominican Republic crashed, killing all 260 people on board! Can you believe it, as recently as 2001, that’s like yesterday, brother!”

Emilio, unsure of what to make of Karl’s find, has a flash of inspiration.

“Karl, are you scared of flying?”

“I’m not scared, bro, but look at the facts!”

“You are! You’re terrified of flying! Yeah, that’s it, I wondered why you were making so many excuses when I put the idea of travelling to you, it just never occurred to me. Why didn’t you just tell me at the time!”

Karl doesn’t want to signal any weaknesses in front of his competitive friend.

“I’m not terrified of anything except my mother! Ok?”

“Your mum’s a saint, Karl.”

“Alright, so I’m a little bit nervous about flying! Big deal!”

“Nervous! You’re practically peeing in your pants!”

“Look, it’s just not natural. I mean, look at the size of the damn things for a start, it’s beyond me how they even get off the ground!”

“Its basic aerodynamics. It’s safe, Karl. In fact, statistics say you’re more likely to get killed driving to the airport than you are on the plane journey itself.”

“Yeah, I know, I’ve heard that one, it just doesn’t make it any easier.”

“And 2001 was like a million years ago! Technology has progressed so much, flying is safer now than it’s ever been before. Anyway, you shouldn’t be scared of dying! The way I see it, before we were born we didn’t exist forever right! So we’ve already not been alive forever and it wasn’t so bad the first time around was it!”

“You’ve totally lost me, buddy!”

“There’s nowhere to get lost, it’s simple”

Karl sits there trying to work out what he’s just been told and for the time being isn’t worrying about the flight as he struggles to get his head around the concept of eternity. Three quarters of an hour passes, with the boys sitting in silence, watching people from all over the world, both wondering

where everyone is headed, and what they all do with their lives. After a while Emilio notices two South American men out of the corner of his eye, standing about ten feet away. They seem to keep glancing in the boys' direction. Emilio nudges Karl to bring the men to his attention. Karl blatantly stares straight at them. One of the men has a large, deep scar shaped like a vagina below his left eye. It looks almost as if someone has tried to slice his eye out with a blunt blade. He is tall, with slick black hair and two protruding front teeth covered slightly by a thick moustache. The other has a black dragon tattoo on the back of his neck, he is short and appears bald, through shaving his head closely. Emilio mutters under his breath to Karl.

'One of them looks a bit like Robert Lopera.'

'Go on, Emilio, enlighten me. Who is Robert Lopera? Karl asks nervously, as he wipes perspiration from his brow.

'You know. It was right here at JFK. Officials stopped him, and opened his bags up, and there were these chocolate truffles and pistachio nuts. Well, you see, these truffles were chocolate covered cocaine balls. Even the pistachio shells were filled with the stuff. I think they seized like five hundred thousand dollars worth of drugs.'

Karl is intrigued and genuinely fascinated by the story. The two men start walking straight towards them.

'Holy crap, Emilio, they're headed right for us. These guys look dodgy.'

'Relax, we're in an airport, there's CCTV everywhere.'

The boys watch with panicky eyes as the two men walk straight past them and up to three half dressed American women who have been sitting three rows behind them the whole time. Emilio looks at Karl and cracks up with laughter.

'Your face, man, you should have seen your face, it looks so pale right now'.

Karl smiles as he reflects on how ridiculously paranoid he was being. Emilio notices their flight is boarding in twenty minutes.

"Come on, Karl, we gotta go check our luggage in."

The boys gather their luggage and head towards the walk through metal detectors before the main departure gate. As Karl reflects on the humorous situation he was just in, his mood is temporarily lifted.

'You know what, Emilio? This trip is going to be fun. I can't wait to get to Peru, the beach parties, and the surf. It's going to be wild. I'm going to be chilling, checking the ladies, drinking my ass off while you're there with your head down boring the crap out of yourself with your stupid notepad, doing your research on whatever the hell it is'.

'Exotic plant species, Karl.'

'Yeah, exotic plants, that's it. Man, it was good of your folks to go halves on my ticket. I don't think I could have raised the full six hundred otherwise. I guess your dad's rolling in it, working for Harrison and Whatsitsname.'

"Harrison & Warner Investments, and it's not all plain sailing, Karl, my dad's had to work hard to get into the position he's in. He's sacrificed a lot, including time with his own family".

Emilio stands, bright-eyed, waiting to go through security. Beside him Karl is starting to get nervous again, and reaches into his baggy shorts, pulling out an energy bar in an attempt to rid his mind of thoughts of flying. As he's eating, he starts staring out of the huge window beside them. At first, he stares at his own greasy reflection on the mirrored surface of the window, checking his skin for blemishes and adjusting his hair, before staring out onto the runway, seeing rippling waves of heat rise into the air.

'Check out that funky looking plane, Emilio.'

'Yeah, that's Continental Airlines' new Boeing 737- 900ER Jumbo Jet, painted in a retro livery to commemorate the airline's 75th anniversary.

'Retro watery?'

'Livery. It's plane paint.'

Karl smiles with a genuine appreciation of his friend's seemingly endless knowledge. Ahead, an alarm screams out across the airport, triggered by someone trying to pass through the metal detector. Karl struggles to see the commotion as directly in front of him a grossly overweight guy is blocking his view. Slightly taller than Karl, Emilio manages to sneak a glimpse.

'Well, I'll be damned if it isn't old scarface himself.'

Unseen until now, two guards, one round, one tall, suddenly break through a line of nosey rubbernecks gathered to the left of the metal detector and apprehend scarface. Round frisks him and draws a stainless steel hip flask from his back pocket.

'Why didn't you declare this at the back of the queue, would have saved the embarrassment.'

Scarface looks the guard up and down in disgust before muttering a profanity under his breath in a foreign language, whilst readjusting his clothes from the scuffle.

The guard tries to be professional, reeling off the rules of procedure to justify his actions while checking the contents of the hip flask, which is empty. He hands it back to scarface before pointing his finger in the air and circling it to signal the recommencement of the security checks, which paused for the incident.

Karl, who has been transfixed by the commotion, but unable to see exactly what the guards have found, raises his eyebrows at Emilio. They check in with their hand luggage, and head down the departure tunnel to board the plane.

As they board, a young air hostess greets them. She parades a manufactured smile over an orange face plied with masses of red lipstick, which seem to have been applied with a trowel. Emilio hands over both tickets.

"That's row E, seats 38 and 39, located on the left hand side in the middle of the cabin." She smiles with artificial enthusiasm, revealing lipstick stained teeth.

Emilio and Karl battle their way through the busy cabin, past the rows of white and blue checkered seats, until they come to their row. The boys' chairs are on the far left of the cabin beside an oval window.

"Which seat you want, Karl?"

"You can sit by the window, brother!"

Emilio takes the window seat while Karl struggles to put their hand luggage in the overhead compartment.

"Don't offer to help then, Emilio!" Says Karl sarcastically.

"Ok then, buddy! I won't, that's very kind of you!" Emilio pulls a stupid face.

As Karl struggles to push his bulky rucksack into the medium sized compartment he clumsily loses his footing, causing the heavy bag to fall back towards him. The momentum pushes Karl into the lap of an old gentleman. Looking up at the gentleman in despair, he opens his mouth to apologize, but the gentleman beats him with the first words.

"What the bloody hell do you think you are doing, boy? Can't even put your luggage away safely without messing everything up?"

"Sorry sir, it was an accident!"

"Excuses, that's all I bloody hear from you young people these days. We never made any excuses in my day! Now get off me, unless you're planning on sitting there the rest of the flight!"

Emilio is creasing up in the corner at the gentleman's reaction. Karl gets up, apologizing profusely, and then focuses on putting his hand luggage away properly before assuming his seat next to Emilio and breathing a sigh of relief. A few minutes later, just as the boys are getting themselves settled, a dark haired, hourglass figured, extremely good-looking lady walks up, checks her ticket and takes the seat next to Karl. The lady is well travelled, friendly and full of self-confidence. She immediately makes contact with the boys and greets them with a smile as she takes her seat.

“Alright boys, nice to meet you. My name’s Crystal. Well, it looks like this is my seat, so just let me know when you need to get out. Or if you need me to get you anything!”

The boys’ are taken aback by her self-confidence. They both say hello enthusiastically at the same time. Emilio then leans straight across Karl and offers his hand.

“Hi, nice to meet you. I’m Emilio, and this is Karl. Karl snores like a mule and drools like a dog so watch out for that!”

Karl looks out in front of himself with his mouth open in shock.

“Emilio, please tell me you did not just say that!”

Crystal grins mischievously, realizing Emilio is poking fun at his friend’s expense and addresses Karl directly.

“Don’t worry about it, I snore too, so it’s no big deal, just don’t drool on me!”

Crystal looks directly at Karl, smiling. Karl warms to her instantly. The doors to the cabin are locked, and the remaining passengers take their seats. The air hostess starts her polished pre flight routine. As she rattles through the safety procedure should anything go wrong, Karl closes his eyes and tries to imagine sitting on a bus. Reality kicks in and starts getting the better of him and he begins to feel nauseous, taking deep breaths, in through his nose and out through his mouth. Emilio realizes Karl is struggling and can’t help but quickly take off one of his trainers, which he’s been walking around in for hours. Pulling his smelly sock from his sweaty foot, he places the sock under Karl’s nose, trying his best not to laugh in the process. Karl draws a deep breath through his nostrils with his eyelids firmly shut. His throat fills up with a sour vinegar stench, which makes him feel like vomiting. He opens his eyes as he exhales, nearly vomiting into Emilio’s lap. Emilio creases up watching Karl turn blue in the face.

“Emilio, you bastard! Man, I don’t feel so good. I think I’m going to be sick! Emilio, I gotta get to the bathroom, pronto!”

“Well, it’s too late, look!”

Emilio points to the seat belt sign that’s lit up in front of them.

“You can’t go now, we’re about to take off, so buckle up and get a grip!” Emilio struggles to contain his laughter.

Crystal, overhearing all this, can’t resist but try and help in some way. She also doesn’t like the idea of Karl being sick over her so she gets the emergency sick bag from under her seat, then rifles through her bag and pulls out a pill bottle containing Meclizine, an over the counter drug.

“Here, I don’t like flying much either; they’re mild, they just help take the edge off!”



Karl hesitantly accepts and passes the pill bottle over to Emilio to inspect for approval to reassure him it's ok.

"Yeah, Karl, they're mild, you'll be fine!"

Karl takes the pill bottle and has trouble undoing the cap.

"Great, it's broken!"

"Give it here! You have to push the cap down and then twist, it's to stop children like you swallowing tablets!" Emilio says sarcastically.

Karl grabs the pill bottle from Emilio angrily.

"Yeah, I knew that, I just forgot!"

"Try the controlled breathing again, this time with your eyes open."

Suggests Crystal, trying not to laugh.

Karl tries the technique again.

"It doesn't work, guys! It just makes it harder to breath!"

"Just keep at it, it'll get easier!" Replies Crystal.

As Karl is trying to concentrate on his breathing, he doesn't notice the plane slowly gathering momentum and lifting off the ground. The plane reaches its summit and then levels out, calmly stabilizing in full flight.

"How you feel there, buddy?" Checks Emilio.

"I feel a lot better thanks to Crystal".

Karl's speech starts to become sloppy, and comes across as if he's been drinking for a couple of hours.

"Hey Crystal, you're great you know! You're so helpful and caring, and like really nice. When you first sat down I knew you'd be cool. You're one of the nicest people I've ever met. And I've only known you a short while."

"Karl, for someone so heavy your such a lightweight! Seriously, this guy gets drunk off one beer, I'm not kidding!"

"Hey, that's not true!" Says Karl drowsily.

He starts to fall into a deep sleep. Crystal puts her hand up for a high five, and Emilio responds, slapping her hand in relief, as he doesn't want to listen to Karl's plane anxiety the whole journey.

"So, how long have you guys been friends then?" Asks Crystal, trying to make light conversation.

"Well, Karl and I met about five years ago now, and became friends after we found out we had a few things in common."

"What's that? What did you have in common?" Asks Crystal, intrigued.

"Well, we discovered that we're both only children, and that we both grew up in England, before our parents moved to New York. You know I don't think our accents have changed that much since we've been here!"

"Oh wow! That's unusual, it's almost like you guys were always destined to meet! What part of England are you guys from?"

“I grew up in Essex. We had a big house, nothing like the kind of houses you get out here, though. Houses in the States are massive in comparison. And Karl grew up in Weymouth, on the south coast of England.”

“I’d love to visit England one day, it’s such a historical place, isn’t it? So why did your parents move to New York, anyway?”

“Well, my dad is a stockbroker and the firm he was working for in London had its headquarters in the New York, and he was travelling back and forth all the time. He’d take my mum and me over with him and we would stay during the school holidays. Dad was working his way up in the company and needed to spend more and more time there. He suggested we all give it a go living there. I don’t remember having much say in the decision at the time, I didn’t really want to leave my friends all that much, but it was so exciting once we were there that I quickly adjusted. I think it was a lot harder for Karl to adjust at first.”

“So why did Karl’s parents move to New York, then?”

“Yeah, that’s a different story altogether. You see, Karl’s dad didn’t stick around when he was a kid. So he grew up with his mum on a council estate. She ended up doing everything for him, like any good mum would, I guess. Perhaps a bit too much though, in my opinion. Anyway, his mum would always spend her spare time sat on the computer talking to people in various chat rooms and forums. And on one occasion she got talking to a guy called Paul who said he had his own business in New York. They hit it off, talking to each other on the computer every night, and soon he invited her over to New York. He was so infatuated with her that he saved up the money to send air tickets to England for Karl and his mum to visit. He turned out to be a great guy, although his doughnut making business wasn’t as glamorous or profitable as he made out it was. They got hitched and Karl got dragged along for the ride. Luckily, Paul turned out to be a decent father figure for Karl. They go and watch Knicks games together all the time, they seem to get on quite well.”

“That’s fascinating. Sorry, but you’ll have to excuse me, I need the bathroom.”

“That’s cool, I’m gonna kick back and listen to some tunes on my phone, I’m beat.”

## Chapter 2: Arrival

In the stifling heat, beneath the mid-afternoon sun, traffic is bustling in Lima. A yellow cab pulls up outside the menacing beauty of Lima's central bank. The driver steps cumbersomely out of the taxi and onto the kerb. Tall, middle aged and overweight, he sports a leather waistcoat and cap, which he pulls over his eyes as he walks slowly through the revolving doors and into the bank lobby. Once inside, the mammoth-man looks at the long queue in front of the five busy counters. He cracks a half smile and starts slowly barging his way through the queue of people, oblivious and unaffected by the protests resonating around him. The people surrounding him are frustrated, but relieved once the stale smelling mammoth has passed them. Walking up to a perplexed cashier, he slams a debit card onto the counter, along with a passport for validation.

"I want 84,000 Peruvian Nuevo Sols" he slurs.

The tanned woman looks at him with disgust, as he doesn't appear to have washed for days. She turns toward her manager and signals for assistance, because the amount to be dispensed is unusually high. Her manager, whose head is buried in a desk a few feet behind her looks up eagerly, and walks over to investigate the issue. He looks at the passport photo and then places the man's debit card into a keypad terminal.

"Could you enter your pin number, please, for security purposes." The prim and proper bank manager forces a smile, which lies parallel to his pencil moustache. The mammoth-man grunts and enters the four-digit number. The pin is verified and the manager checks the screen in front of him. He sees a payment for 84,000 Peruvian sole, from a company called Vipercom Pharmaceuticals. He looks back slowly again at the man and checks his mug against his passport photo one final time, before turning swiftly to the young cashier and giving her a surprised nod of approval. The cash is counted out meticulously, sorted into bundles, bound, placed in a paper bag and pushed toward the mammoth-man, who cockily stashes the cash bundle on the inside of his sweaty waistcoat and triumphantly walks out of the bank. Once outside in the warm smog the man sees his cab has been clamped. Instead of airing discontent, he merely laughs. He walks to the side of the humid street and beckons an approaching taxi. Stooping down to the cab window, he stares at the driver.

"The Hotel Tropicana!" The Mammoth demands.

The driver turns down his radio, which is blaring pop music.

"I know it well, I hear the drinks are free!"

The Mammoth looks somewhat confused as he climbs into the back seat of the taxi. The driver looks at his rear view mirror and struggles to contain his exuberance and inquisitiveness as he begins to negotiate the manic streets.

“Hey, I know you, don’t I?” He asks.

The Mammoth cracks yet another lazy couldn’t-give-a-damn smile.

“Yeah, I picked you up a couple of days ago from that strip club! Hey, did you win the lottery? The Tropicana isn’t cheap, you know.”

The Mammoth shakes his head and looks out of the window, as if to shut himself off from a further interaction. The driver relents, realizing he’s not getting anywhere, and turns his radio back up, muttering to himself.

“I gotta start playing the lotto!”

Emilio and Karl appear through the arrivals gate of Jorge Chavez International Airport in Lima. They stand chatting at the luggage terminal. Karl is calmed by the immaculate cleanliness and professional calm of Lima’s award winning international airport.

“Hey, this is a smart airport, Emilio, real slick!”

“Of course it is, Karl, what did you expect?”

“I thought it would be like going back to the dark ages, because you kept talking about how Peru is one of the oldest civilizations in the world.”

Emilio’s mind locks in on the subject.

“Well, it is, Karl, but obviously they’ve advanced a fair bit in the last so-many thousand years. You know, humans have been on this earth for millions of years now. And then about five thousand years ago civilizations started to pop up out of nowhere, and the Peruvians are one of the oldest of them. They were among the first civilizations to start doing things like mathematics, writing, pottery making and metallurgy!”

“What’s metallurgy?” Karl scratches his head.

“It’s means creating and manipulating metals, in layman’s terms!”

“What are layman’s terms?”

Emilio starts getting frustrated by the constant questions.

“Layman’s terms mean explaining a complex subject to someone like you in a way in which you can understand!” Emilio replies, with a hint of venom.

Karl looks down at his sneakers, trying to ignore the ridicule he senses. His stomach feels fragile from vomiting on the plane. Emilio is keen to move on and enjoy his time in Peru. He is elated, massively inspired by his surrounds, and excited by the prospect of his plans beginning to unfold. He pushes his earphones in, and selects a Rolling Stones song from his phone. The euphoric track Jumping Jack Flash kicks in, and Emilio begins to jolt and

punch the air in rhythmic ecstasy. His imagination is ignited as he begins to cavort through a scattered sea of foreign bodies. He is blissfully unfazed, with unrepentant disregard for how any of the people around perceive him. Karl walks behind, laughing at his friend's bravado and show of elation, which remedies the sour moment between the two only seconds before. Karl holds his phone up to Emilio's showmanship and catches the improvised performance on film. Emilio jumps around, miming to the song, occasionally walking up to strangers and dancing inoffensively in front of them. Passersby see the two boys filming and dancing, most of them smiling and grinning as they pass the scene. The song fades out, and Emilio walks in provocative slow motion towards Karl's rolling camera. Karl puts his phone away shaking his head, grinning ear to ear.

"That's some great footage, bro! You crack me up sometimes. So, where we are staying then, Emilio!"

"Karl seriously, you never listen to a word I say, do you! It's called the Hotel Tropicana"

"Hotel Tropicana! Sounds like the title to that crappy song". Replies Karl sarcastically.

"You're thinking of the Copacabana, Karl, and loads of people love that song, including me!"

"What is with you and your old music, Emilio? I just don't get it!"

"I'm a connoisseur, Karl. Fine wine, art, music, women."

"Since when did you start collecting art and drinking fine wine, and what's a connoisseur anyway?"

"I have drunk one hundred dollar bottles of wine, Karl! Come to think of it, so have you! Do you remember that little house party I threw when my parents went on that Caribbean cruise and you threw up on Emily Saunders?"

"I wasn't sick on her, Emilio, I just sneezed and blew a few chunks out by accident, that's all."

"Who are you kidding, Karl, you completely vomited all over the poor girl's head. She had to wash her hair five times just to get rid of the smell of your guts! It tainted her forever, Karl. I swear she used to be this sweet innocent blonde. After one evening hanging around with you she became a purple haired pot head."

"Emily was talking about dying her hair a different colour anyway, Emilio."

Emilio doesn't reply as he notices their luggage travelling down to them on the sloped conveyer belt.

“Come on, Karl, let’s get our stuff and get on our way.” Seizing his luggage from the conveyer belt Emilio sees an opportunity to educate his companion.

“Getting back to the connoisseur thing, Karl. It’s an old French expression. It means someone who has a lot of knowledge of a fine art or cuisine, an expert in the matters of taste, to put it another way. Also, coincidentally and unfortunately for your delicate mind, it sounds a lot like Cono Sur. Which is a province in the south of Lima. You see Cono Sur is one of the six areas that make up the Lima metropolitan area. It is located in the southern part of the metropolis. The area is popular for its awesome beaches. But we're staying in the area where the beaches are generally used for surfing rather than bathing.” Emilio parrots the Peru information pamphlet he read on the flight over.

“Awesome beaches, we have to visit some of those! You know this Cono Sur thing is starting to sound really cool.”

“Are you for real, Karl?” Says Emilio with a half-baked gaze. Karl picks up his luggage and stands up straight, looks directly at Emilio and replies.

“Connoisseur. I get it. So, for example, I’m a connoisseur of beautiful ladies. And the beaches in Cono Sur are full of attractive women!” Bursting with laughter Emilio puts his arm around Karl and escorts him out of the airport.

“Jesus, Karl, I think I just taught you something! You know what buddy, maybe you’re not such a dumb ass after all.”

### Chapter 3: Casino Tropicana

The cyan glass panels of Lima airport reflect the clouds, hanging heavy in the humid atmosphere. Between the sky and the surrounding mountains the city's pollution problem is held perfectly in place. Four wide roads stretch away from the airport, carrying passengers to and from the flight centre. Emilio and Karl have hardly placed their suitcases on the tarmac before a yellow taxi springs from nowhere, as if it were preying on the morsels of life that spill from the thriving airport. Through a cloud of fumes the head of the driver appears, beaming.

“Gentlemen, greatest taxi in all of Peru here to help!”

Emilio looks at Karl, with ‘what a character’ written onto his face, and instantly makes friendly contact.

“That’s great, do you know the Hotel Tropicana?”

“Ahh yes, I know it well! I hear the drinks are free!” Quotes the driver, hoping for a reaction.

“Oh yeah! Fun and sunshine, apparently there’s enough for everyone!”

Says Emilio jovially, realizing the song lyrics.

The driver jumps out, opens the boot and throws their luggage in, without a thought for any valuable items that could be inside. The boys tumble onto the uncomfortable worn rear seat of the taxi, and the driver cautiously starts to navigate them toward their destination. Turning to glance at the boys in the back, he proudly presents his customized taxi information card from his messy dashboard. He hands the card to the boys via a letterbox cut-out in the cheap plexiglass partition.

“Now listen! You boys are new here, and I can tell we’re best friends already, so! Here is my personal number, you need to go anywhere you call Carlos and I will be there before you blink. I know Lima like the back of my hand! I have lived here all my life. I know the good from the very bad. I am the only taxi driver you can trust.”

Emilio reaches out with a friendly smile to take the card and then turns his attention to the otherworldly surroundings, which Karl is already fixated with. The streets of Lima are a constant eye opener for Emilio, who is shocked to see dangerously unmaintained buses and cars. The chaotic traffic they have slipped amongst seems to have no lane sense, but despite all the unruly vehicles, the streets have some of the best traffic lights and road markings he has ever seen. Drifting back to what Carlos was saying Emilio gives his delayed response.

“That’s great Carlos, we don’t know much about this place, it’s really good of you to offer your services like that.”

Karl is gripping the internal door handle tightly. The jerky, disjointed motion of the cab swerving through uncoordinated traffic makes him feel on edge and uneasy. Emilio is excited and thrilled by the same experience. He is almost disappointed as they pull up outside their destination from the sheer eye-opening delight of the journey. Carlos lets out a fake cough into his fist as he prepares to ask for his fee.

“That will be 25 sole please, kind men! You have arrived safe, as promised”

“Here you go Carlos buddy, keep the change.”

Emilio passes 50 sole through the scratched Perspex window, double the fare: a generous and spontaneous gesture, born out of the excitement of the moment. As Carlos receives the offering he reacts with unrestrained delight.

“Yes! Yes! If you need anything, anything at all, you call Carlos! All other taxi driver’s rip you off! I tell you what, as extra special service I will base myself around here for a while just to make sure you get best possible taxi.”

Emilio hauls himself off the back seat, and leans in through the front window, smiling.

“It’s a gesture of good will, Carlos.”

“Of course, of course, kind gentleman.”

Carlos fetches their luggage and bids them farewell, bowing several times, before heading off to find more seemingly rich tourists. They boys stand at the bottom of a steep flight of stone steps, which are draped in a deep red carpet. They look up with jaws gaping at the scale of the mile-high skyscraper. The Hotel and Casino Tropicana sign is lit up in bright red italics. The sign stands regally above tinted black glass revolving doors.

“This place is epic.” Gasps Karl.

“Yeah, my dad has stayed here a few times, he booked it for us. I must admit I didn’t realize it would be quite so upmarket.”

“It reminds me of the time I went to Las Vegas and partied hard.”

“Karl, you went with your mum and stepdad! And knowing your mum, she wouldn’t have let you out of her sight.”

“You’re just jealous because you’ve never been.”

“No, I’m just looking out for you buddy. I don’t want to see you walking around under this veil of delusion your whole life. Come on, Karl, come and join me in reality. Let’s go and check this place out.”

They grab their luggage and walk up the steps. Emilio playfully spins around in the revolving doors three times, before continuing on into the white marble of the grand Art Deco foyer. Awestruck, they step past perfect, lush-green indoor palms. As the boys approach the reception desk they are



addressed graciously by a beautiful brunette, dressed in a smart dark gray suit with a gold name badge, spelling Carina. She smiles widely.

“Welcome to the Hotel and Casino Tropicana, do you have a reservation?”

Karl’s jaw drops to another level as he is instantly smitten, and can only muster a faint mutter from under his breath

“I have no reservations about you.”

Carina looks puzzled.

“Did you say you have no reservation?”

Emilio displays his annoyance by nudging Karl firmly with the outside of his forearm, the nudge doubling as a signal, warning Karl to keep his trap shut and act cool.

“Ignore him, he’s got sunstroke. We have a reservation under the name Winters.”

Carina delicately taps the name into the unseen computer behind the desk.

“Ah yes, I think this is it. I just need some form of I.D and a valid credit card.”

Emilio hands over an American Express card and both passports.

“Excellent. You are staying in room 157, the deluxe suite, two single beds have been set up as requested”.

“Wait a minute, one room, two beds, what happened to all that talk of our own rooms, Emilio?”

Emilio sighs, realizing his dad’s intervention.

“Look, dad’s paying for all this on one condition - his rules. He just wants us to stick together, that’s all. We’re also not supposed to deviate from the tourist excursions, but what he doesn’t know won’t hurt him. Come on Karl, lighten up, we could never afford this on our own, we should think ourselves lucky, especially you, Karl. Didn’t your mum once sell her dog to get your dad’s car fixed?”

Frustrated and embarrassed, Karl picks up his luggage and storms off, shouting “That’s not true Emilio, why do you always have to bring that up? I’m getting sick of it.”

Carina hands over the room key and casino ID cards with a smile, trying to remain professional and not laugh at the outburst.

“Here’s your keys and your casino ID’s. You’ll need these to buy drinks and play at the casino tables. At the back of the casino are the elevators that will take you up to your room. You can’t miss them.”

Emilio takes the items, thanks Carina and casually walks off after Karl. He quickly catches up with his friend, who stands in the archway at the entrance of the casino. The boys look on, impressed at the detail of the distinguished

casino. They marvel at the vast hall laden with green velvet, craps, baccarat and poker tables, and sparkling roulette wheels. Massive diamond chandeliers cast sharp silhouettes. The tables are bustling with smartly dressed people. As the boys make their way through the hall, they pass a tall, debonair man with a black pinstripe suit and a large black suitcase chained to his wrist. He walks through the casino to a door leading into the cashier's cage at the far side of the large hall.

“Man, I wonder how much money is in that suitcase? Emilio, this is so cool, what’s the legal age for gambling here?”

“Well, Karl, as I told you about million times back home, in Peru it’s eighteen, same as it is for buying alcohol.”

“Hallelujah, we can buy some beers and throw some dice all under the same roof.”

“Yep, we sure can. Right, let’s get to our room, get showered, get changed, then get down here to the bar, load up with some cocktails and head for the snake eyes tables to shoot some dice, what’ya say, partner?”

“I say you’re a fucking genius with a master plan! Let’s do it!”

They head for the elevators at the back of the casino and wait impatiently for the silver doors to slide open. A tall woman is standing inside, looking every minute of her 57 years old in her blond wig, sparkling blue sequin dress and a face full of slap.

“Well, ain't you two boys just divine” She drawls in a strong southern accent as she steps out of the elevator, turning to look back at the boys, watching them lustfully until the doors shut. They stand in silence for a moment as the elevator sleekly begins to move upwards, until Emilio pulls an awkward expression.

“That was weird!”

“I think she was kinda hot!” Remarks Karl softly.

“She was like 70 years old, Karl! Man, we got to get you laid, and not with somebody’s grandma!”

“Don’t be an ass-wipe, she looked good for her age.”

“She was creepy, man! Her eyes were mascara and vengeance.”

The pristine lift smoothly opens on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor. As they exit, a silver engraved sign points them toward rooms 150 to 200.

“We're in room 157, Karl, looks like it’s down this way.”

They walk a stone’s throw down the corridor, passing signed pictures of Dean Martin & Jerry Lewis, Harrison Ford, Barbara Streisand and Goldie Hawn.

“Man, these pictures are cool.” Karl stops to admire the framed photos.

“I’m pretty sure that’s Harrison Ford. He used to play James Bond, and I think Goldie Hawn was in Star Wars!” Says Emilio.

“What are you talking about, Emilio? Harrison Ford was never James Bond, he was Indiana Jones, and he also played Han Solo in Star Wars, which Goldie Hawn was never in!” Explains Karl indignantly.

“Ok, so you spend more time sitting on your ass watching movies than I do, so what!” Emilio shrugs.

Karl feels victorious, having finally put Emilio right on one of the rare subjects he actually knows more about.

They enter room 157 and see a smart black mini bar next to black marble kitchen work surfaces. At the other end of the room are two black leather reclining armchairs in front of a plush black entertainment unit with a 60” flat screen TV.

Karl’s face lights up as if he’s just set eyes on a cluster of presents on Christmas morning.

“Oh my God! This room is off the hook! It’s the greatest room I’ve ever seen in my entire life.”

“And there you were feeling sorry for yourself in the foyer! Dad’s really pulled out all the stops this time.” Remarks Emilio smugly.

“Your dad must be rich, dude.”

“Well, he’s no millionaire, Karl, although he has done well for himself for sure, but I think this is the hotel his company uses when they do business in South America, and I remember him saying he was owed a few favours.”

“Look! The mini bar’s loaded!”

“They’re expensive though, Karl, so we got to go easy. It’s all getting charged to that American Express card, and dad expects us to only use it in case of emergencies, so we have to be sensible with it! But I’m pretty sure a couple of small ones won’t hurt, so let’s see what we got”.

Emilio looks into the smartly lit glass mini bar and pulls out two miniature bottles of bourbon and a can of coke.

“How about a bit of Dutch courage before we head downstairs, bruv.”

“I’ve never had Dutch courage before, but I’ll try it.” Says Karl, grinning slyly at Emilio, knowing full well what his buddy meant. Emilio laughs, spotting Karl’s grin, as he was about to roll his eyes at Karl’s airhead remark. Emilio prepares the drinks, and Karl raises his glass as it’s handed to him, excitedly making a toast.

“To the two most excellent amigos and the greatest holiday of all time.” Emilio laughs as he clinks his glass with Karl’s, and then shouts out loud toward the ceiling.

“To excellent amigos! Right, lets get our best garms on and get downstairs to test our nerve.”

They down their drinks and Karl quickly turns away from Emilio to hide his disgust for the strong liquor. As he stands with his back turned he puffs his chest out whilst slamming his glass down on the kitchenette counter, trying to act as manly as possible.

“Nothing like a nice strong hit of whiskey to get the blood pumping.” Emilio walks into the bedroom and throws his suitcase on one of the two perfectly made single beds.

“I’m taking a shower now, so don’t fucking come in here for ten minutes.”

“I’m gonna use the sink in here, anyway!” Yells Karl, looking around in awe at the modern kitchenette.

“You can’t clean your sweaty ass in that sink, Karl.”

“Are you kidding me, this sink is bigger and cleaner than our bath back home!”

The boys wash and change into their smartest clothes. Karl was feeling good in his grey chinos and black Ralph Lauren shirt, until Emilio emerges from the bedroom in a dark grey suit.

“Man, you make me look shit wearing that suit, brother. You always have to outdo me, don’t you?” Karl throws his towel down onto the floor in frustration.

“Not at all! It’s the only suit I own! I had to get it for my uncle’s wedding last fall and I’ve been waiting for an opportunity to wear it again, and what better place to wear it than at a cool casino.”

Emilio assumes various poses, checking himself out from every angle in the long horizontal wall mirror.

“Let’s go, man! I’m feeling lucky tonight.”

As Emilio is fine tuning his appearance in the mirror Karl picks up a magazine from the kitchenette worktop. Emilio has scrawled the words ‘Manesh - Iquitos Medical Research Institute’ on a yellow post-it note and stuck it to the cover, partially obscuring the title. Karl flips up the note, revealing the words ‘Medical Research of the Amazon’. He flicks through the pages without any particular interest, and drops the magazine back down on the worktop before joining his friend, who is now standing by the door, impatient to leave. Emilio opens the door for Karl and ushers him through. Making last minute adjustments to their hair in the glass of the signed photographs, they stroll towards the elevators. As they get close, the doors open, revealing a massive, sweaty, unshaven man with a leather waistcoat and cap. The grotesque figure limps awkwardly towards them, not leaving

much room either side for them to pass. Walk inline, Emilio and Karl brush the wall as they try to avoid contact with the mammoth figure. As they enter the lift Karl looks back, nosily spying on the man as he enters room 156, the room next to theirs.

“You see the size of that guy, Emilio?”

“It was pretty hard not to!”

“It makes you wonder why they let him in here! He stank.”

“So did we when we arrived. He must have paid his way, just like the rest of us.”

As they enter the casino Emilio heads straight for the bar. The snobby congregation of well-to-do hotel guests fall silent as the boys move between them to place their order.

“Two of your finest margaritas please, brother.” Emilio addresses the bartender.

“Two of your finest IDs then, gentleman.” Sniggers Samuel, shovelling ice from a gold bucket into a cocktail shaker.

The inquisitive spectators look down their noses and laugh. Emilio, unembarrassed, clicks his fingers at Karl, keeping eye contact with the bartender and ignoring the insulting laughter. Karl pulls both casino IDs out of his back pocket and places them in Emilio’s open palm. Emilio pushes the IDs across the bar, and smoothly informs the man.

“We’re residents, just like the rest of these people.” He raises his voice a little, to make sure the bystanders can hear. “And we have a good line of credit.”

The bartender checks the IDs, nods with admiration at the manner in which the boys have conducted themselves and begins to mix their drinks.

“We have to ask new faces for IDs, and even then people try forging these things all the time, as this is an extremely exclusive hotel.” The bartender’s tone slips easily from brazen rudeness to servile friendliness.

“Nature of the business, I guess.” Replies Emilio.

“I’ve seen it all!” The bartender smiles, “Here are your drinks! Have fun, gentlemen!”

Turning from the bar and leaning back on it confidently, Emilio looks directly at the arrogant group of eavesdroppers. He waits for eye contact and then raises his glass in a mocking toast, completely unfazed. The group give a disgusted look and turn away quickly, laughing at an in-joke, probably aimed at the boys. Looking out across the casino, margarita in hand, Emilio lets out a sigh of relief.

“This is the life, Karl! Awesome casino, beautiful women, ice cold cocktails, I could really get used to this.”

“Yeah, but those people seemed kinda rude.”

“Don’t worry about them, they’re probably so rich that they’ve lost touch with reality.”

Karl nods his head in agreement whilst holding his cocktail up to the chandelier light, admiring and checking the margarita’s quality, trying to be a connoisseur.

“Yeah, this is pretty cool.”

“Right, I’ve got \$200 cash. I’m thinking I’ll use half of it for drinks and the other half to try my luck. How much you got, Karl?”

Karl opens his wallet and counts the notes. “I got \$58, and it’s all for drinks.”

“Come on, Karl, we’re in a casino, you gotta do some gambling. Look, I’ll buy you a few drinks and you never know, you could treble up with your \$58 dollars.”

“Well, as long as you get me a few, I guess I could stake some of my money.”

“That’s the spirit! Now what game you into, what have you played before? Whoa, Karl, check the two hot brunettes over there at that baccarat table!”

“Yeah, those girls are hot, but I got no idea how to play baccarat. How about roulette? How hard can it be? I mean you pick a number or a colour or something.”

“Yeah, you can place bets on a single number or a range of numbers, and then red, black, odd or even.”

Karl starts walking off toward the roulette table, with Emilio in tow. Leaning against the immaculate varnished table Karl garners the attention of the roulette croupier.

“I’ll take \$5 on red.”

The two hot brunettes from the baccarat table walk over to the roulette wheel in an attempt to change their previous bad luck. The croupier, not hearing Karl’s mumbles, double checks what he said.

“Was that \$5, sir?”

The two brunettes are watching Karl, waiting for their turn. Karl, ashamed of his meagre bet, and in an attempt to impress the girls, replies dishonestly.

“Five dollars! No way man, I play in Las Vegas, over there we bet fifty dollars minimum!”

“So that’s a fifty dollar stake then, sir.” Says the unconvinced croupier.

“Fifty dollars, absolute minimum.” Says Karl firmly as he glances across at the girls and pulls a face of discontent at the croupier. Emilio is revelling in the moment, loving his friend’s outlandish act. He downs the rest of his

cocktail, anticipating the outcome. The croupier spins the wheel clockwise and releases the small white ball. Karl's outward arrogance and confidence cover his silent prayers. 'Just this one time, God, please make me look cool, please, I couldn't take the shame.' The ball winds quickly around the static outer rim of the spinning roulette wheel. As it begins to slow it pings anxiously between the sparkling silver ridges. All eyes are fixed on the ball as it dances around the wheel, before nestling into the black number 12 slot as the wheel gently grinds to a stand still. Karl slams both of his hands on the table unable to keep his cool and shouts.

"Fuck's sake! Fifty fucking dollars! For God's sake! Shit!"

Emilio turns away, almost choking through laughing so hard at his friend's misfortune. The girls, seeing Emilio's reaction, become infected with laughter, and even the croupier gives an unprofessional smirk at Karl's ill-fated bravado. Karl circles round to Emilio, head-in-hands, smiling after calming down and seeing the funny side of it all.

"So what now? I got eight dollars left!" He exclaims.

"Right, take your last eight dollars and get us some drinks, I'll buy your drinks for the rest of the night, ok?"

"It's a deal! What drink do you want?"

"Surprise me."

"God, I hate it when people say that, they always end up disappointed."

"You could never disappoint me, Karl."

"Ahh shucks."

"Because I already know your gonna fuck it up." Says Emilio with a wink. He actually has ultimate faith in his trusty sidekick. "Look, I think our best chance of making any real money tonight lies at the poker table. You know I play a lot online and I generally win more than I lose. So! You get the drinks and I'll meet you over at the poker table."

## Chapter 4: The Game

Emilio makes his way towards the poker table. As he waits patiently for a seat a beautiful blonde waitress walks by with a tray of empties. Emilio places his glass on the tray, making eye contact with the blonde, who carries on her way, immune to drunk admirers. He watches her sashay across the floor until his gaze is met by another blonde; the crazy old woman from the elevator, who is already seated at the poker table.

“Over here, sweetheart!” She yells, following up with a wolf whistle, and gesturing towards the seat next to hers that has just become available. Emilio begrudgingly slides in beside her. The game is No-Limit Texas Hold’em, with a one hundred dollar buy-in.

“So, we meet again” Says Emilio, with a fake smile and lack of enthusiasm.

“Oh the pleasure is all mine honey, all mine!” Replies the crazy old blonde, running her eyes over his athletic frame slowly while sensually biting into the liquor soaked cherry from her cocktail glass.

“Well, that’s for sure” Counters Emilio slyly.

She smiles, slightly confused by the condescending remark, eventually taking it as a compliment. After a couple of insignificant rounds, Emilio is dealt a pair of queens and raises the pot, throwing ten dollars worth of chips out in front of him. A man who has just joined the game calls the raise. The man is a rough diamond with a distinctive scar beside his eye shaped like a vagina. Emilio stares at the man, trying to get a read, and feels a slight pang of paranoia as it slowly dawns on him that it’s the man from the airport. The first three community cards are dealt; the ace of hearts, the queen of hearts, and the two of clubs. This gives Emilio three queens. Feeling confident with his hand he bets another ten dollars. Scarface calls again. The fourth community card is the seven of hearts, completing a potential flush. Emilio bets a further ten hoping his opponent hasn’t made a flush and that his three queens are still good. Scarface puts his thumb to his chin to rest his face as he slouches, considering his next move. Out of nowhere he raises one hundred dollars, making the pot one hundred and fifty dollars in total. Emilio is faced with a very difficult decision. There is still one more community card to be dealt, the fifth and final river card. To see this card will cost him seventy dollars, the rest of the one hundred dollars he brought into the game. Emilio’s knows he may already be beat if Scarface has a flush. Emilio starts to perspire under the pressure, but drunk on the booze and the atmosphere, he pushes the rest of his chips into the pot and calls. The final card is the two of hearts, giving him a full house. Scarface proudly



shows an ace high flush and reaches out prematurely for all the chips in the middle. The dealer puts his croupier stick across Scarface's outstretched arm, blocking him from drawing in the chips.

"We haven't seen your opponent's hand yet, sir." Says the croupier, instilling order.

With that, Emilio coolly turns over his cards to reveal a full house.

"Full house. Queens over deuces beats an ace high flush." The croupier casually announces.

"Must be my lucky day. Think I'll quit while I'm ahead." Emilio looks over at Scarface, who is fuming with rage.

Emilio stands up, gathering all the chips from the centre of the table, leaning across the crazy old blonde, who takes the opportunity to stare directly at his toned backside.

"Where do you think your going, kid?" Says Scarface menacingly. "You must give me a chance to win my money back. That is good manners."

"Yeah, sweet cheeks, you've only been here for ten minutes! You can't leave so soon!" Adds the crazy blonde, as she squeezes Emilio's thigh.

"Good manners are to be gracious in defeat, kind sir." Says Emilio in a patronizing tone. "And thanks for the seat, lady, I'll see you around."

"You can see me anytime you like!" She replies, slapping Emilio's ass abruptly.

Emilio turns away, and gratefully makes a beeline for Karl, who is heading toward him with a cocktail in each hand. The boys convene beside a baccarat table.

"Emilio, sorry about that, the bar was busy and the good looking women were all getting priority. Come on, let's play some poker."

"Already did, and I'm finished."

"Man, that's just our luck tonight, we better make these drinks last."

Emilio presents the chips he's holding to Karl, as if they were gold.

"Here's your money back, bruv." He smiles, counting out and handing over \$50 dollars worth of chips.

"Wow, where'd you get that from! I thought you were broke."

"You assumed I was broke. Take it, it's cool, I won it."

"But I was gone like fifteen minutes."

"I know, I just got lucky."

"Man, you are epic! You never fail to amaze me. I just don't know how you do it."

"Listen Karl, do you remember that dodgy guy who got stopped at the airport?"

"You mean the dude with the freaky scar? "

“Yeah, that guy.”

“What of it?”

“Well, he’s here.”

“Holy shit, what, in Lima.”

“Yeah, in Lima. In this fucking casino in Lima.”

“What the fuck, is he following us?”

“No, I don’t think so, although he’s kind of pissed off with us, you see that fifty dollars worth of chips you’re holding used to be his.”

“Well fuckin say sorry and give it back to him then, you freak.”

“No fuckin way, I won that money fair and square at the poker table! He’s a bad fuckin loser though Karl. Worse than you! Look, it was only one hundred and twenty dollars, it’s not like it was thousands. It’s nothing to worry about, I just thought you’d want to know”

“Yeah, it’s not that much I guess, I’m just getting tired. It’s been a long day and these drinks are going straight to my head.”

“Your right. It’s nearly 11 now, and we have a big trip in the morning, so we need to get our heads down”

“What big trip?” Karl looks bewildered.

Emilio tries to downplay his careless remark.

“Oh, it’s nothing, just thought we’d go on a little trip tomorrow, you know, see the sights, that kind of thing!”

“You said big trip!”

“Well, it’s a big city!”

Karl nods and thinks nothing more of it. They quickly finish their cocktails and head back to their room. The crazy old blonde has been keeping a close eye on Emilio since he left the poker table, and starts slyly following the boys to the elevator. As the doors start to open she gathers pace, stepping in just behind them.

“Well, my my, we just have to stop meeting like this, boys.” She coos excitedly, wedging herself in between them.

“I couldn’t agree with you more.” Mutters Emilio with a despondent look.

“Now, how about you boys join me for a nice little night cap at my apartment, so we can get better acquainted!” She slurs.

“Karl and I think that’s a really nice gesture, don’t we, Karl?” Karl nods on cue. “But we’ve had a long day and have another tomorrow, so I’m sorry, but we’ll have to have a drink some other time. I hope you don’t mind?”

“Now come on, boys! You two are young, you have bags of energy, I should imagine. One little drink isn’t gonna hurt now, is it!”

The lift doors open and the boys are keen to exit.

“Oh, here’s our stop! Sorry, we gotta go.” Emilio replies abruptly. The boys rush out of the lift and stop dead halfway between their room and the lift. Standing outside the room next to theirs is the Mammoth having an argument with Scarface of all people. Scarface notices Emilio mid argument and turns towards him.

“Ah, my young friend with the manners, we need to talk also.” Says Scarface in a slow, sinister voice.

Emilio, not wanting to talk or let Scarface know which room they are staying in, turns back to the old blonde.

“So, how about that drink!”

“Well, I just knew you boys would see sense, now follow me, my room’s right along here.” She smiles warmly. “I’m Marilyn, by the way.” She giggles.

“Of course you are.” Emilio replies wryly.

Marilyn’s room is at the opposite end of the corridor, and Scarface has turned back to the Mammoth by the time they reach her door. Not taking any chances, Emilio grabs the keys as she pulls them out of her bag and hurriedly lets them in.

“Oh my my, you are keen!” She gurgles, pressing up against him and breathing in the cologne on his neck.

They enter a virtually identical room to their own, except this one smells of vanilla and has fresh flowers arranged throughout.

“Now, I’m going to fix us some drinks, so you just get yourselves nice and comfy, you hear.”

She winks at Karl, who smiles back half-heartedly, before she disappears into the adjoining room.

“You know what, Emilio? She’s not that bad looking.”

“Spare me, Karl.”

Karl sinks into the black leather sofa while Emilio mans the hotel door, opening it and peering out into the corridor to see if it’s empty.

“Scarface has gone. One drink and then we get back to our room, ok?”

“No problem.”

Marilyn reappears, wearing a black lace nightdress and holding a tray of drinks. The boys are speechless as she sits down next to Karl on the two-seater black leather sofa.

“Try these boys, they’re my own special recipe. I do hope you don’t mind me making myself at home like this. I just love to get cosy.”

“That’s fine with me, do whatever the hell you like.” Declares Karl, with one eye on her ample cleavage.

“Why thank you, I just knew we’d all get along just fine.” She replies coquettishly.

“So, what are you two handsome young men doing out here in Lima anyway, I’m just fascinated with you boys right now.”

“We’re here to visit some of the ancient locations in Peru, do some research, take some pictures, learn some history, you know, that sort of thing.” Says Emilio, suspiciously sniffing the drink he’s just been handed.

“Oh, Peru is just packed with history, there is just so much out here that hasn’t been discovered yet, it’s all so interesting. I love it!”

“This drink is pretty good, what’s in it?” Emilio starts warming to their hostess, and gives her a chance to show a different side to her personality, which he was so quick to judge.

“Vodka, white rum, sweet vermouth, a drop of cranberry juice and a twist of lime.”

“So why are you here, what’s your story, Marilyn?” Asks Emilio with a relaxed demeanor.

She sits back in her seat and adopts a melancholy, introspective expression.

“Well, I’m divorced, thank God! He was a wealthy businessman and I was a housewife. I would cook for him and keep the house as clean as a pin. Not that he ever noticed. Twenty-five loyal years went by before he started seeing some fancy piece at the office. God knows how long he was playing away. I had my suspicions. I put up with it at first thinking it was a phase, a mid life crisis, you know, that kind of thing. I thought he’d think better of it, but the more I put up with, the more he took me for granted. I just couldn’t continue living in a loveless marriage. So I filed for divorce and hit him where it hurt him the most; his wallet!”

Marilyn pauses, her mind trapped in negative reflection. The room goes silent. Snapping out of her sombre mood, she continues. “But that was then and this is now. I’m going to make the most of my time and his money. It wasn’t all that long ago, so I thought I’d take a break and get away. I’ve always wanted to explore and see the wonders of the world, so here I am!”

“I hear there’s a trip from this hotel to the Museo Pedro de Osma tomorrow, are you going on it?” Enquires Emilio.

“What the hell’s the Museo Pedro?” Enquires Karl, confused.

“Why, bless you! It’s a famous old art museum displaying sculptures, silverware, and paintings. It dates back as far as the seventeenth century, I believe. And yes, I will be going on that trip. Will you boys be joining me?” Asks Marilyn hopefully.

“Yeah, Emilio, that sounds cool, just the kind of thing we came here for. That’s the trip you were talking about isn’t it?”

“Yeah, kind of, Karl! Look, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that. You know I’m doing some important research on a rare species of plant?”

“Yeah, you said it could cure cancer or something.”

“That’s right. Well, I think I know where it could be found. And to find it, it might be necessary for us to take a flight over to Iquitos.”

“Where the hell is Iquitos and why do we have to fly there?”

“Well, Iquitos is the city that backs onto the Amazon rainforest. And we may need to take a quick detour through the rainforest to find the plant.”

Karl immediately springs to his feet in protest, carelessly spilling his drink in his lap. Marilyn quickly withdraws her foot, which she’d been slowly nestling into Karl’s groin, and blots at the spill with a cushion. Unconcerned with the spillage, Karl gets up and heads across the room to Emilio, his voice growing louder with each question.

“Amazon rainforest? What the hell you are talking about Emilio? Where’s all this suddenly come from? Your dad told us to stick to the tourist excursions and that’s it! Those were the rules, remember? You said it yourself!”

“He’ll never know, Karl. Come on, help me out, bro! I need my wingman, I can’t do this without you!”

Karl is right up in Emilio’s face. Emilio calmly stands his ground until Karl backs down and begins nervously pacing the room.

“I knew there was something else. You could have studied back home. Why didn’t you tell me about this back in New York, Emilio, why did you lie to me?”

“Hey, I never lied to you, Karl, but I knew if I told you about my detour you’d pussy out and not wanna come.”

“Your damn right I’m gonna pussy out, and that’s why I’m staying right here at the hotel until it’s time to fly home. Man, we know nothing about Peru and you’re on about a detour across the Amazon fuckin jungle. There are killer fuckin monkeys, killer snakes, man-eating spiders; even the plants can kill you! I thought it was weird when you packed that fold up tent, knowing we were staying at a hotel, and there you were, saying it was in case we wanted to camp out at the beach.” Karl spits angrily.

“That is the reason I brought it! We are gonna do that. Come on, Karl, look! Most of the medicines used in the world today were first discovered in the rainforests. Only about two percent of the rainforest plants have been studied for their medicinal properties. The best chance we have of finding the plant I’m looking for is by actually going there!”

“Now, calm down boys, we’ll just have our drinks and relax as friends.” Says Marilyn, getting in-between them, loving the tension between the two young men.

“Come on, Karl, let’s get going. Let’s get some rest.” Pleads Emilio.

“No fuckin way, I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“That’s fine, Karl can stay right here with me tonight, I’ll look after him.”

Says Marilyn, sensing an opportunity as she looks towards Karl, sultry eyed.

"You're more than welcome."

“I’m off, Karl! Goodnight Marilyn.” Says Emilio, figuring Karl is probably bluffing. He walks back to their room, hesitating briefly before entering, half expecting to see Karl puffing along behind him, but the corridor is empty. Emilio shrugs and heads straight to bed, focused on getting some much needed rest before the trip he is determined to make the next day.

## Chapter 5: Wingman

Emilio sinks his head into the luxurious black silk pillows and glares at the ceiling. Raised voices from the room next door penetrate his thoughts. After ten minutes of trying to ignore the commotion and get to sleep the voices begin getting louder and more aggravated. Realising sleep is out of the question now, and overwhelmed with curiosity, he slowly slips out of the sheets and walks silently over to the far wall, pressing his ear up against the divide in an attempt to listen in. He is disappointed to find that all he can hear is a more intense mumbled drone. After a few minutes, the voices die down. Tiptoeing quietly back to bed, he checks his phone; it's 12:10am. Setting his phone for 7:30am, he drifts into a restless sleep.

A strange thump, followed by a shattering of glass pulls him back to consciousness. The noise was only just audible through the wall from the adjoining room, and so fails to alert attention anywhere else in the building. Emilio jumps up in shock, concerned by what the sound could have been. Slipping quietly into the bathroom, he leans against the wall trying once again to hear what is happening. A minute later, he hears what sounds like the balcony doors sliding open. He rushes into the main room and out onto the balcony, where he's greeted by the ever-busy city street. The Mammoth is clambering down the fire escape, but gravity is no friend to his immense frame, and he falls the last few steps. Once on the ground, he crouches down to inspect his leg, which has been badly cut by the cold metal. A car parked on the opposite side of the road jerks into life, accelerating over to him with a startled, stuttered panic. The Mammoth hauls himself up, pulls open the rear door and dives across the back seats. The car quickly speeds off without its lights on and the rear door flapping open. Emilio's mind is reeling, thinking over every possibility to try and work out what might have happened next door. He walks back into the living room and sits nervously on the sofa. His phone is lying on the floor beside the bed. It's 1:48am. He looks over to Karl's bed, double-checking that it's still empty. Not knowing what to do next, he heads for the mini-bar and fixes himself a neat double shot of bourbon. Slumping onto the living room sofa, he puts the cold glass to his hot, perspiring forehead to cool and calm himself. He downs the liquor and decides the best thing to do is forget about the whole thing. Lying back, flooded with exhaustion and yet more alcohol, Emilio closes his eyes and falls asleep on the soft leather sofa.

At 6:56am the door to the boys' room is quietly unlocked. Karl creeps in, and sighs inwardly at the sight of his friend crashed out on the sofa. Just his

luck! Trying his hardest not to wake Emilio, he tiptoes past the sofa. As he reaches for the bedroom door handle he hears a drowsy voice.

“You dirty dog, what time do you call this?” Emilio queries, with his eyes shut.

“What are you talking about, I’ve just got up. I got in hours ago.” Karl cringes.

“So why are you wearing the same outfit you had on last night? What happened? Did you get it on with aunty Marilyn?”

“You’re gross Emilio. And no, I didn’t, as it happens, I fell asleep while she was giving me a foot massage.”

“Oh, a foot massage? That’s creative! I haven’t heard that one before. Anyway, Karl, get the coffee on, we’ve got a long day ahead of us.”

“You mean you’ve got a long day ahead of you!” Replies Karl, sharply. Emilio sits up on the sofa and yawns, realizing he has work to do if he’s going to get Karl back on side.

“Come over here, Karl. Take a seat. We have to talk business. Look, I don’t know how to put this, buddy, but I’m gonna lay it on the line here anyway. I need your help. I can’t do it alone. Only you have the skills necessary to take us all the way.”

Karl shakes his head with a wry smile. He knows Emilio is lying through his teeth, and saying absolutely anything he can to try and rope him into to his plans. But the effort and content of what he is saying is keeping him interested for the time being at least, merely on a humorous level.

“Look, we’ll fly out there and spend one day, max! We’ll find the plant and then head back here for an unforgettable two weeks of fun and sun. I promise. It will take one day, tops. Come on, buddy, it could even be a laugh.” Says Emilio light-heartedly, pushing Karl on the arm in a friendly manner.

Karl sits apprehensively, considering his friend’s words.

“I don’t know, man, it could be dangerous. And besides, I’m pissed off you lied to me. We’re supposed to be best friends and tell each other everything. Look at it from my point of view. You’ve kept this whole jungle trip a secret from me, and now your telling me that you can’t do it without me. Don’t treat me like an idiot, Emilio.” Karl’s tone is disappointed and despondent.

“I know. I’m sorry, and you not an idiot. I should have told you about it before. I just didn’t want to freak you out, and have you ruin your chances of being part of something great. But do you realize Karl, that if we can actually find this plant, and if my theories about it are correct, then you and me, Winters and Deadshore, we could be the people responsible for



discovering a legitimate cure for cancer! We would go down in history, Karl. Think of all the millions of lives we could potentially save.”

Emilio sees Karl’s expression change from an uncomfortable grimace to one of marginal interest and deep thought. He can see he’s struck a chord, and continues to paint the scene.

“You could be rich and famous beyond your wildest dreams. Think about it. Think about what you could buy with all that money.”

“Maybe you’re right, Emilio. Karl Deadshore, the co-discoverer of the first cure for cancer. I kinda like the sound of that.”

“Exactly, Karl, you know it makes sense. Think of all the lives that could be saved. All the money that could be earned.” Emilio starts clicking his fingers and grooving his head around to a tune playing in his mind as he senses Karl is having a change of heart.

“Ok Emilio, you’ve convinced me. I will help you, but don’t lie to me again, ok?”

“Never again Karl, I swear to God! Just straight up pure honesty from now on. Look, let’s get ready, our flight leaves in a few hours.”

“Great! More fucking flying, you seriously owe me for this, Emilio.”

“Anything you ever ask me, I will do, no question. Remember, you’re gonna be a hero. Right, come on, let’s go get ready and then I’ll call Carlos to pick us up!”

## Chapter 6: Flight to Iquitos

The boys walk out into the bright sunshine, nursing killer hangovers. Pedestrians shield their mouths against the thick, noxious fumes flowing from the exhaust of a battered taxi. Carlos leans out of the driver's window and waves enthusiastically to the boys. Karl hurries down the hotel steps and clambers into the back seat, relieved to be free of the intimidating city street. Emilio casually takes his time, stopping at the taxi doors and leaning on the roof briefly, drinking in the hectic, exotic atmosphere.

"Ah, my boys! How are you today? Did you sleep well? You'd like the airport, yes?" Says Carlos, pumped with coffee and a lust to drain as much money out of the never-ending stream of tourists who infiltrate his city.

"Didn't sleep so well, Carlos! And yes, to the airport please." Emilio yawns, rubbing his forefingers over his eyelids in a futile attempt to snap out of his lethargy.

"You're not going home already, are you?" Carlos peers at the boys through his dusty rear view mirror, concerned with losing custom.

"Not yet pal, we're flying to Iquitos, have you heard of it?"

"Does a penguin shit ice cubes? Of course I bloody know Iquitos. I'm born and bred Peruvian. I take a million tourists a year to the airport to travel over there."

"So what the hell is Iquitos like, Carlos? It sounds like you've been there before." Inquires Karl in an agitated state, unnerved by where he is headed.

"My cousin lives in Iquitos! It is one of the biggest cities in Peru and the Amazon jungle sits right on its doorstep. It's a beautiful place to visit, you boys will love it, just stick together and be sensible!"

"That really doesn't make me feel any better!" Karl tugs at his collar to release trapped heat from his polo shirt.

"Shut up, Karl, you'll be fine! Why do you have to worry over every little thing? This should be the greatest experience of your life!" Says Emilio without empathy.

"This is not little, Emilio! This is huge for me! It's a big deal! And besides, I've already had the greatest experience of my life! It was at the Rhode Island Holiday Inn, when I beat Denzil Knight in the under eighteen hot dog eating challenge. That day will live on in my memory forever." Karl looks out of the open window in a reflective daydream, smiling while reminiscing, distracted from his paranoia. After a quiet, thoughtful and unusually sedate journey the cab pulls up at Lima airport. Emilio hands Carlos 25 sole, more than the fare. Looking at the generous offering and

jumping to the conclusion that he has a pair of trust fund teenagers in his cab Carlos has an idea.

“You know what you boys really need when you get to Iquitos is your own personal guide.”

“How much, Carlos?” Inquires Emilio with limited enthusiasm as he glances at Karl and rolls his eyes.

“For you, a very special offer! You pay for my flights and give me three hundred sole per day. And you have a deal, greatest guide in all of Peru.” Carlos points his finger up into the air momentarily before stashing the notes Emilio has handed him with the rest of his money.

Emilio hesitates for a moment, considering the proposition. He thinks about syphoning the money off his dad’s credit card, but dismisses the thought quickly, as he knows he’d have a hard time explaining where all the extra money had been spent, plus he’s only known Carlos for five minutes.

“One hundred sole a day and maybe I’ll think about it.” Emilio figures he could possibly afford to pay Carlos with his own money, which he’d saved for the trip.

“One hundred! I make more than that driving my taxi. It has to be worth my while, there is no room for bargaining.”

“Oh, there is lots of room, Carlos.” Emilio opens the rear passenger door slowly.

“I’m sorry, I just can’t see where.” Frowns Carlos, as he stows his black metal cash box back under his seat.

“Right here in the back of your taxi. We’re leaving.” Says Emilio, as he and Karl both vacate the taxi rapidly.

“Fine, you’ll both be eaten alive then!” Carlos taunts the boys inoffensively.

“Look, we appreciate the offer Carlos, but the plane tickets cost me nearly three-hundred sole and I’m financing this excursion out of my own back pocket.” Emilio pokes his head in through the open front passenger window.

“I understand, and remember, any problems over there, you call me.” Carlos looks intently at Emilio.

“Cool buddy! Adios!” Emilio appreciates the gesture and gets the feeling Carlos genuinely cares.

Carlos drives off and the boys turn to face their images in the enormous glass exterior of Jorge Chávez International Airport. They walk into the main lounge, which is swarming with people from all nations. Karl stops amongst the crowds of passersby to appreciate the impromptu performance of a couple of young buskers, one with an acoustic guitar and the other playing a

pair of bongo drums. Emilio's focus is distracted by an electronic departure board on the far wall.

"So! It looks like we haven't got a flight for an hour, plus my stomach's rumbling. What does that equal, Karl?"

"That you need to take a shit." Karl grins.

"Real classy, Karl. No man, I'm hungry."

The boys walk down to the check in desk and pick up the tickets that Emilio has pre-ordered. Whilst Emilio is checking the tickets over and working out which departure gate they need, Karl heads for a nearby fast food restaurant. A spotty sixteen-year-old girl stands behind the counter. Dressed in a bright yellow uniform, it looks as though she eats more burgers than she serves. Looking at the array of different burgers on the menu Karl makes an arduous decision.

"I'll have the bacon double cheeseburger."

Emilio saunters up to join his friend, scratches his head and agrees with Karl's order.

"Make that two."

The girl grits her braced teeth, while playing with her greasy locks of auburn hair, which should be tied up beneath her bright red cap.

"I'm sorry, we're still only serving breakfast. You'll have to choose from the breakfast menu." She smiles cynically.

"Why does your company do that? I don't actually like anything from your breakfast menu." Emilio reacts with frustration.

"I don't make up the rules, I just work here. So are you going to order anything or not?" The burger girl looks at the queue beginning to mount behind the indecisive pair of time wasters.

"Ok, just give us a couple of your breakfast muffins." Emilio sighs.

They take their morose looking muffins and start eating them on the move.

"Hey, check out the side of this muffin, from a certain angle it looks like Jesus." Points out Karl, practically shoving his muffin into Emilio's face.

"What makes it look like Jesus?" Replies Emilio, squinting at the muffin, trying to see what he is being shown.

"Well, this bit looks a bit like a beard, and this part looks like an eye."

"My Uncle Joe's got a beard Karl, are you sure it's not an image of him? You really need to lay off the caffeine, brother."

Karl childishly sticks his tongue out at Emilio as they make their way toward the departure lounge. As they walk, they pass another giant digital display. This one has a list of destinations and the types of aeroplanes that are traveling there.

“Tans Boeing 737 to Iquitos, that’s the plane we’re catching, right Emilio?”

“Sure is.”

Almost unable to control his curiosity Karl starts inquisitively putting the aeroplane information into the web browser of his phone again. A list of related results is returned, with one standing out a mile. Halfway down the long hall Karl stops suddenly in his tracks, turning to Emilio he reads from his phone loudly.

“Listen to this! Wednesday the 24<sup>th</sup> of August 2005. 41 people were killed when a Peruvian airline on a domestic flight crashed in a jungle region. The Tans Boeing 737 aircraft came down while attempting an emergency landing. Are you hearing this? There’s no freaking way you’re getting me on that plane!”

Emilio stands with his hands placed on his hips tapping his foot like an impatient parent. He looks back at Karl, who is rooted to the spot, head buried, reading the information on his phone.

“Relax, Karl, it was an isolated incident, it’s perfectly safe. Look around you. These people aren’t worried. Just look at that little girl over there laughing and playing; she’s not scared.”

“That’s because she’s not aware of her impending doom!”

Emilio lunges forward and tries to snatch the phone from Karl, but Karl has a firm grip and is reluctant to give up the gadget without a fight.

“Give me the stupid phone, Karl. You’re reading way too much into all this, it’s totally irrational.”

Karl is resisting so much that Emilio loses his footing and falls to the floor, dragging Karl down with him. The boys scramble around, tussling for control. Elbows and knees fly as they try to prise the phone from each other. An elderly couple step past them, disgusted by the boys’ antics as they tumble around, childishly cursing. Emilio pinches Karl’s clutched hand as hard as possible with his sharp nails. Karl gives a piercing, feminine scream as he relinquishes the phone, turning to shield his hand as he examines the freshly inflicted wound. Standing up and dusting himself down Emilio reads further into the page Karl was quoting from.

“Look, it says here it was a matter of unforeseen bad weather! Look how clear it is today, there’s nothing to worry about!”

Emilio tries to drag Karl up from the floor, but Karl resists, pushing Emilio away.

“Come on, Karl, the plane is going to leave in 20 minutes and we need to get in our seats! Do we really have to go through this every time, just because you’re scared of flying? Look, it’s going to be fine, just hurry up.”

“Dude, that was a cheap shot! You drew blood, and anyway, I’m not scared of anything.” Says Karl adamantly.

“Oh yeah! Well then you hide it pretty badly!”

“I flew to Peru just fine! It’s just that this particular flight path and plane has had some bad luck!”

Karl slowly gets up from the shiny beige floor and stands looking down the hall at the departure gate. He begins to shiver; his stomach starts feeling heavy and nauseous. He burps loudly, and Emilio catches a waft of bile as it floats past his nostrils.

“Whoa buddy, is that you? Are you feeling ok?”

“I feel fine, it’s just trapped wind. Wait here, I gotta take a leak!” Karl remembers the toilets the pair walked past a moment ago.

“Ok buddy, you do what you gotta do.”

Karl starts walking toward the toilets, not wanting to give away how worried sick he actually is. He would run if wasn’t being watched by Emilio. He enters the unoccupied toilets and runs for the cubicles. He throws up on the floor just before he makes it to the first door. Crouched over, holding his stomach in relief, Karl stares at the foul smelling lumpy muffin mess on the floor. As he’s looking down, he notices that a blob of the sick has stained his white sneakers, which concerns him more than the act of throwing up. Karl heads over to a row of grey sinks below water-stained mirrors, without even considering cleaning up the mess. Gazing into one of the mirrors he splashes cold water onto his face, and speaks loudly to his reflection in the mirror.

“Come on Karl, get a grip! It’s just like sitting on a bus. So what if it flies like thirty thousand feet from the ground. They have parachutes, right!” His terror counters every reassurance. “Yeah, but what if the parachute doesn’t open, what then?” He splashes his face again with cold water in an attempt to flush the idea from his mind. As he looks back up at the mirror, he sees a strange orange lump in his hair. On further investigation, he realizes that he smeared a trace of the sick through his hair when he was doubled over. He quickly fills the sink with tepid water and keeps his finger firmly pressed on the soap dispenser, which releases a floral-scented liquid soap. Once the sink is full, Karl bends over and submerges the top of his head to wash his greasy vomit-tainted hair. As his head is under water a tall, bespectacled businessman walks in, and slips slightly on the pool of sick. He shakes his boot and walks on toward the urinals, staring strangely at Karl as he passes. Karl comes up from the sink and empties it, before turning to discover the only way to dry his sopping wet hair is by stooping under the electric hand dryer. The businessman shakes himself off in the urinal behind Karl and walks straight out of the toilet uttering as he leaves. “What the hell’s wrong

with your generation?” Karl comes up from beneath the hand dryer with mildly damp hair, and addresses the closing door.

“There’s nothing wrong with our generation, at least we wash our hands after we take a slash! Nasty!”

Karl makes his way back to Emilio. By the time they reach the departure lounge Karl is feeling sick again.

“Emilio, I’m not sure I can do this.”

“Give me a break, Karl.”

Emilio is starting to get fed up with Karl, whom he feels is dramatizing every situation. Two beautiful young women pass in front of the boys, destined for the same flight. Emilio suddenly has an idea that may help him get Karl onto the plane without having to put up with further moaning. Emilio walks up behind the girls and calls out to garner their attention.

“Excuse me, ladies!”

The older of the two girls, a tall and friendly brunette, turns and stops.

“What’s up?”

“Sorry to bother you, but you see my friend Karl here is scared of flying. And I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind setting his mind at ease and confirming that there is, in fact, nothing to worry about.”

The brunette smiles sympathetically at Karl. “Yeah, I understand, it can be a bit nerve wracking at times, especially if you don’t fly much. But we’ve done this trip three times now and it’s absolutely fine. Right, Ashlynn?”

“Oh God yeah, I hate flying, but the more you do it, the easier it gets.” Says Ashlynn, who is shorter and more curvaceous than her friend.

“Sorry about my friend wasting your time, you see he’s using me in a pathetic attempt to stop you girls, so that he can chat you up. I fly all the time, I love it, now if you good ladies will excuse me, I have a plane to catch!” Karl desperately tries to cover his embarrassment by deflecting the situation back onto Emilio. He walks off confidently towards the waiting plane. Emilio is left on his own with the girls for a brief moment.

“Thank you ladies, it did the trick perfectly. I suppose I’d better go after him! Hopefully I’ll catch you guys on the plane.”

The girls giggle, taking an instant shine to Emilio. He catches up with Karl, who’s already boarded, and is sitting wide eyed and bolt upright, trying to pretend he hasn’t any problem with flying.

“Ah, there you are buddy, you know those two girls were so hot!” Says Emilio.

“Yes, they were, and hopefully now they think you’re a complete dick!”

“I don’t know about that, Karl, they were extremely talkative, wanting to know what my name was and asking where I was staying in Iquitos and everything!”

“You can stop the act now, Emilio, no one’s listening!”

The girls walk into the cabin and take their seats, just two rows behind the boys, on the opposite side of the plane. Emilio turns round and waves. Ashlynn winks back at him. Karl turns in his seat, watching astounded as the girl acknowledges Emilio in such a manner.

“How the hell do you do it? That is ridiculous! I was gone like 5 minutes! Please don’t talk to me for the rest of this flight, Emilio.”

Karl sets himself stubbornly in his seat and starts doing some controlled breathing. He is determined not show any outward sign of fear, aware the girls are only two rows behind him. As soon as the plane is up in the air Emilio gets out of his seat. He walks over to the girls and invites himself into the vacant chair beside them. He enjoys their company for the next two hours, completely ignoring Karl, who is unable to muster the confidence to get out of his seat and join them.



## Chapter 7: Iquitos - The jungle city

Sweating profusely in the intensely humid rainforest climate, Emilio and Karl walk with apprehension and fascination through the chaos of Iquitos Airport. Old-fashioned and dilapidated, it's a far cry from the sleek and modern terminal at Lima. The airport is currently undergoing some much-needed development, and the air conditioning is non-existent. A couple of shops serve locally made confectionaries, snacks and drinks. The armed security guards look serious and uptight. Children swarm around the boys, attracted like moths to a light. All the locals are distinctively short, with wonderful caramel coloured skin beneath mops of silky black hair.

"Check this place out! It's like we've just gone back in time, Karl. Is this what you thought Lima airport would be like?" Karl gives Emilio the silent treatment, still in a foul mood. "What's the matter, Karl? Why aren't you talking to me?"

Karl sighs, torn between maintaining his stance and letting Emilio know what's on his mind.

"You just fucking left me stranded back there and went off having a great time with those two bimbos."

"First of all, they're not bimbos. They were really nice, polite, friendly, well-spoken girls. And you could have joined us. It's just you were in such a bad mood, I figured I'd give you some time to cool off. Look, next time we meet some really hot girls I'll make sure I tell them you're the greatest human being that's ever set foot on this planet, ok?"

Karl grunts in acceptance of Emilio's offer as they walk up to a stall where a boy no more than 10 years old is selling miniature ornaments carved out of wood, depicting famous Peruvian sites such as Machu Picchu and the city of Chan Chan. The young boy jumps in front of Karl with a miniature in each hand.

"Machu Picchu, cheap \$5, very cheap" The boy stands wide-eyed in hope of a sale, shoving the ornaments right up into Karl's face, invading his personal space.

"Nice try, kid. Maybe on the way back."

As Karl goes to walk around, the boy blocks him off, pleading with him to buy the items.

"Beautiful Machu Picchu, and Chan Chan. For you \$8 for both, special deal."

The boy's expression goes from friendly to desperate and he pulls at Karl's shirt to stop him from walking past him.

“Look, I’m not interested, kid. Now beat it!” Karl goes to move round the boy again, but he persists and keeps moving back into Karl’s way. Karl pushes the boy lightly, but the boy trips over Emilio’s feet and falls to the floor. Emilio can’t help but laugh at the situation. An airport guard standing by the far wall has seen the whole thing and starts to walk towards them, picking up his pace.

“Karl, check the guard over there! We’d better start running!” Without hesitation they start sprinting through the airport, with the guard in hot pursuit, weaving between the startled crowds, until they break out of the airport and onto the busy main road, which is teeming with motocarros. As one approaches they hurriedly wave it over and jump in the back, before it has come to a stop. Emilio smacks the sides as if to giddy up the motocarro, which whisks them away from the airport and the angry guard, who is left standing, shouting and gesturing after the laughing boys. Whipped up with excitement from their escape the boys jostle each other like a pair of young monkeys, until Emilio calms down enough to realise that the driver has no idea where they want to go. Taking a research journal from his backpack, and opening it to an article about the Iquitos Medical Research Institute, Emilio leans forward and shows the picture to the driver.

“We need to go here, do you know where this is?”

The driver smiles, showing gapped yellow teeth, and nods vigorously.

“Do you think he understood you?” Karl asks nervously as Emilio sits back.

“We’ll soon find out, I guess!”

“It still pisses me off that you couldn’t just be honest with me about this whole trip.”

“Look, Karl, like I’ve said a hundred times before, I’m sorry for not telling you about this little detour. You would never have come out here with me if I told you my plans back home.”

“Well, you lied to me in Lima and I still came out here with you, so go figure.”

“I never lied to you, Karl! I just didn’t tell you the full extent of my plans, that’s all.”

“Keeping information from me is just as bad as lying, in my book.”

“Karl, just shut up. I’m trying to enjoy myself, stop being such a drag.”

“You can be such a bastard at times, Emilio. Seriously.”

They fall silent and start to absorb their environment. The streets of Iquitos are fizzing with people going to and from the local market. Bicycles and motorized passenger carts weave among pedestrians in disorganized confusion. Windowless warehouses, brightly coloured huts, cabins and sheds

jostle for space, every building different to the next. Shacks made from corrugated metal merge with thatched wooden houses and brick buildings with tin roofs. Half an hour later they arrive at the research institute. The building is vast, sprawling across the city's harbour. Pristine white with a dark green roof, which blends in with the vegetation that's climbing up the walls, the building is extremely impressive. As Karl steps out of the motocarro he walks directly into a passing local with a giant catfish draped over his shoulder, causing the man to drop his prize. The man rants ferociously at Karl, while Karl apologises profusely, and Emilio laughs hysterically at his accident-prone compadre. Karl bends down to try and help the man pick the weighty catfish up, but the man shoves Karl away with more unfriendly rants, concerned he's trying to steal his fish. Karl steps slowly away from the scene, leaving the man to hoist his catfish back up onto his shoulders, and hurries to catch up with Emilio. They walk onwards together, talking and laughing, while making their way onto the beautifully kept grounds of the medical research institute. Emilio walks straight in and up to the reception desk. Behind the desk sits a beautiful brunette, who addresses Emilio politely in English.

"How can I help you?"

"I'm looking for a friend of mine called Manesh." Emilio smiles.

Before the young woman can reply, a man with swept back black hair and a pair of large rectangular black glasses walks out from a door behind the desk, wearing a long white coat and holding a clipboard. The brunette informs the man that the boys are asking for him. He raises an eyebrow and addresses them in a strong South Carolina accent.

"Can I help you gentlemen?"

"My name's Emilio Winters. I'm the dude that's been emailing you from the University of Syracuse in New York."

Manesh looks out of the window onto the grounds, prodding his pen against his lips in thought.

"Emilio? Oh yes, you're studying biotechnology. You didn't say anything about coming out here. You should have told me you were coming, I could have organized my time better."

Manesh looks up at the clock on the wall, as if to emphasise how important his time is, and then back to Emilio, who is looking at him expectantly, countering Karl's blank expression of boredom.

"Look, I can give you twenty minutes, and then I have a meeting. How about I show you around, and we can talk."

"Yeah, that would be fascinating." Replies Emilio excitedly.

Manesh does his best to conceal his own excitement at this rare opportunity to share the important research he is conducting.

"So, how exactly does it work here?" Emilio asks with youthful exuberance.

"A company called Vipercom Pharmaceuticals commissions the projects that are conducted here at the research facility. The purpose is to try and develop new vaccines from exotic plants, and there's no better place for that than right on the Amazon's doorstep. The plant species out here are unlimited. Did you know two thousand new plant species are discovered worldwide each year?"

"No, I did not!" Emilio is fascinated. "I was reading about Borneo, where they have discovered plants that could potentially cure diseases like AIDS and malaria. The only problem is that man is destroying vast areas of the rainforest on a daily basis. It's crazy we are closer to curing life threatening diseases than ever before, but greedy capitalists are in danger of stopping us just before the finishing line."

Manesh can see how passionate Emilio is about the subject and is even keener to show him around the facility. He leads the boys into a small utility room packed wall to wall with brown boxes full of medical gloves, aprons, syringes and white jackets and hands each of the boys a white coat and mask.

"Here, put these on. It's standard protocol."

Manesh walks the boys down a stark corridor towards a big set of double doors. Disregarding the sign marked 'No unauthorised personnel' Manesh swipes his pass through the card reader, and the doors unlock. On the other side is another immaculate, brightly lit corridor, smelling heavily of bleach. The words Vipercom Pharmaceuticals are emblazoned across one wall. Beside the words is the company symbol, of a snake eating its own tail. Emilio can't help but point it out.

"What's with the snake?"

"It's an Ouroboros." Manesh corrects.

"It's a whatoboros?" Karl pulls a confused expression.

"An Ouroboros; an ancient symbol, usually depicted by a serpent or a dragon eating its own tail. It represents eternity. I suppose it's the notion of something constantly recreating itself. The company is striving to produce drugs that help people live longer, so I suppose it's fitting from that point of view." Manesh pushes his glasses back up to his eyes with his index finger, as they had slipped uncomfortably to the point of his nose.

The long corridor they are walking down has ten large rooms, five on either side. Each room is sectioned off by floor to ceiling glass walls and

doors. The first room on the right has three giant plants sprawling against the back wall, pushing up against the twenty-foot high ceiling with their thick green stems and giant, round, green and orange funnels.

“What are those things, Manesh?” Enquires Karl, pointing directly at the enormous plants.

“They are a newly discovered species of carnivorous plant. They aren’t usually this big; we have been genetically modifying them to increase the enzyme production. Our initial research indicates that they have some extremely exciting healing properties.”

The conversation quickly goes over Karl’s head, as Manesh and Emilio become embroiled in an intense discussion, using long unfamiliar words that mean nothing to Karl. His mind and his eyes begin to wander, until he spots a high stool next to a long workbench scattered with laboratory equipment.

“Hey, you guys carry on your science project, I’m gonna take a seat, I need to take the weight of my feet for a while.”

Manesh and Emilio barely respond. Manesh guides Emilio through the rest of the rooms, talking him through the breakthroughs they have made with each of the numerous unusual looking plants. The tour is going well until they reach the last room, which is off limits. It has four massive tanks, all covered over by white sheets. Emilio notices Manesh avoids talking about the room, and is instantly fascinated.

“What’s happening in this room, Manesh?”

Manesh stops in his tracks, looking for an answer, before falling short.

“It’s a privately funded project. I’m not involved with it. It’s highly confidential. That’s as much as I know, and I’m going to keep it that way. Let’s move on.”

Emilio is deeply unsatisfied by this answer, and as Manesh starts to walk off he grabs his arm firmly.

“Do you really not have any idea what’s going on in here?”

Manesh looks at his arm and then back at Emilio, who instantly lets go.

“Sorry Manesh, but haven’t you ever wanted to know what they’re doing in there?”

Manesh doesn’t like the physical intrusion or being pressed for answers he doesn’t have.

“Nothing worth losing my job over. Emilio, why have you come all the way out here?”

“Like I said in my emails, the plant I’m looking for will destroy cancer cells ten thousand times more effectively than chemotherapy. With zero toxicity.”

“Even if a plant with those properties does exist, how are you going to find it? There are over 40,000 different plant species out there, and they're the ones we know about.” Manesh is sceptical. Emilio looks at Manesh, unwilling to revealing the missing piece of the puzzle.

“Well, I'm keeping that one to myself.”

“Emilio, even if you do find this miracle plant there are market considerations. For example, a drug that's developed or synthesized from a plant could be so expensive to make that the big pharmaceutical companies won't be interested in funding it for commercial use, because there's no profit margin. And any such discovery could also be detrimental to a big pharmaceutical company because it would reduce the sales of less efficient cancer fighting drugs which turn a hefty profit.”

“That's so fucking corrupt!” Says Emilio emphatically.

“Aren't all big businesses in these primitive times?” Replies Manesh calmly. “Look, Emilio, I'm going to be straight with you. In my opinion, you're out here on a whim, and while I admire your enthusiasm, I very much doubt you'll find anything out there that hasn't already been discovered by Vipercom Pharmaceuticals. And if you're planning to hike across the Amazon you need to be well prepared and know exactly where you're going. It can be extremely dangerous. Did you hear about the Swedish professor that went missing in Iquitos recently?”

“Dr Bjorn Alexanderson. Yeah, I read up on him, he was interested in plants with cancer fighting properties, too.” Emilio is suddenly really animated “He went missing a couple of months ago, just vanished without a trace.”

“I don't want to get you unnecessarily paranoid, but you really should be careful, Emilio.” Manesh stands with his arms folded, looking thoughtfully at Emilio and then counters Emilio's last comment throwing a suggestion out into the void.

“Or maybe you became so rapt up in his story after reading up on his research that you thought you would try and complete his work and look for whatever he had discovered.”

Emilio freezes as Manesh hits the nail on the head. Without responding, he looks at his watch while calling out to Karl.

“Wow! Is that the time! Hey, Karl! We have to get going. Nice to meet you, Manesh. Thanks for showing me around, but we've got a bus to catch.” Manesh shrugs his shoulders and walks back down the corridor to where Karl is messing around with one of the microscopes, looking at a dead fly he has found.

“Come on, Karl, it's time for us to leave.” Says Emilio.

“Just be careful.” Manesh calls loudly, as the two boys remove their white coats and head back along the corridor. They pass a few middle-aged scientists, who clock into the laboratories without batting an eyelid at the unfamiliar faces passing them in the opposite direction.

## Chapter 8: Bus ride

The two boys stand outside the institute facing one another, their clothes clinging to their skin, saturated with sweat brought on by the humidity.

“Ok, so can we go home now? I need to take a shower.”

“What’s wrong with you, dude? We’ve only just got here! Come on, look over to the other side of the road and tell me what you see.”

“I see a small child taking a dump!”

“No, not the kid, over to the right.”

“A bus stop.”

“Exactly, Karl, a bus stop! That bus is going to take us right to where we need to go, then it’s just a quick walk into the forest, I’ll collect the plants we need and then we go back to the Casino in Lima. Ok?”

“Ok, I guess.” Says Karl, reluctantly dragging his feet.

The boys make their way over the road and walk into the old bus shelter to join the mixed bunch of locals and tourists already waiting there. Emilio takes the map from his backpack and turns it around several times, trying to get his bearings.

“So Emilio, how long is this bus ride going to take?”

Emilio hesitates as he tries to get a rough idea, based on what he can fathom from the map. Although he’s studied the map dozens of times, it begins to dawn on him that he may have miscalculated the distance.

“It’s looking like it could take around 4 hours.”

“Great! That’s just great Emilio, that’s four times longer than that damned flight I just shit myself through.” Karl starts pacing around in front of Emilio, ranting.

“Sorry man, I thought it was closer.” Says Emilio honestly.

“This place is going to end up costing us an entire day to get to. That’s if we ever fuckin get there, and then we’ve got to live in the jungle like bloody Tarzan and Jane. And I’m not Jane by the way, before you say it.” Karl kicks a cluster of stones around the shelter under the judgmental gaze of the tourists.

“It’s short term, Karl. Remember what we’re here for. Keep thinking of the bigger picture. Never lose sight of your goals.”

“This was never one of my goals! My goal in life is to take over my stepdad’s doughnut business and hire people to run it for me, while I sit back and concentrate on quality control taste testing. I’m heading back tomorrow, no matter where we are, you hear me, Emilio? I mean it!” Karl takes a defiant stance.



“Relax, we're both heading back tomorrow, ok. Done and dusted!”

Out of nowhere a clapped out dishevelled yellow bus coughs its way to a spluttering standstill. The glass in most of the windows is missing, as is the door.

“This is us, Karl. It should take us most of the way.”

“I'll be surprised if that thing gets to the end of this road.”

Emilio grabs Karl and jumps the queue, before his friend has a chance to back out, pushing him onto the decrepit bus, before settling into the prized seats in the left hand rear corner, so they can view each person that enters. A group of Canadian tourists take the middle rows, and two local men sit at the front behind the driver. The bus sits motionless for fifteen minutes, before starting up and heading off on schedule. Emilio and Karl gaze through the empty window frame at the strange city where motorcycles dominate. The city is very basic, chaotic and loud. Motorcycle repair shops are seen in abundance until drab threadbare shacks take their place. The dwellings, packed together at first, become ever more sporadic until they are completely replaced by vibrant tropical scenery. Karl is a wreck of emotions, with an expression like he's being transported to his own funeral. At the same time, his mind is awash with wonder and awe at the array of exotic wildlife, strange trees and plants that he never could have imagined existed. Adrenaline swirls around Emilio's body. He feels as if he is travelling on the path he was always destined for. The imagery he is experiencing is conjuring a strong sense of *deja vu*. Forty-five minutes of sight seeing later and Karl finally starts to relax. As the scenery becomes familiar, his attention wanders, and he begins toying with his bus ticket, folding and unfolding the paper between his fingers, until he unintentionally flicks it at one of the tourists a couple of rows in front. The man takes the ticket, which has nestled uncomfortably in his loose collar and turns around to glare at the boys, who are struggling to contain juvenile laughter. With a scathing look, he remarks in a camp manner.

“Cute, boys! Very cute.”

Mischievous smiles are replaced by blank bewilderment, as they are unsure how the comment should be taken. As the man turns back to his previous conversation Emilio mutters under his breath.

“Fuckin weirdo.”

Two hours pass, and the babble of voices has trickled into a weary silence. Karl lazily watches the other passengers, wondering where they are heading and how they might lead their daily lives. His daydream is interrupted when one of the local men turns around briefly, before leaning in to whisper something to his companion. The two men then nod and return to

their tranquil state. Five minutes pass. The bobbing of the bus is causing the majority of the passengers to drift in and out of sleep. Karl watches as one of the men stands up. He has a bowl haircut and a faint moustache. He turns to face the passengers, with his arms folded against his thin murky green coat, as the bus ventures on. The docile passengers, including Emilio, perk up and stare directly back at the man, wondering what he is doing. He remains standing, resolute, despite the bumpy ride. The man is staring straight out through the back window, avoiding all eye contact with the passengers. Emilio and Karl look at each other with concern. As the man stands, trance-like, he slowly reaches inside his coat and pulls out a short, stubby, black, automatic Uzi from his brown leather belt.

“Holy shit, he’s got a machine gun!” Karl presses his feet into the chair in front, bracing himself. The Canadian women shriek and gasp in horror. The man aims the weapon at each and every passenger in turn. His accomplice makes his way slowly down the bus and puts an identical weapon to the driver’s head, instructing him to keep driving. With terrible broken English the man with the green jacket gives orders.

“Now pass you bags down me. Slow! No fun business!” Emilio nudges Karl who’s stopped breathing, and signals to the wide windowless frame behind them. Emilio knows that if he loses his bag and the map, then their chances of survival in the Amazon would be ruined.

“Karl, after three were going to jump out of this window.” Emilio whispers.

Karl shakes his head profusely, shuddering at the thought, but gets himself ready regardless. Terrified of jumping, he is even more afraid of being left behind, knowing Emilio will leap without a second thought. The gunslinger notices movement at the back and takes aim at the boys.

“Hey, no fun business, I say!”

“Three!” Shouts Emilio, as he launches himself horizontally out of the window. Karl scrambles awkwardly after his friend as the gunman fires, perforating Karl’s backpack, narrowly missing his torso and ripping a chunk out of the rear window frame. Tumbling six feet to the ground in a heap of intertwined limbs, Emilio takes the initial impact, hitting the mud with his right shoulder. Karl falls on Emilio’s back, winding and pinning him to the muddy road. Bruised and in immense pain they scramble sideways into the dense undergrowth. The gunman turns to his accomplice and talks rapidly in Spanish.

“Forget them, we’re miles from anywhere.”

The bus drives on with the petrified tourists left at the mercy of the twisted gunmen.

Hobbling as quickly as they possibly can, propelled by adrenaline and fear, Emilio and Karl rush through masses of damp leaves and sharp branches, which tear and tug at their damp clothes. They jog until they reach a fallen tree surrounded by an expanse of dead leaves, where they collapse, exhausted and quaking. Macaws and toucans squawk through the lush canopy overhead. After a few minutes Emilio gathers his composure and sits up, looking over at Karl, who is lying face down in the mud. Karl rolls slowly onto his back, his face encrusted with leaves and dirt.

“We gotta keep moving, Emilio, they could be after us.” Karl breathes rapidly, with his eyes fixed on the direction from which they came. Emilio controls his own breathing and starts to think rationally. His chest is in immense pain from the weight of Karl falling on him, but he doesn’t think he has broken anything.

“The bus kept on driving, Karl, but yeah, we should keep moving, just in case.”

“We nearly fuckin died back there, Emilio. That’s it! I’ve had it! I draw the line at death. I’m going home.” Karl blurts angrily.

“What do you mean you’re going home? We’re so close, it would be crazy to turn back now.”

“Crazy to turn back! What are you talking about, Emilio? We just jumped out of a moving bus while being shot at by some lunatic. This isn’t normal.” Karl sits up and puts his head in his hands.

“Those guys were never going to kill us, Karl. They were just some small time crooks stealing people’s bags.” Emilio is keen to play down the incident, fearing it could put an end to his mission before it has come to fruition.

“Small time crooks! Are you fucked in the head! They just held an entire bus to ransom! With Uzis! They’re probably after us now.”

“Look chill out, shit happens. It happens in New York all the time, what’s the difference?”

“The difference is, until today, it hadn’t happened to us!”

“Well, welcome to the hijack club, Karl. At least you’ve got a cool story to tell all the good people back home, instead of the boring ass things you normally talk about.”

Karl gets to his feet and storms off, having an argument with every branch that swings into his face, before stopping dead in his tracks. Walking slowly backwards, he eventually steps into Emilio’s oncoming path.

“What’s up?” Emilio is concerned by his friend’s strange behavior.

“We’re going back to the main road right now, Emilio, I don’t care if we get shot.” Karl is rooted to the spot, with his arm and index finger stretched

out, pointing straight towards a hollowed out tree several feet in front of him. Emilio looks forward, trying to focus on what Karl is pointing at. He notices a subtle movement. Edging closer he makes out the contours of a snake, with a broad, flattened dark brown head and a pale yellow underside. The venomous pit viper is erect and glaring, watching the cowering boys attentively.

“Come on, Karl, let’s just walk around it slowly, no sudden movements.”

“You’re crazy, that snake’s looking straight at me, and it looks pissed off.”

“Follow me, Karl.”

Moving cautiously, they stick close to a thick mass of vines just a metre away from the hollowed out tree, until they become level with the snake. In a blind panic, Karl jolts forward, trying to get past as swiftly as possible. The snake reacts, flaring out towards Emilio, missing him by millimetres before sliding away into the shadows.

“Which part of no sudden movements did you not understand?” Emilio scowls.

“Yeah, I freaked out. We’ve been in this rainforest less than half an hour and already I’ve been nearly killed by a giant snake. Cut me some slack here, Emilio.” Karl quivers.

“It wasn’t even that big, Karl. It was just a grass snake. I’m sure it was harmless.” Emilio lies, fully aware of how poisonous the reptile actually is. They walk on cautiously, paying more attention to every detail with each step they take. The enclosed rainforest atmosphere is sweltering, even more humid than the open city.

After half an hour rain begins to pour heavily, spraying them from every angle, as it bounces off the branches, leaves and vines around them.

“Great! It’s pissing it down! Plus, I stink. And to be honest, Emilio, the jungle is scaring the crap out of me.”

“Stop being such a pussy! Look, I’m close on this one, I can feel it, and do you know what they’re gonna say, Karl?”

“Spare me, Emilio.”

“They’re gonna say Emilio Winters, there’s a man who can really achieve things.”

“I really don’t think we’re going to find anything out here, Emilio. Let’s just turn back.”

“Shut up, Karl. You really need to start being more positive with your life instead of wasting your time, lazing around all day watching the Red Hot channel.”

“Hey, I’ve learned a lot from that channel.”

“Like what?”

“Ask Joanne Tully.”

“You couldn’t score with J.T even if some genie appeared, blessed you with two dicks and sculpted your face into that of Johnny Depp. You’d still bore the shit out of her.”

Karl’s eyes flash at Emilio.

“That’s not true, there was this time I ran away from home, hiked to Las Vegas and spent the night with Jessica Channing in the penthouse suite at the Golden Nugget. You’ve heard this story before?”

“So many times, Karl, I'm starting to think it happened to me." Emilio ducks and dodges between branches, which lash back into Karl's face as he tries to keep up with his fitter companion. "Hey, I can see a way out.”

Emilio signals towards an opening in the forest. As they get closer they hear a muted rumble, which becomes a roar as they step out of the dense jungle and onto a muddy cliff edge. The first thing they see is an old, worn out bridge, hanging over a vast gorge. The bridge sags and sways in the pelting rain. What’s left of the wooden slats are slippery, and in danger of giving way with the slightest pressure. From their elevated position the boys can see for miles across the thick green blanket of the forest below. The sun is setting in the distance, projecting a tranquil orange glow that bends with the rounded contour of the horizon, exposing the scale of the jungle wilderness.

“Have you ever seen anything like it?” Emilio is besotted with the stunning view. Karl’s attention is completely absorbed by the worrying thought of crossing the dilapidated bridge. He wipes the torrential rainwater from his brow. “No, I haven’t, and I’m not crossing it, it looks like it can barely support itself, let alone me.”

Emilio turns his attention to the bridge.

“It’s fine, it’s stronger than it looks. It will take us right across, no problem.”

Emilio walks out confidently over the first eight desperately thin, moss-covered slats. He slips slightly as he turns back to face a bewildered looking Karl. Confident with his own body weight, and in an attempt to quash Karl’s unease he starts bouncing up and down on the spot.

“See, there’s nothing to worry about.”

The ancient bridge creaks pathetically and gives way, sending him hurtling down into the churning depths.

“Emilio!” Karl shouts frantically at the top of his voice, as he helplessly looks on, petrified for his friend. Emilio hits the surface and Karl hurries in the same direction along the gorge’s edge, terrified that he’s lost his friend

forever. Emilio's body is dragged under by a strong current. He opens his eyes, staring at the blurry fast moving surface, convinced his life is about to end, as he can't move from being pinned by the immense water pressure. A boulder smacks into his side, leaving his legs pointing downstream. Unable to breath, he panics. The relentless river drops steeply and throws Emilio's body like a rag, slamming him into the muddy banks on the opposite side from where he fell in. Gasping for air he sets about dragging himself clear of the river. Shaken and bruised, but otherwise uninjured, he gets to his feet and looks back up at the top of the gorge. He tries to spot Karl, but the water has carried him too far downstream. He decides to find a spot that could hopefully be seen from Karl's perspective. After a few minutes, he finds a small clearing next to a calm stretch of river and sets up camp, taking a small blue tent from his sopping wet backpack, which springs out to form a paltry looking shelter. Looking around for something dry to set light to, he resigns himself to the fact that everything around him is as soaked as he is. He rummages through his wet clothes and pulls out his cell phone, trying in vain to turn it on. Vulnerable and isolated, worried sick about Karl's welfare, Emilio starts to feel disillusioned. Maybe Karl was right; maybe they should have turned back. Trying to remain positive, he forages around for anything dry that he could possibly use to build a fire. Eventually, he finds a piece of dry bark, which has fallen and got caught up in the lower branches of a nearby tree, protecting it from the downpour and holding it away from the damp ground. He rips some of the large leaves from the tree to make a dry base for him to stack the bark on, making sure to leave gaps for oxygen to circulate. He takes a lighter and eventually manages to create a smouldering mound of tinder. Blowing lightly, he coaxes the smoking bark into life, until he is crouching proudly in front of a small fire. Standing back, he feels temporarily elated. Putting his hand in his pocket he takes his phone and throws it in the newly formed blaze. As the phone starts to melt it turns on. Seeing it illuminate he quickly puts his hand in the fire to try and salvage it, retracting it instantly, shaking and blowing on the burn to ease the pain as he kneels down to dry himself. As the evening dusk starts to settle in something moves in the shadows on the opposite side of the river, but it is too dark to make out what it is. Half paranoid and half hopeful, he jumps to his feet and scurries down to the bank of the river to investigate.

## Chapter 9: Savage pond

“Hey Karl! Is that you?” Emilio hollers, confident the barrel shaped figure is his erstwhile companion. The figure walks up to the side of the shimmering brown river and shouts across.

“Emilio! I’ve found you, thank God!” Tears of relief roll down Karl’s face.

He can just make out Emilio, who is waving in front of a small flickering campfire. The trees behind him are blacked out as the light starts to fade.

“Yeah man! You gotta cross, we’re gonna need to camp here tonight. I’ve made a fire and got the tent set up and everything.” Emilio yells through the concave arches of his palms.

“How am I gonna cross? It’s like the goddamn Atlantic Ocean out there and I only ever did my twenty-five meter swimming badge!” Karl sizes up the enormity of the task at hand.

“Just wade out as far as you can and then swim the rest of the way.”

“I’m not swimming in this river! There are probably piranhas and snakes and shit in there.”

“What?” Emilio struggles to make out what Karl is saying.

“I said the goddam creature from the black lagoon’s probably lurking around here somewhere under this river of shit.”

Karl stares at the dark water in horror, the clicking sound of a thousand hidden crickets growing oppressively loud as his imagination conjures endless horrific scenarios of what is loitering beneath the river’s surface.

“No, you’ll be fine!” Emilio reassures. Karl is not convinced. The river seems so wide that the task is overwhelming him. He eventually realizes that the more time he stands thinking about it the less likely he is to overcome his fear, and so without further thought he edges closer to the side of the bank and dips his foot in the river, which is warmer than he had expected.

“Please God, no Piranhas.” Karl closes his eyes, clenching his hands together in prayer. Slowly he begins to wade out, shivering and whimpering with each unbalanced step. His clothes clench his body and grow heavy as he starts to become submerged. A loose reed slides past his arm as he gets shoulder deep, causing him to jump out of his skin, terrified.

“Oh my God, what the hell is that?” Karl whips his arm out of the water before realising what the harmless object is, although it does little to restore his calm.

“You ok out there?” Shouts Emilio, seeing the commotion.

“Oh yeah! I’m having a fucking ball out here! You should try it sometime!” Karl wisecracks, trying to concentrate on Emilio’s figure, as he steadily becomes immersed up to his neck. Karl assumes a tiptoed position until his feet start to sink into the mud, causing him to push himself out into the unknown depths and start swimming, trying to keep his chin above the water. The underlying current begins to drag him to the right, making it hard for him to keep his head afloat. Feeling the additional pressure he kicks harder.

“Keep going, Karl, your doing great. You're already a quarter of the way across!”

As Emilio is walking along the bank following Karl’s trajectory he notices a disruption in the water fifty meters further to the right from where Karl is swimming. Assuming it is fish feeding at the surface he thinks nothing more of it. As Karl swims across the dark surface he leaves a strong white fizzing wake behind him. Emilio notices a disturbance in the water once again, only this time he can make out the tail of a large fish. A black fin then emerges, slicing gracefully through the water's surface. The fish seems to be attracted by Karl’s frantic splashing as he struggles his way through the murky water. Emilio squints, trying to make out exactly what the fish is, because the closer it draws towards Karl the bigger it seems to become. Emilio then realizes something that he had not considered before. He realizes that the dorsal fin headed toward Karl belongs to a shark. And the only kind of shark that could possibly survive in fresh waters is the Bull Shark, notorious for its hostile disposition. Emilio recalls a documentary about Bull Sharks getting trapped in river systems, miles upstream from the open ocean.

“Hey Karl, you’d better start swimming faster buddy, you’ve got company!” Bellows Emilio, watching Karl flapping in the middle of the river. “Quicker, Karl, I think there's a flipping Bull Shark in the water!” Karl is oblivious, his frantic splashing literally drowning out Emilio’s words. The muscular fish lingers nearby, before making a few agitated lunges, homing in on Karl’s kicking legs. Karl, unaware, kicks the shark on the nose, deterring it for a moment. The eight-foot long shark circles back around. Karl sees the shark's dorsal fin as it circles him. His limbs go numb and his mind explodes with anxiety as he frantically looks over his shoulder to try and spot the shark’s whereabouts. The shark darts at him, thrashing through the water and brushing up against him. Karl clings to the shark as it passes and is dragged for a few seconds through the water at speed, screaming in terror as the shark jerks its gaping mouth about, trying to get a grip on the struggling passenger.



Karl is just forty feet from Emilio's side of the river. Desperately searching for a sharp object that he may be able to harpoon the shark with, Emilio grabs at a fallen tree branch and rushes out into the water towards Karl, who dips below the surface. Fear and fatigue make way for survival and as the shark comes in close, Karl turns and punches. The punch lands on the shark's sensitive snout, disorientating it briefly. The shark swims out wide and circles around again. Seeing Karl within ten feet of the riverbank Emilio sets himself. The shark homes in on Karl's arm. Emilio edges closer, submerging himself up to his waist. He waits for the shark to raise his snout and then thrusts the pointed stick into the shark's face, narrowly missing Karl's arm and perforating the shark's lower jaw. The bulky fish thrashes violently, trying to dislodge the branch. Emilio grabs Karl, pulling him up the muddy bank, slipping several times as he struggles to gain a foothold. Lying on their backs, their chests convulsing, Emilio and Karl look up at the dark sky. Emilio levers himself up onto his side with his elbow and sees the branch that's wedged in the shark's jaw moving across the water's surface wildly.

"Like seriously, when does that ever happen, Emilio? A shark! In the goddam river! That's just my luck. The one time I have to cross a fuckin river and there's a prehistoric son-of-a-bitch in there. And there I was worrying about snakes." Karl rasps, struggling to catch his breath and coughing up gritty river water.

"It was a Bull Shark, it must have been. No other shark could survive in these waters."

They get their breath back, then make their way silently over to the fire, which is besieged with pests hovering around its radius, attracted to the light. Emilio strips down to his underwear and hangs his clothes on a stick that he has dug into the ground. He looks at Karl with a rare feeling of humility.

"I'm sorry, Karl" He speaks quietly.

"I'm ok, don't worry about it!" Karl throws a stone into the fire.

"I'm sorry for dragging you out here! For putting you on that shark's menu." Emilio is deeply remorseful as the scale of the situation is brought home to him.

"You saved my life, man." Karl replies.

"I nearly got you killed!"

"You know what, Emilio, I think somewhere out there, a miracle happened. I felt like God was guiding me somehow."

Emilio smiles fondly at his friend.

"Look Emilio, let's just find that plant and get the hell out of here."

“Yeah, I hear that, man!”

“Emilio! Do you believe in God? I really mean it, I think he saved my backside out there!”

“Woah, that’s a heavy subject for you, Karl. I never heard you talk about religion before.” Emilio is surprised.

“I know! It's just when you come close, it makes you think. So, do you believe?”

“I’m a man of science, Karl. I need evidence, something I can measure and see with my own eyes. But having said that, I’m open to the idea that there could be something else, a higher power perhaps. Not a man with a long white beard, just a power or a presence we could never comprehend. If people do choose to follow a religion and take something positive from it then that’s great.”

“So do you believe in God or not?”

“Not really, Karl, but that’s just my opinion.”

“So if you don’t believe in God, what do you think happens to you when you die?”

“Well, this is why I love science Karl. It gives me great comfort when thinking about death. You see, according to science, everything is eternal, nothing ever ends.”

“How do you work that one out?” Karl is sceptical.

“Well, everything in the universe is made out of a kind of energy. You, me, a grain of salt, this grass we’re sitting on, everything, right! Now energy cannot be created or destroyed, it just changes form. So the very fabric of what we are all essentially made out of simply goes on forever, including our spirit and consciousness! So what do you think of that?”

Karl looks out across the dark river, deep in thought, before replying.

“I think that as long as I don’t piss my mom and stepdad off too much, then I’ll go to heaven.”

Emilio laughs. For once he doesn’t care if Karl isn’t seeing things from his point of view, he’s just relieved he got out of the river in one piece and that he is by his side.

“So, I guess we better try and get some rest.” Emilio looks over at the small blue tent.

“I don’t think I’m going to be able to get any sleep tonight, Emilio. My mind is still in that river. I can’t stop thinking about that shark, man. I have to be honest, it really shook me up.”

“Yeah, I hear you, Karl. We should at least get in the tent and zip it up, to protect us from getting bitten by anything.”

“Man, couldn’t you have brought a bigger tent?”

“This was the smallest most portable one I could find that was snake proof.”

“Snake proof?”

“Yeah, I ordered it from an Australian website. It’s snake and scorpion proof.”

“Hey, I forgot to ask, are you ok, man? I was so scared when you fell from that bridge. That was one hell of a drop. I was so scared I’d never see you again.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Luckily I didn’t land on any rocks. I knew you’d find me if you followed the river downstream, although as it was getting dark I started to have my doubts.”

Something large slithers across the mud and drops into the river. The boys fall silent. A sound from the trees behind them, primitive and visceral, fills the space left by their voices.

“The rainforest gives me the creeps, Emilio. Did you say this tent was snake proof?” Pangs of anxiety stab at Karl.

“Yeah, snake and scorpion.”

“Ok. I think you’re right, we should get in the tent.”

The boys’ climb into the tent in their soggy underwear and sit awkwardly, trying their best to distance themselves from one another as they sit upright, leaning back on the tent’s dark canvas. By the early hours they doze off, bolt upright and exhausted.

## Chapter 10: Contact

As dawn approaches, Emilio and Karl shuffle into the new day in silence, feeling more tired than when they settled down the previous night. The scene outside the tent looks completely different in broad daylight. Trees appear taller, and much of the river is shaded from the sun on one side. An early morning mist hangs low over the water, giving it a foul, swampy appearance. The campfire has nearly run its course, and their hanging clothes are partially dry.

“I’ve been thinking, Emilio, maybe we should turn back.” Karl sounds more hopeful than expectant.

“Seriously, Karl, we’re virtually there! Let’s just walk another hour, find the plant and get back to the airport.” Emilio speaks confidently, masking the fact that he isn’t entirely sure where they are. Karl nods reluctantly and they slowly dress and pack their tent before continuing their journey, battling the unforgiving jungle in quiet desperation, eager to get to their destination and avoid another night of sleeping rough in these overwhelming surroundings. The rainforest ticks and crawls with life. A spider monkey swings through the upper canopy, seeming to trail the unusual explorers. Stepping cautiously through dark sludge, weaving past unruly branches, prickly stems and strange, razor-sharp leaves which scratch at their skin from every direction, Karl fights back the urge to run, his fear of losing Emilio again even greater than his fear of hidden predators. Emilio is thriving in the foreign habitat. The sight of immense, vibrant, tropical plants is more staggering than he had imagined from the documentaries he had immersed himself in prior to the trip.

“I keep getting bitten, man!” Karl swats his neck and inspects his sore arms.

“It’s the mozzies. Don’t worry about it, you’ve had your malaria injections.”

“Yeah, I knew this trip was a bad idea as soon as I sat in the doctors waiting for those damned jabs.”

“I’ve never seen anyone cry so much over a couple of pin pricks.”

“It’s malaria man, it’s kind of a big deal!”

With cuts, bruises and torn clothes, they reach a strange arc of trees, which stick out a mile from the randomness of the dense tangled jungle surroundings, looking almost manmade. Further ahead, the undergrowth gives way to an unusual clearing. In the distance they can see a thatched hut with a fire burning in front of it.

“Whoa, hold up! You see this, Emilio? I think we should go back the opposite way.”

“Wait a second.” Emilio grips Karl’s torn shirt and pulls him in amongst the twisted branches, looking on inquisitively. A man appears from the hut, his face painted a ghostly white, wearing only a brown cloth covering his loins.

“We’ve walked straight in to a community, Karl.” Emilio whispers in astonishment.

“I seriously think we should walk the other way, they might try and eat us or something.”

“Shut up, Karl, we pose no threat to them. Besides, they may be glad to have visitors and offer us food or something.”

Karl looks on from behind, with his chin resting on Emilio’s shoulder. A long, sharp spear is slowly put up to the side of his face. Karl notices the spear in the corner of his eye and freezes in fear. His right eye follows the spear round until it is presented in front of his face, demanding submission.

”Emilio, we are definitely going to be on the menu, brother!”

Emilio turns, frustrated with Karl, before realizing their predicament.

“Oh man, this is crazy!”

Three short tribesmen with jagged edged spears usher the boys forward into the clearing. Approaching a line of thatched huts the tribesmen call out in a strange dialect. Slowly, people start to emerge from the huts and the surrounding trees, inquisitively and tentatively. As the villagers draw closer, Emilio and Karl edge together, until they are standing back to back. Directly in front of them is an extremely tall old man who towers over the boys, looking down on them with an intimidating air of righteousness. His skin is weathered, dark brown and leathery. His frame is muscular and toned beneath minimal clothing. Emilio estimates he must be close to eighty years old.

An uneasy silence descends. Emilio feels the need to explain their intrusion.

“Hey boss, we come in peace.”

“Yeah, we walked in here by accident.” Karl adds desperately.

The gathering remains silent. The old man then bellows out a name at the top of his voice.

“Valencia!”

A tall woman with jet black hair steps out from the largest of the huts grandly holding a long tribal staff, topped with a gaunt monkey’s head adorned with long black and white feathers. Valencia appears westernized, with sandals, three quarter length trousers and a halter neck top, exposing

tribal tattoos which run from the base of her spine, up her back and over her shoulders. The scantily clad men, women and children surrounding the boys part like the red sea to form a human passageway for Valencia to get to the front of the circled mass of onlookers. Emilio and Karl are pushed forward and presented to her in silence. Close up, they are struck by how different she looks to the rest of the tribe. She is extremely pretty, and wisdom beyond her years sits behind piercingly beautiful blue eyes.

“We want to know what you are doing here and how you found us.” Says Valencia confidently, with surprisingly good English spoken in a strong Spanish accent.

“Total accident! Right, Karl?”

“Totally!” Karl nods his head frantically.

“We’re lost!” Emilio proclaims, to Karl’s disgust.

“For fuck’s sake Emilio, I thought you knew where we were going.”

“I did, and then I didn’t. Anyway, shut up. Leave the talking to me.”

Emilio clears his throat and then continues to fill Valencia in. “Well, I’m a science student, and me and my pal Karl here are trying to find a species of plant that I believe grows in this area. You see, the bus we were travelling on got hijacked and we had to find our way through the jungle on foot, as the main road would have been too dangerous. We were just following our map and it brought us up this way.”

Valencia considers what has been said and then raises her staff into the air chanting at her people. Instantly the people of the village raise both their hands above them and start chanting the same words back loudly.

“What the hell is happening?” Says Emilio.

“You have been declared lost, and when someone is declared lost then we try and assist them, but first we must get rid of any evil spirits that may have followed you in here. There must be a cleansing ceremony.”

“Well, I can assure all the good people gathered here that no ghost followed us into the rainforest.” Karl is worried by what he’s hearing. “And we appreciate the whole cleansing thing, it’s very kind and everything, but we both took a bit of an unexpected bath in the river yesterday, and I can assure you that got us as clean as we need to be right now, so if it’s all the same to you, we’ll just get on our way.”

“You won’t be going anywhere until the evil spirits have been banished from you and our community.” Says Valencia, taking a more serious tone. Emilio is fascinated by the idea of a tribal ceremony and is keen to comply.

“Karl, chill out, they want to help us. This will be cool! Besides, when will we ever get to be part of or witness anything like this again?”

The boys are hoisted aloft by the villagers, who chant in a repetitive, hypnotic rhythm as they carry them into one of the many thatched huts to have their bodies washed in preparation for the spiritual cleansing ceremony. The boys are placed on two separate wooden beds draped with red cloth. They are then stripped and given woven gowns. Karl clings to his pants as three old native women try to prise them from him. Emilio is fascinated while Karl remains desperately uncomfortable as his chubby flesh is exposed to a host of strangers.

“This is amazing, Karl! What an honour! Look, they’re taking our clothes to be washed as well.”

“This is the end, their gonna boil our bones!” Karl wails, losing hope.

“Relax, Valencia seems cool.”

“Are you kidding? She’s a witch! It just doesn’t make any sense, Emilio, she speaks English and she looks normal compared to the other people, almost like she could have walked in here with us.”

“That’s a good point, Karl. We need to talk to her.”

Emilio tries to communicate with a woman who’s putting handmade sandals on his feet. She wears a red head robe and has a glistening gold nose ring.

“Excuse me, hello. Can we speak to Valencia, please?”

The woman smiles and turns her attention back to his feet. Another woman, who’s trying to peel Karl’s damp socks off, gets the idea and whispers to one of the other women, who giggles and hurries off. After what seems like forever, Valencia saunters in.

“Wow, don’t you guys look groovy!” She remarks, clearly getting a kick out of poking fun at the odd couple, who are way out of their comfort zone.

“I don’t mean to be rude or anything, Valencia, but you kinda of stick out like a sore thumb round here, you know? What’s your deal? These people are hanging off your every word, and how come you speak English so well?”

“You really want me to bore you guys with my story?” Valencia replies humbly.

“It’s fine, Karl bores the crap out me all the time, I’m used to it.” Emilio receives a punch on the arm for his remark from Karl who mimes a fake laugh and then shakes his head. Valencia looks at the boys. She is normally reluctant to talk about herself, but she hasn’t spoken to anyone about her upbringing for so long she reasons that it wouldn’t do any harm. She sits down beside the boys and starts to reflect on her past.

“My mother died giving birth to me out here. I lived in this rainforest for the first ten years of my life, happily at first. But after a while I started to

feel different, I wondered if this was all there was to life. I was bored. It made me feel rebellious. Nobody seemed to understand me. I started to feel alone, even though I was part of a large, loving family. I would always hear stories about the city of Iquitos, and I would often ask if I could visit there, but I was always told I was too young. One day I woke up and decided to leave, so I ran away to Iquitos. After a couple of days of walking around I found a refuge for street kids. I told the lady that ran the refuge that I was homeless and didn't have a family. She took me under her wing and sent me to a local school in Iquitos, where I studied English and Mathematics. At the refuge there was an old black and white TV set. I was mesmerized by it. It was a window to the rest of the world, a world of individuals, of different races, of luxuries. I had an ambition go to America and maybe one day to Europe. I was so carried away with the new life I'd created for myself that I didn't spare a thought for my family back home. When I did return to the tribe, I found that my father had died. He had searched for me every day from when I ran away until his death. I've never forgiven myself for not returning sooner. My relatives rallied around me, they never blamed me or turned their backs on me for one minute, although that is what I had done to them. I returned to Iquitos, and eventually got a job as an English teacher, which I still am. I come back here on a regular basis and visited my relatives to let them know I'm ok and to talk of my dreams, which to this day they find hard to understand. I always bring gifts and try to do something positive for everyone and in turn they treat me like royalty and put me on a pedestal, which they really shouldn't.

"Wow, you've got a great story there, you should write a book about it one day!" Karl is engrossed.

"Anyway, enough of me, so what's so special about this plant your looking for?" Valencia asks.

"Tell her, Emilio!" Karl slaps Emilio on the back to encourage him.

"Well, my research leads me to believe there is an area of the rainforest that could harbour plants with cancer fighting properties. So we're out here trying to find them."

Valencia looks at them curiously.

"Well, good luck with that. Our people have been here for thousands of years and we have discovered many plants with healing properties. All I'm going to say to you boys is that, if you haven't realized it already, the jungle can be very dangerous, so be extremely careful. If you don't know what you're doing, you can easily get caught out."

Karl looks at Emilio in a rage, as his worst fears are highlighted.



“We’ll bear that in mind.” Emilio smiles, and tries not to make eye contact with Karl.

Valencia returns his smile, and continues. “Now, we must continue with the cleansing ceremony. You will be presented with a drink called Ayahuasca. Our people say they received the recipe directly from the plant spirits. They believe it has healing powers and can ward off evil spirits!”

“Do you really believe in that stuff?” Emilio tries his best not to sound sarcastic.

“I think it’s good to keep ancient traditions going. Do I believe in it? I like to keep an open mind.”

Emilio is intrigued by this unusual girl, and Karl is besotted. An indigenous woman wearing next to nothing but a beaming smile walks into the hut holding an old emerald perfume bottle and pumps a strange sweet smelling cologne onto the boys’ heads causing Karl to sneeze repeatedly. Karl doesn’t know where to look as he is riddled with embarrassment. She then beckons the boys out into the clearing. Valencia stands and guides them out of the hut and into the camp opening where two thrones intricately made of wood and vines have been erected, standing opposite at a distance from the raging fire. Over the fire hangs a rusty cast iron cauldron on a huge iron tripod. The boys are coaxed toward the throne seats, Karl looking nervously at Emilio, who gives him a nod of reassurance as he walks confidently over and assumes his seat. Karl stands looking at Emilio nervously before joining his companion. The indigenous people surround the fire to dance; women gyrate unconventionally to the low patter of a mystic sounding beat. The women convey a spectrum of different looks. Some wear nose whiskers made from the ribs of palm leaves to represent the big cats of the rainforest. Some have huge circular earrings, which are embedded into their ear lobes, which look uncomfortable as they swing to and fro. Red and black face paint is used liberally and most often appears as horizontal lines across the face. Clothing is scant; the people think nothing of bearing all. A drummer is perched to the far right hand side of the clearing in front of a set of large hand carved bongo drums, the size of barrels. He starts a complex rhythm and within moments a group of men and women appear out of the trees wearing facemasks depicting various birds of prey. They move slowly around the fire, their bodies swaying to the rhythm. An old woman walks over with a hamper of raw ingredients including Banisteriopsis, Caapi vine, Passion flower, Psychotria Viridis and Coca leaves. She kneels down and cuts them up into small pieces on a block of aged wood and grinds the cut pieces in a pestle and mortar, mumbling all the while. She then adds the prepared ingredients to the low hanging cauldron to boil. Another middle-

aged woman with extremely long black hair which trails along the ground behind her walks up to the boys, carrying headpieces made of red feathers and amber stones. She places them on the boys' heads. Karl looks at Emilio and starts laughing nervously.

“What the hell is going on, brother, you just couldn't make this up”

“This is the craziest thing I have ever witnessed. But it's cool, though.”

They notice Valencia laughing at their outlandish head attire, which wouldn't be funny on anyone within the tribe. Valencia is staring at Emilio in particular; each time she makes eye contact with him she feels an energy, she finds him very handsome and from the brief time she has been around him she can tell he is a sponge, absorbing and showing a genuine interest in just about everything he comes into contact with. She can relate to Emilio and is secretly hoping the boys are going to stick around for a few days before moving on.

A light blue vapor emanates from the bubbling cauldron.

“Emilio, is that blue smoke? I've never seen blue smoke before, what causes blue smoke?”

“I have no idea, Karl!” Says Emilio, who is racking his brain trying to work it out.

“Hey, Emilio, I think we should refuse to drink whatever's boiling in that pot over there, you heard Valencia, she said it can send you crazy.”

“Well, I'm up for it, these people are cool and Val said it was safe.”

“No, she said don't drink it, it causes psychosis.” Says Karl desperately.

“She didn't say don't drink it. If it were dangerous she wouldn't be over there laughing at us. It's probably like downing a tequila and then taking a drag on a joint.”

“How would you know what smoking a joint was like? You've never smoked marijuana in your life!”

“I had it once after football practice. It's no big deal”

“Shut up, Emilio, you're lying. I'm always watching you from the stands at practice. And you would have talked about it till the cows come home if you'd had it”

“You don't know everything about me, Karl.”

The beat of the tribal drums gets louder and more intense, the villagers start chanting, and the boys snap out of their argument as they become aware that something significant is brewing. They look on in bewilderment as the woman with extremely long hair dips a ladle into the steaming pot to fill a medieval looking brass cup with Ayahuasca. A shaman appears, dressed in a dark green hooded gown, which covers his head sinisterly. He is short with intense eyes; he seems possessed as he moves slowly towards Emilio and

Karl, one step at a time. The shaman reaches into his gown and pulls out a long wooden pipe, which he proceeds to light. He takes long drags from the pipe before blowing the smoke into the headpiece that the boys are wearing. Emilio is laughing at the ritual, Karl is shitting his pants. The longhaired lady walks up to the boys slowly, bearing the brass cup filled with the warm herbal concoction. The woman stands before them and places the brass cup to Emilio's lips. Emilio breathes in the aroma.

"Hey, it's no big deal! It smells sweet and earthy, buddy!" He takes a long swig. "Piece of cake, nothing to worry about, it actually tastes alright." Informs Emilio, eager for his friend to follow suit. Karl looks into Emilio's eyes and can see no apparent sign of any problem.

"Ok, Emilio, what could possibly happen?"

Karl then opens his mouth and drinks the remaining liquid from the cup.

"Hey, your right, it wasn't so bad."

"See, I told you not to panic."

The boys relax and enjoy the dancers and the drums' hypnotic rhythms. Karl goes to get up from his throne and is pushed back vigorously by the shaman.

"Hey, what's your problem? Can you believe this guy Emilio?.....Emilio!"

There's no response from Emilio who has passed out and is now slumped in his throne.

"Hey, Emilio, wake up! Can you here me?"

Whilst Karl is shaking Emilio frantically his vision starts to become blurred. At first he sees a double image of Emilio, which suddenly splits to four, then eight and then sixteen. The beats of the drums around him start to feel like they're thumping his brain into another dimension. He looks around at the indigenous people, but as he does their faces start to distort as if they were made of soft clay. Thick course hairs start to sprout all over their entire bodies as they morph into monkeys dressed in top hats and tailcoats, with giant tusks and sharp fangs. They begin to assume a crouching position and then spring at speed all over the camp like live frogs being cooked on a hot plate. Karl doubles over to his knees and is sick, the sick then multiplies before his eyes and starts to form a gigantic seemingly endless river of vomit, which flows upwards into the sky. Bright yellow inflatable banana boats drop from the trees. The suited fanged monkeys jump onto the boats and paddle manically up the river of vomit to the heavens.

Meanwhile, Emilio's soul is floating up past the earth's atmosphere and into space. Once clear of the earth he sees a line of infinite white doors speeding towards and past him like a locomotive. They eventually slow and

grind to standstill. He stands before the row of white doors and his body splits into three independent versions of itself. The three versions walk through three separate doors at the same time. The doors lead to white corridors, which at first glance seem endless. All three souls start running at the speed of light. Two of them run on forever and the other reaches yet another white door. Emilio opens the door into a blindingly white room, which has no ceiling and is exposed to the entire universe. At the end of the room is a white dining table. Sitting at the table are two of his deceased aunts, playing a game of crib. Aunt Ann and Aunt Jane are both wearing enchanting white dresses and sporting copious amounts of diamond jewellery. They both turn calmly and beckon Emilio to the table to join them. Emilio is overwhelmed with happiness.

“Wow! I’ve missed you two, how are you?”

“Never better.” Replies Aunt Ann

“How is this possible, Aunt Ann?” Says Emilio, starting to well up with tears.

“Everything that ever was will be again, forever!”

“Time doesn’t exist, so don’t let it stop you, it’s never too late!” Adds Aunt Jane.

“And Emilio! Take the third gate.” Says Aunt Ann softly with a wink. Emilio’s aunts turn their attention back to their game, as the white door behind him opens up, and a strong vacuum sucks his soul back down to earth to rejoin his body.

## Chapter 11: The morning after

Karl slowly opens his eyes as he feels a cool breeze gently wafting across his face. Tilting his head back, he sees a woman fanning him with a giant leaf.

“Am I in heaven?” Karl asks in confusion. The woman smiles, not understanding a word he has said, and walks out of the hut. Karl looks over to where Emilio is sleeping, snoring loudly with his mouth wide open. Karl sits up abruptly as reality dawns.

“Oh God, I’m not dead. It’s worse, I’m still in the land that time forgot!”

An immense pain floods through his head. As he puts his hand to his brow Valencia walks into the hut.

“You poisoned us!” Karl groans.

“It’s just a mild hallucinogenic.” Valencia laughs.

“Mild! Mild! My fringing ass that stuff is mild, it knocked us the fuck out! I threw up a week's worth of burritos.”

“I must admit you boys did react unusually to it.”

“Unusually! I was tripping my balls off”

“Relax, you’re ok! There is nothing to worry about. In fact, I think the tribe are enjoying you guys being around.”

“Oh great, yeah, get the stupid boys high on drugs, let’s laugh as they stagger around like performing monkeys losing their minds.”

Emilio stirs at the sound of their voices.

“What happened? How long have I been asleep?”

“You guys have been out for 18 hours.” Valencia smiles.

Karl watches as his friend grabs his head, mirroring his own pain.

“Emilio, did you have any vivid nightmares?”

“Yeah, it felt so real! I mean I’ve never experienced anything like it, what a rush.”

Karl shakes his head in dissatisfaction at his friend’s endless exuberance and enjoyment of everything.

“You’re telling me you’re cool with this horse crap! These people were trying to fry our brains!”

Emilio reaches across and places his hand on his pal's shoulder and smiles wickedly.

“Karl buddy, I don’t think you have anything in there that’s not already fried.”

Karl pushes Emilio’s hand away with disapproval.

“Shut up, Emilio. What the hell are we doing here? We don’t belong here and you know it. This Amazon detour was supposed to last one day. This is our third. I’ve been shot at, nearly eaten by a frickin river shark and drugged by a bunch of cannibals.”

Valencia, although amused by Karl’s rant, gives jesting daggers in his direction. Seeing Valencia’s piercing look, he quickly tries to backtrack and rectify his comment.

“Ok, maybe not cannibals, but definitely witch doctors.”

Emilio focuses in front of him for a moment, staring at the far wall as he pulls his arm across his chest, stretching his shoulder muscle.

“Yeah, we should crack on and wrap this thing up.”

“How far have we got to go now?” Karl feels dishevelled and worn out.

“It shouldn’t be too much further.”

“Are you sure about that? You said we were lost yesterday. Look Emilio, we gotta turn around now and get back to Lima. I just don’t see the point in continuing, I really don’t.”

Emilio looks up to the ceiling, as if imploring the heavens to give him strength.

“Trust me, I know what I’m doing.”

Valencia is skeptical, but fascinated.

“Well, if your gonna go looking for this plant then you’ll need my help. Otherwise, you guys have no chance. I’ll ask my friend Elmanda if he’ll help us out as well. The rainforest is a dangerous place, he can guide us safely, and then we will return here to get some rest before we take you back to Iquitos.”

Karl agrees enthusiastically.

“That’s a fantastic idea! Right, Emilio?”

“Yeah, that would be amazing! So, who’s this Elmanda guy?” Emilio enquires.

“Elmanda is a carpenter from Iquitos. He is an excellent bowman and what he doesn’t know about the jungle isn’t worth knowing. He’s been coming out here for as long as I can remember. He has a good relationship with our people; he’s built many of the shacks in this village. He loves to help people and be close to nature.” Valencia speaks proudly of her lifelong friend.

Emilio is inspired by the idea of Elmanda helping them, and is intrigued by the thought of meeting him.

“That’s fantastic! I must admit the rainforest is proving more difficult than I had anticipated.”

“Ok, I’ll ask Elmanda to help us. We should get going as soon as possible so that we can return here before nightfall.”

Valencia gets up slowly and provocatively from the end of Emilio’s bed in an attempt to draw his attention. Emilio is too caught up wondering what Elmanda will be like to notice. Karl on the other hand has been staring directly at Valencia the whole time. He sits in a trance with his mouth wide open. Valencia walks out of the hut and up to a group of villagers.

“Has anyone seen Elmanda this morning?”

One of the women points to a path leading away into the forest. Valencia follows the path to the lagoon. A beam of light breaks through the dense rainforest canopy and cuts through the shallow turquoise water. Standing beneath a gently flowing waterfall stands a well-built man with jet-black hair. Valencia stares at the water running off his muscular back with

approval. After a few minutes she crouches down, collects a big handful of mud and throws it at his freshly washed back.

Elmanda feels the impact and pivots on the spot, running his hands through his long hair. He sees Valencia laughing and begins to wade towards her, smiling at her audacity. He is particularly fond of Valencia, who is like a sister to him. She has given up much of her free time to help teach him English, enabling him to create new business contacts in Iquitos. Elmanda is a small-time entrepreneur, spending the majority of the week dredging up mud and sediment from the Amazon River, searching for flecks of gold. As the price of gold continues to rise thousands of gold hunters are laying siege to the country's rivers to devastating effect, tearing down acres of forest and polluting the rivers with toxic mercury. Elmanda is different. He is fiercely protective of nature and his heritage. His ancestors, like Valencia's, hailed from the tribes of the rainforest.

“Hey Elmanda!”

“Buenos días, Cómo estás?” Elmanda greets her, with a broad accent.

“I’m feeling good, thank you. I was wondering if I could ask you a favour?”

“Ok, what is it?” Elmanda flicks into English.

“Our visitors could do with some help getting through the rain forest. I’m going to try and help them myself, but obviously they are strangers, so we have to be careful, although they do seem harmless.”

“I will help you, but I will be leaving for Iquitos tomorrow.” Beams Elmanda.

“That’s great, maybe you could take them back with you?” Elmanda nods his agreement.

“Of course, that’s fine! I can practise my English!”

“Thanks Elmanda. They haven’t a chance of surviving out here on their own.”

Back at the hut, Emilio and Karl are being presented with their own clothes, which have been washed, cleaned and hung out to dry by the doting women looking after them.

“You see, Karl, you see how they’ve looked after us.”

“Easy for you to say, you’re not haunted by killer monkey frogs!” Emilio looks at Karl kindly.

“Monkey frogs! There’s no such thing as monkey frogs Karl.”

“Obviously, you asswipe!”

“Just calm down and get a grip.” Emilio pats Karl on the head. “I know this is a lot for you to take, but try and keep it together.”

Karl sticks his middle finger up and begins to get dressed. Emilio jumps up from his bed and pretends to box an imaginary opponent, psyching himself up.

“I’m pumped and feeling good, Karl. Today is the first day of the rest of our lives.”

Karl watches Emilio as he bounces about the hut.

“Check me out, Karl, this is how you dance like a butterfly and sting like a bee.”

“You mean prance like a ballerina and sting with a bitch-slap.”

Valencia walks into the hut, followed by Elmanda, who feigns concern as Emilio continues to destroy his invisible foe. Valencia stands with her hands on her wide hips sizing Emilio up, then begins to spar with him, bobbing, weaving and pretending to uppercut. Karl gazes at her long legs, which keep her upper body balanced with a graceful ease.

“Boys, I’d like you to meet Elmanda.”

Emilio slowly grinds to a halt and extends his hand to Elmanda for a formal handshake. Karl eagerly stretches his hand out for the same gesture.

“Nice to meet you Elmanda, I’m Emilio and my buddy here is Karl. Valencia’s been telling us all about you.”

“Valencia was telling me you need some help getting through the jungle. Do you know exactly where you are headed?” Elmanda asks. Emilio walks over to his backpack and pulls out a laminated map. Elmanda looks at it closely and tries to get his bearings.

“This is a strange area, but we can go most of the way on my boat, and then maybe a few hours on foot, so maybe it’s not so difficult to get to! I must warn you, though, that the land out there can be unstable, and it’s a breeding ground for anacondas and alligators.”

“So, can you guide us there?” Emilio asks bluntly.

“Probably, but I need to get back to Iquitos within the next couple of days!” Elmanda sounds hesitant.

“I could pay you!” Emilio fires back.

Elmanda hadn’t considered charging, but now there was an offer on the table he could certainly rethink how quickly he needed to get back to Iquitos.

“How much are you willing to pay?” He asks carefully.

“Two-hundred American dollars.” Emilio responds.

“Give us eight hundred and you have yourself a deal!” Elmanda tries his luck. Valencia wasn’t intending to charge, but the prospect of taking her share of eight hundred dollars suddenly seems very appealing.

“Done!” Emilio reaches out to conclude the deal with a handshake.

“What are you doing, Emilio? You’re supposed to negotiate!”



Karl is fuming with frustration, wishing desperately that the whole trip will be over with as soon as possible.

“Right! Well, I’m ready to go as soon as you are.” Elmanda beams.

“That’s great! We’ll get our asses in gear and be with you shortly.” Emilio returns his smile.

Karl is slightly embarrassed changing in front of Valencia and puts his clean clothes on in the corner of the hut as swiftly as possible, concealing himself as best he can. Once changed, the group leave the hut and join Elmanda, who is surrounded by curious villagers. He has a rucksack full of survival equipment and a machete in his hand, which puts Karl on edge.

“They’re here to send you off. They know you’re leaving.” Valencia explains, mistaking Karl’s expression for confusion.

“Val, could you tell these good people that we’re thankful for their hospitality.” Emilio asks.

Valencia roughly translates Emilio’s thanks as Elmanda leads the group out of the village. Emilio puts his hands together, assuming a prayer position and bows to the villagers around him in appreciation. Karl forces a smile and mutters under his breath.

“Yeah, thanks for not eating us!”

## Chapter 12: The Amazon River

Emilio stops for a moment as the rest of the group disappear into the thick vegetation surrounding the village. He takes in the scene of the camp, the huts, the villagers, the burnt out fire and the two thrones. Although he knows he will never experience anything like this again he smiles, as an uplifting wave of emotion washes over him. Emilio says one last goodbye to the villagers, takes a deep breath and turns to catch up with the rest of the gang. Elmanda leads them along a lush green tunnel through the trees. Rays of sunshine break through, creating a beautiful dappled light. At the end of the tunnel is a steep muddy hill, the roots of the surrounding trees forming rudimentary steps. They slowly make their way down until the low hanging branches of the forest open out onto a lake, beyond which lies an enormous mountain range. Moored to a tree stump is Elmanda's prized boat. The boat is light blue with a white roof, sheltering two rows of wooden seats covered in blue cushions, which have seen better days since the boat was originally built in the mid-thirties. At the back is a large transparent plastic box attached to a long hose and a motor, which Elmanda uses to suck up sediment from the riverbed. Elmanda leaps aboard and beckons the group to join him. Emilio and Valencia follow without hesitation, but Karl remains standing on the riverbank. He's dreading the thought of travelling on the water, even though the boat seems sturdy. After the shark attack he is terrified of what may be lurking beneath the surface.

"Come on Karl, we need to get going." Emilio calls.

"I'm not travelling on the water, Emilio. There are Bull Sharks in there. There's probably alligators and all other kinds of evil creatures in that God forsaken river!"

Elmanda looks at Karl with bewilderment.

"A Bull Shark! Are you sure? They're extremely rare in these waters."

"It was definitely a shark, and the only shark that could survive in a river system like this is a Bull." Emilio confirms.

"That's true, but are you sure it wasn't a black Caiman, they're very common around these parts, and they'll try and eat just about anything."

"What's a Caiman?" Karl asks fretfully.

"They are huge aggressive black crocodiles." Replies Elmanda.

"Oh, that's just great! You know you're supposed to be setting my mind at ease, not scaring the shit out of me." Karl places his hands atop his head and turns in a semi-circle with despair.

“No, it was definitely a shark, dorsal fin and everything. It looked like it was almost three meters long. Anyway, it’s probably dead now, I speared it in the face.” Continues Emilio.

“Well, I guess it was, I’ve heard of Bull Sharks as far down as Iquitos. I’ve just never seen one around here.” Elmanda is surprised.

“Look, you’ll be fine Karl. I’ve been out on this boat many times with Elmanda, and you’re in safe hands.” Valencia soothes reassuringly.

“I don’t care, I’d rather walk than come face to face with another river monster.”

Karl stands with his arms crossed resolutely while Emilio and Valencia excitedly enjoy shifting between the various empty seats, searching for a favoured position and point of view. Elmanda starts the boat’s large outboard motor and prepares to untie it from the mooring. Karl doesn’t like the prospect of being left alone, and has little choice other than to join them. He steps on board, mumbling his dissatisfaction under his breath while selecting a seat at the back and sitting with his arms firmly crossed.

Elmanda fires the engine and unties the boat, then runs across the deck to the steering wheel, guiding the boat gently as it cruises along the tranquil river. The group embrace the wonder of the wildlife that surrounds them. The musky smell of decaying plants and wood mingles with the drone of insects. Giant dragonflies buzz beside the boat, attracted by the light reflected in the metal surfaces. Karl is uncertain if they are getting any closer to their destination or heading further in the wrong direction entirely. Emilio remains ever optimistic and fully immersed in his goal.

The boat continues cutting through the peaceful waters at an easy pace, meandering with the river until it reaches a fork. Elmanda guides the boat to the left, the miles slipping away behind them, drawing them closer to their destination. A slick black-feathered Harpy Eagle circles the trees along the bank, before swooping down on a dead squirrel monkey, which is floating facedown on the surface of the river. As it touches upon the murky waters and grips the monkey an alligator rises from the depths. The large eagle flaps its powerful wings erratically as it is dragged under and drowned. Karl stands up abruptly, pointing in shock.

“Did you see that? This water is croc infested! We’re all gonna die!” He blurts.

Elmanda laughs and pats Karl on the back vigorously, in an attempt to calm him down. The pressure being applied makes Karl feel a sudden discomfort in his bowels.

“Oh man, my stomach doesn’t feel so good!”

“You said you swam in the river earlier?” Elmanda asks, seeing Karl gripping his stomach.

“Yeah, I was nearly eaten by that shark.”

Elmanda sits and dwells for a moment on a friend of his who died after ingesting Candiru. As soon as one of these toothpick-sized parasites gets inside you it begins to feed on your flesh and blood, growing in size until it's too late. Elmanda shakes off the negative thought.

“Did you swallow any water when you were in the river?” Elmanda tries to keep his voice neutral.

“Why, is that bad?” Responds Karl, immediately concerned.

“These aren't the cleanest waters to drink from!” Elmanda replies honestly.

“I did swallow a little bit. Will I be ok?”

“You should be fine, don't worry.”

Karl starts to worry about swallowing river water, which gives him a nervous stomach. He feels his belly churn and becomes desperate to relieve himself.

“I need to go to the toilet right now, I can't wait!”

Karl begins to drop his pants in an attempt go over the side of the boat.

“That's disgusting! You are not shitting on this boat while I'm sitting here!” Valencia is revolted. Emilio is equally repulsed and insists on pulling the boat over to the riverbank so that Karl can go in the rainforest.

“What's the problem? All the animals go in the river! I can't hold it.”

Karl fights against the urge.

“Well, your gonna have to hold it! I'm not letting you shit off the side of my boat.” Elmanda replies, trying not to laugh.

Elmanda quickly steers the boat over to the bank and Karl jumps off, nearly emptying his bowels in the process. He jogs into the undergrowth, so the rest of the party cannot see him. He finds a dense patch of vegetation and squats down to relive himself with his pants pushed firmly down around his ankles. After a few minutes of painfully explosive diarrhoea, Karl hears a strange sound, indistinguishable from a deep cough. Ten feet from where he is squatting is a two hundred and fifty pound male Jaguar. Karl freezes, trying to control his fear, and his bowels, but to no avail. The Jaguar moves slowly, with its back arched and head low to the ground, ready to pounce. Karl is reduced to tears, unable to move or call out. Just as the Jaguar gets ready to pounce it suddenly shifts its attention, as a dead howler monkey is flung onto the ground a few feet from Karl. Scooping up the dark brown monkey in its jaws, the feline slinks away into the undergrowth. Elmanda stands not five yards from Karl and calls out for him to make his way over.

Paralysed with fear, Karl has to resort to crawling to Elmanda on his hands and knees. Elmanda reaches out to Karl and the pair lock hands as Elmanda helps Karl to his feet. The two look at each in silence, a mutual understanding and respect forming between them. They walk back to the boat together and climb aboard, ignoring every question that is asked of them. Emilio and Valencia are relentless, but Karl is too shaken and drained to engage. Elmanda knows the boys are in well over their heads, and wonders how long they would have survived had they not stumbled upon the tribe.

“My stomach’s hurting again!” Karl moans, struggling to get comfortable.

“Does it feel like your stomach is cramping?” Elmanda is concerned.

“Yeah, I feel cold, too. I’m starting to shiver. What the hell’s going on Elmanda? I’m going to die, aren’t I?”

Karl clutches the side of the boat, feeling weak. Cold flushes pulse through him, making him feel like throwing up.

“You must have consumed some of the river water! You may have caught a bug.”

“Sounds like dysentery!” Emilio chips in.

“What’s dysentery, Emilio?” Karl begins to panic, fearing the worst.

“It’s when your intestines get inflamed, and it can cause some really bad diarrhoea. But don’t worry, you’re young and strong enough to fight it, but you need to drink loads of clean water!” Emilio answers confidently, but Elmanda is hesitant to agree quite so soon.

“It may not be. Dysentery can be severe. We’ll soon know if it is. But yes, you do need to drink plenty of clean water.”

“Well I’m screwed then, aren’t I? It’s not like a convenience store is gonna pop up on the riverbank. Where the hell I’m I gonna get bottled water from?”

Elmanda reaches into his bag and pulls out a large brown water canteen. Casually taking a swig from it Elmanda taunts Karl, pretending he is drinking the most refreshing drink in the entire world. Elmanda is trying to raise the group’s spirits by poking fun at Karl. Karl swipes the canteen from Elmanda’s hand and sinks half the contents, gasping in relief as he stops to take a breath.

“You need to go easy and pace yourself, in case it takes us a while to find a fresh water source.”

“What if we can’t find fresh water, Elmanda, have you thought about that?”

“Don’t worry, I will find us plenty of fresh water. Have faith, Karl. I will look after you.”

## Chapter 13: The hike

Two hours and eight desperate toilet stops later the group arrive at the point where they need to travel inland. Elmanda spots an embankment. Reeds protrude high into the air from the brownish-green tinged water and creeping plants hug the riverside. Karl is virtually rolled up in a ball with pain. Elmanda, Valencia and Emilio help haul him off the boat and onto land to rest, as they look around for something sturdy to moor the boat to. Once the boat is secured Elmanda and Emilio put Karl's arms over their shoulders and start to haul him into the rainforest. After being uncomfortably dragged along for fifteen minutes Karl decides to walk by himself, conscious of being a burden. He sees that Elmanda needs to start cutting through the undergrowth, which is becoming increasingly dense the further they travel. Elmanda brings the group to a standstill, having noticed one particular tree. He examines the bark, before cutting into it with his large survival knife, until it bleeds a milky white sap.

"Here, have a look at this!"

"What is it?" Emilio asks as they gather round.

"It's a milk tree. Karl, try the sap, it will help settle your stomach. You should normally avoid trees that have milky sap, because often the sap is poisonous. But this is one of the good ones, one of nature's healers, so don't worry."

"Oh great, why did you have to tell me that some saps can be poisonous? You should have just kept that fact locked away in your head, and I could have settled my stomach just fine." Karl is too sick and tired to dwell on the possible negative outcomes for once and starts to nourish himself upon the sap flowing from the tree. He can't get enough, and latches onto the bark as if his life depended on it. He can almost feel the healing sap create a protective layer around his stomach lining.

"It's actually really nice!" He announces in surprise as he comes up for air.

"How are you feeling now, Karl?" Elmanda asks caringly.

"I feel empty."

Elmanda gets close to Karl, looks into his dilated pupils and checks his temperature by placing the back of his palm on Karl's forehead.

"You don't seem to have a temperature. And you haven't been sick. Has there been any blood in your shit?"

"No, not at all."

“Karl, I don’t think you have dysentery, just an upset stomach. You don’t need to worry so much.”

Karl takes in the reassuring information, but doesn’t verbally respond. The group give Karl time to replenish his energy, patiently waiting, as they all sympathise with his current condition. Karl repays their sympathy by giving them the nod to continue before he actually feels completely ready. Elmanda marches on into the undergrowth, guided by a compass and a basic route worked out from Emilio’s detailed map. Emilio is eager to walk alongside Elmanda to gain knowledge about the environment. Valencia and Karl follow at their own pace. Karl takes a deep breath and exhales, blowing his cheeks out fully with a sigh thrown in for good measure. Valencia looks at Karl in concern.

“Are you ok, Karl?”

“Not really. As you can tell, I’m kinda going through a lot at the moment. To be honest, Val, it’s been the craziest few days of my entire life. Emilio has dragged me into a few half-baked schemes before, but this is ridiculous. I’m not used to this at all, I mean who is? I’m exhausted, I have never felt this ill before, I don’t even know how I’m still moving, I just know I can’t stop for too long or I will never get going again.”

The pair walk on for a few moments in silence and deep thought.

“Please don’t be offended, but you have to be tough to survive out here. I mean, as much as I love the people, I’m always glad to get back to the city.”

“None taken. I’m shattered! This is the most exercise I’ve had in forever. We’ve walked a thousand miles already, I feel like an empty vessel, and just when I think there is nothing left to come out, bang! My feet are killing me, I’m aching in places I never knew could ache, and all these little insects keep biting me.”

“It will probably do you good. All the walking I mean!”

“I know I’m a bit overweight, but I can think of better ways of keeping in shape, like eating one doughnut, instead of a whole box.”

Valencia laughs out loud, making Emilio and Elmanda look back briefly to try and see what is so funny.

“Well, I’m guessing it’s only another few hours by foot to your destination. Didn’t you guys say the bus you were on got hijacked? You haven’t had much luck have you!”

Karl thinks deeply about Valencia’s comment before responding.

“You know Val, I’m not being funny, but I swear somebody’s been following us, I just keep getting this creepy feeling I’m being watched.”



“You’re just paranoid because you’re out of your comfort zone. And the amount of animals lurking around us watching our every step probably adds to that feeling as well.”

“Yeah, that’s what Emilio keeps saying. Maybe you’re both right.”

Valencia looks at Karl fondly, like she would a brother.

“You’d do anything for him, wouldn’t you?”

“Who, Emilio? Sure, he’s my best buddy, I’ve known him ever since me and my mum moved to New York. We’re polar opposites in terms of personality, but have a lot in common, if that makes any sense. He’s actually a really exciting guy to be around. And that’s where we’re different. He’s always jumping head first into things, like this, for God’s sake. My idea of excitement is beating my best score on Pacman or waking up and realising it’s Pancake Day or something!”

“What’s Pancake Day?” Valencia asks.

“You don’t know Pancake Day? Oh, it’s a British tradition, you just eat pancakes all day, basically. I think there’s some religious thing behind it, but I don’t really know what it is.”

Valencia starts creasing up with laughter. The boys are a breath of fresh air; so different to anyone she has met before. Karl never intended his comments to be so comical, and starts to naively think that she’s laughing because she really likes him, maybe even fancies him. And with his newfound comedic talent he has an over confident surge of inspiration.

“So Valencia, how come you’ve got such a big round ass, must be from eating all those mushrooms in the jungle, right?”

As soon as Karl has uttered the ridiculous statement Valencia’s laughter is instantly silenced, as she begins to worry about her posterior and tries to think what the hell her backside has to do with the conversation. Karl, realising the stupidity of his outlandish comment, starts to panic.

“No! No, what I mean is there’s nothing wrong with your figure, in fact you’re perfect. But, like what can anyone eat here that could make them gain weight. Not that you’re fat or anything. Fuck!” Karl makes a futile attempt to rectify the situation.

Valencia searches for the right thing to say, before realizing Karl’s sudden outburst maybe just nervousness around her.

“It’s cool, Karl. Forget it. Have you ever had a girlfriend?”

Karl is taken aback, thinking she’s asking him because she’s interested. He has no idea how to respond, so he blurts out the first thing that comes to mind.

“Yeah, I got a girl! I mean I had a girl. We had a thing in Las Vegas one time.”

Valencia doesn't know what to believe, but is fascinated by Las Vegas.

"Wow, what's Las Vegas like? I'd love to go there, it looks amazing on those travel programmes."

"Oh, well, I don't really know! You see me and my girl never left the hotel suite, if you know what I mean." Karl tries to act cool and experienced.

Valencia doesn't buy it, and is starting to laugh more at Karl than with him. She starts adopting the approach she's seen Emilio use when Karl acts stupidly. She pats him on the head.

"It's ok, Karl. We're going to get through this, ok? But for now how about we catch up with Emilio and Elmanda?"

Valencia ups her tempo, eager to find out what Emilio and Elmanda are talking about and avoid any further embarrassment for Karl, who lags behind, talking loudly to himself while no one can hear him.

"Oh yeah, nice one Karl, you idiot, you really swept her off her feet!"

As the hours wear on, Karl falls further and further behind the fitter and more focused members of the expedition. The most exercise he normally gets back home is a slow, slouched daydream to the local corner store to stock up on bottles of soda. Only Valencia notices Karl's struggle, and hangs back to wait for him. She would rather be with Emilio and Elmanda as they confidently venture forward, but her sympathy for Karl's bumbling discomfort in this harsh but beautiful environment wins out. Emilio is concentrating on keeping up with Elmanda, who is hacking forcefully through the relentless undergrowth. Absorbing every decision, copying each move Elmanda makes, Emilio is enjoying himself so much that he is not even aware of Karl struggling to keep pace. Elmanda thrashes and slices his way through green walls of lush forest. Rain begins to ping and trickle off the masses of outstretched branches. Unable to hang back any longer, Valencia runs up alongside Elmanda and grabs his right arm, deftly taking the machete from him, before he's even realised what's happened. She waves it around playfully while the boys all duck and dive out of her way, genuinely worried they may get caught accidentally by the hefty blade.

"Let me take it from here." She says confidently.

"Be my guest, but be careful with that thing. I don't want you cutting your own head off." Elmanda smiles.

Emilio and Karl mock her childishly, not believing a girl would have the strength and stamina needed to make any progress through the relentless undergrowth. Valencia is unfazed and begins chopping and hacking the tangled foliage with stubborn intent, unlocking the hidden rainforest before them. Mocking grins are slowly replaced with expressions of shock and awe. Valencia cuts through a particularly dense mesh of unruly vines hung with

deep green leaves, and reveals a natural shelter formed by the surrounding trees, ideal for taking a much needed rest from the heavy rain. She walks into the den and stabs the machete firmly into the bark of a tree, as if marking her territory and proving a point. Elmanda signals for the others to hurry into the shelter as the rain becomes torrential. Emilio rests his backside on a mound of soil between the gangling vines. Piles of leaves pave the floor of the shelter. Valencia huddles up beside Karl and Emilio as they all breathe a sigh of relief once the weight has been taken from their aching, blistered feet. Karl's cheeks are bright red, and he seems far more fatigued than everybody else. Valencia slaps him on the knee.

“Hey, are you ok? You don't look well at all!”

Karl is aroused by Valencia touching his knee and feels like returning the gesture. But he thinks better of it, through lack of self-confidence, respect and illness. Instead, he just looks at her in awe. She has a unique beauty, which is heightened by the elements that have soaked her to the bone. Every voluptuous contour of her body is defined and in full view, leaving little to Karl's imagination. His eyes wander towards her wet vest, which clings tightly to her busty chest, making it difficult to concentrate on much else. Emilio doesn't bat an eye, as he is accustomed to seeing the marvel of the female form, and his focus is on the fearlessness and strength of Elmanda. Emilio notices Karl gazing at Valencia lustfully out of the corner of his eye.

“Hey Karl! Why don't you take a picture, it will last longer?” He teases childishly. The comment causes Valencia and Elmanda to look at Karl, who jumps out of his skin with embarrassment. Emilio laughs at the situation, leaving the others to wonder what is so amusing.

“What's so funny?” Valencia asks with an expectant smile. Emilio opens his mouth to tell her exactly what he's laughing at, but is cut off by Karl, who is eager to change the subject immediately.

“So Elmanda, how much further do we have to go?”

Elmanda takes a deep breath and creases his face in thought as he takes a strange object from his pocket.

“Around an hour, maybe two. Is anyone hungry?”

Karl's hand immediately springs up into the air as fast as a boffin during class question time. Elmanda is holding an unusual round fruit with dark maroon scales all over it. He throws it at Karl, who moves like lightning from his slouched position to grab the fruit before it hits him square in the face.

“What the hell is this?” Karl sniffs at the fruit, then turns it over in his hands, examining it closely.

“Out here we call it Aguaje. Try it!”

Karl closes his teeth around the strange fruit and struggles to bite through the outer skin. Elmanda and Valencia crease up laughing, as the fruit is supposed to be peeled before consumption. Karl realizes what everyone is laughing at and hurls the fruit back toward Elmanda, who dodges the missile, a playful expression lighting up his features.

“Here, try this instead.” He takes the biggest and greenest grapefruit Emilio and Karl have ever seen and rests it on a flat piece of bark before cutting it into four pieces and distributing it to the hungry, tired members of his party.

“Wow, I never knew fruit could taste this good!” Karl blurts through a mouthful of crushed fruit, as the abundant juices stream down his chin.

“That’s because this is the first time you’ve ever had any!” Quips Emilio.

“Shut up, Emilio. That’s not true. I accidentally ate some sliced banana that was hidden in a banoffee pie once. Right now I’m so hungry I could eat a massive plate of broccoli, and I hate that stuff.”

Valencia and Elmanda are creasing up with laughter as the boys squabble. The group calm and relax whilst eating the fruit and staring out at the rain pelting through the tropical landscape. Half an hour passes peacefully and the rain starts to subside. Elmanda rises to his feet and signals for the rest of the group to follow in his footsteps. They quickly fall back into the rhythm they were keeping before they rested. Hours pass, with the sun beating heavily down upon the vast jungle canopy. Karl walks upfront alongside Elmanda, as he has renewed his energy and is interested in spending some time with the warm and non-judgemental man. Valencia and Emilio wander along behind them at a distance. Emilio wants Karl to get more involved, and is happy to see that he is taking an interest in Elmanda. Valencia seizes the opportunity to try and delve into Emilio’s personal history.

“So, have you got a girlfriend?”

“I’ve got loads of friends who just so happen to be girls.”

“No, you know what I’m saying. Do you look at any of those girls as more than just a friend?” Valencia asks in a playful tone, not hiding her interest in the slightest. British boys are a rare commodity in Iquitos, and she’s fascinated by Emilio. She loves the way he talks and his unusual humour. The two boys represent the kind of fun group she’s always wanted to be part of. Although she is bubbly and makes friends easily she hasn’t met many people who share her dreams and ambitions.

“I can’t believe you actually grew up around here.” Emilio gently tries to change the subject.

“Well, what kind of girls do you like?” Valencia is undeterred.

“Ones that don’t ask too many questions!”

Valencia stands still in her tracks as Emilio continues walking ahead. After a few yards Emilio turns to her, wondering why she's stopped walking.

"What's the matter, have you got cramp or something?"

Valencia stands, hands on hips, biting her lip, trying to fathom Emilio out.

"You know it's the women that are supposed to act hard to get. You've got this all the wrong way round." She protests loudly.

"What did you say? Come on, let's get going." Emilio toys with her.

The group arrive at a particularly overgrown stretch of the forest where low hanging branches intertwine with thick dark brown vines, lacing the way forward shut.

"You might as well rest up. This may take some work." Elmanda scratches his head as he looks at the wall of damp vines.

"Good! Man, I gotta sit down again, my stomach's aching." Karl sinks into a mesh of bushes set back from the new pathway the group have created. As his weight pushes into the supporting bushes a swarm of spiders the size of a child's hand spill out of their disrupted colony, crawling all over Karl. The others have their backs to him, and are completely oblivious. Karl's throat has seized up, and he sits motionless and silent as the spiders cover his face and body. Hearing a rustling sound from behind him, Emilio turns around to see Karl helplessly clutching at the foliage around him, like a security blanket.

"Wow, you gotta be kidding me, what the hell?" Elmanda and Valencia look around at the same time.

"Oh shit." Elmanda says. "Don't move, Karl. They could be poisonous."

"What kind of spiders are they?" Emilio asks fretfully.

"I don't know, but this is amazing, I've never seen them group together before. Spiders are normally solitary creatures."

Valencia sees one of the spiders scuttling towards her and squashes it with the side of her sandal, causing a yellowy-brown goo to seep out onto her bare toes. Angrily, she stamps on another approaching spider, making the mess even worse. Karl goes into a sudden frenzy, brushing them off and screaming frantically. The disoriented spiders scuttle about, searching for escape routes. One is too large to fit through a narrow gap between the shrubs and jumps manically, displaying ferocious looking fangs. After this, everyone stays rooted to the spot until the spiders disband, scattering in different directions. Karl decides it is probably safer to stay standing, no matter how exhausted he is. Elmanda gets back to cutting through the clustered vines, until he has created a gap just big enough to crawl through. He calls for the group to follow him. Once they emerge on the opposite side

they are met by the welcome sight of water streaming off rocks and into a small pool.

“Is this water safe to drink?” Karl asks desperately.

“Sure, go ahead!” Elmanda replies with confidence.

Karl crouches down by the pool and cups his hands together to shovel as much water as he possibly can down his throat.

Everyone drinks from the pool and splashes the fresh water over their heads in an attempt to cool down and rinse the grime and sweat from their hair, before continuing on in the impossibly humid heat. After a little while they come to a clearing.

“Check out these weird trees!” Karl remarks “They’ve got blue patches and spots all over them.”

Emilio notices a similar blue patch on the ground in front of him and bends down on one knee for a closer inspection. Touching the blue patch, he puts it up to his nose to smell the substance. Rubbing it between his fingers and then looking around clearing he concludes “It’s calcium oxide.”

“What’s it doing out here” Karl asks innocently.

“We’re looking at what makes up seventeen percent of Peru’s gross domestic product.” States Emilio, but Karl is none the wiser.

“It’s used to make cocaine, Karl.” Elmanda has come across the waste from cocaine production in the rainforest before.

“But I thought it’s made pure from leaves.” Karl is wide-eyed.

“No, they use all kind of chemicals to extract the coca from the coca leaves; petrol, cement, calcium oxide, ammonia. It’s a misconception that cocaine is ever pure.” Emilio explains.

“Can you tell if it’s been made recently?” Valencia asks urgently.

“Within the last couple of days, if I had to hazard a guess.” Replies Emilio, wondering which direction whoever made it would have gone in.

“We need to leave immediately.” Elmanda is eager to keep moving. Emilio sees a blue trail leading down a beaten forest path away from the direction they are supposed to be travelling, and is so intrigued his curiosity starts to get the better of him.

## Chapter 14: So near and yet so far

“I gotta check this out.” Emilio announces.

“We must get away from here immediately. The military are not authorised to search deep into the rainforest to find the cocaine labs. It really is a jungle out here, and you don’t go looking for trouble.” Elmanda is well aware of the danger, and can’t begin to understand Emilio’s fascination, as cocaine production means cocaine producers, and given how recently they were here they may still be nearby, and those guys are not people he wants to run into.

“You and Valencia carry on, Karl and I will catch you up!”

“What are you doing! Elmanda thinks it’s dangerous, we need to get out of here.” Valencia is completely unbelieving of how stupid Emilio is being.

“Look, just carry on and we’ll be with you in ten minutes.” Emilio replies stubbornly.

“Are you fuckin stupid, Emilio? Elmanda and Valencia have helped us all this way, and now you want to ignore their advice.”

Elmanda looks at Emilio with a disappointed expression, but Emilio is defiant. Elmanda shrugs and ushers Valencia along, determined to keep her safe. Valencia keeps looking back at Emilio, reluctant to leave him.

“What are you trying to achieve?” She makes one final attempt to work out Emilio’s fascination with danger. Karl is torn. He doesn’t want to leave his friend, but he is scared of losing the safety of Elmanda and Valencia. Reluctantly, he takes Emilio’s side.

“Seriously, just go. We’ll be right along. I just want to check something out!” Emilio employs his most wide-eyed expression.

Elmanda and Valencia walk off, utterly confused, as Emilio and Karl head in the opposite direction down the muddy path, until they see a clearing. Crouching down and peering into the clearing they see two men with moustaches dressed in old worn out army uniforms. The men are pacing back and forth, with AK47 assault rifles strapped over their shoulders. Next to the men are several kilos of cocaine packaged and stacked on the ground in front of a group of dense leafy trees. The men are clearly guarding the cocaine. To one side of the clearing is a green and brown M35 cargo truck. The rear of the truck is open topped, with room to seat twelve soldiers on two built-in benches.

“Oh my God, Karl! Do you see that!”

“I think we should get the fuck out of here right now! They have machine guns.”

Karl is terrified. He tugs repeatedly at Emilio's shirt, signalling for them to leave. Emilio shrugs Karl off as he concentrates on the packages of cocaine.

"Karl, there's easily twenty million dollars worth of coke there."

"Who gives a shit? They have machine guns, Emilio. Real machine guns!"

"I saw a TV show about cocaine once. A kilo of cocaine out here is worth about \$2,000. Back home in the US it could sell wholesale for around \$30,000. Then it's broken down into grams and sold on the streets, and that same kilo would sell for upward of \$100,000."

"We need to get out of here before anyone sees us, and catch up with Elmanda and Valencia."

"Hold on, I reckon I could swipe one of those packets."

"Steal fuckin drugs! Off armed fuckin guards! Are you out of your fuckin mind? I didn't fuckin sign up for this, Emilio! I'm sorry, you're on your fuckin own this time pal. I'm going to catch up with the people that aren't mentally unstable, ok?"

"They won't notice two packets! That money could change our lives, Karl. And anyway, those guards look stupid as fuck."

"Emilio, they look psychotic and they're probably waiting for backup and I'm not sticking around to find out."

Karl heads back up the path to catch up with Elmanda and Valencia and tell them what's happening with Emilio.

Emilio stands deathly still, hidden amongst thick vegetation. One of the men walks over to the edge of a nearby stream and urinates, spraying playfully in circles. The motion causes his lighter to slip from his pocket and into the water. Swearing to himself he fishes the lighter from the stream. He tests it, before hurling it back into the water with dissatisfaction. The other guard sits in a deckchair in front of the wall of stacked cocaine packages, smoking a cigarette. Emilio manoeuvres himself slowly around the back of the dense trees situated behind the stack of cocaine, to get within reaching distance. His heart starts racing with fear. He tries to control his breathing and compose himself. He slowly puts his hand around the moist bark of an adjoining tree between him and the cocaine stash, out of view of the guards. As he feeds his hands through the undergrowth a black scorpion wanders onto his arm. Feeling the scorpion on his arm and adjusting himself to view what is crawling on him he gasps. Pulling his hand back suddenly, he launches the scorpion into the bushes close behind him. Hearing the disturbance, the guard gets up to investigate. As he gets closer to where the sound came from a macaw flies unexpectedly out of the bushes beside him.



The guard grimaces with annoyance, reassumes his seat and lights another cigarette. Emilio waits for the guard to settle and then nervously edges his arm forward again with his brow perspiring profusely. He slowly gets hold of a packet of cocaine from the top of the pile and slides it into his satchel. Seeing how easy it was, he greedily goes back for one more. He successfully gets the second packet and then turns to slip away. After taking a few soft quiet steps the adrenalin kicks in, and he gathers momentum. In his haste, he trips on a tree root, landing on his face, snapping several branches in the process. The guard barely moves this time. His friend walks up from the estuary, asking for a light. As he stoops towards the flame he notices the uneven stack of cocaine.

“Cathos! Look!”

Cathos turns towards the stack, and grimaces.

“Somebody’s here!”

As Emilio goes to push himself up from the damp earth he sees a muddy pair of combat boots step in front of him and feels cold, hard metal press into the back of his neck. A wave of sickness reaches the pit of his stomach, and he lies motionless, his eyes locked shut. For the first time in as long as he can remember he panics. He hasn’t got a clue what to do in this situation.

“Get up!” A voice orders harshly.

“I said get up! Are you stupid or what?”

Emilio slowly gets up and is pushed towards the clearing. The push almost sends him back to the ground, but he manages to keep his balance and walks, heart racing, not knowing what fate awaits him.

“Keep your hands where I can see them. Me cago en la madre que te pario!” Demands the voice, pushing Emilio roughly forwards into the clearing.

“Hey, Cathos, Pacho, I don’t know who’s dumber, you two or this puto!” The man proudly presents his captive to the others.

Cathos spits, ripping the satchel from Emilio’s shoulder. He reaches in and pulls out the two packages of cocaine.

“Hey look, my brothers, this guy’s trying to take our shit.”

Pancho takes a long drag on his cigarette until the end is red-hot and then pushes it into Emilio’s neck with venom in his eyes. Emilio yells out in agony. The man who pushed him into the clearing looks him up and down while the other two circle him intimidatingly.

“You think you can just walk in here and steal from my brothers! Do you know who we are? Are you fuckin loco?”

They start laughing uncontrollably.

“He thinks he can out smart us, General.” Remarks Cathos.

The men are momentarily distracted by the sound of voices. Elmanda, Valencia and Karl emerge from the undergrowth with their hands on their heads, closely followed by a tall, thin boy holding a machine gun.

“Ah, more guests!” The General draws. “Funny what you find deep in the rainforest. You gotta admire the many species of creatures you find out here. Take the black widow spider. It thrives out here. Why? Because it learns to adapt. Many creatures are much bigger here, but none of them thrive quite so well. You see, the black widow has a lethal venom. It waits for prey to walk into its trap and then...snap!” He snaps his large fingers in Emilio face.

The General pulls out a small perspex and silver box from his breast pocket and presents it to Emilio. Through the perspex Emilio can see a small black widow spider inside, crawling on a few compact leaves.

“You know, we have our own version of Russian roulette out here, especially for uninvited guests.”

The General signals to the others, who grab Emilio’s arms tightly. The General then kicks Emilio’s legs, leaving him kneeling on the ground. Pancho grabs Emilio’s face and forces it in front of The General with one hand, whilst placing the barrel of his gun at Emilio’s temple with the other.

“Open your mouth, puto!”

Emilio is left little choice. He opens his mouth reluctantly, shivering with terror.

The General slides the lid of the box back, allowing the red-bellied spider to crawl out onto Emilio’s tongue.

“Let’s see if God wants you to live today! See, the black widow spider likes to burrow in warm damp tunnels. If they like their new home they spray a little of their venom. Like the way a dog marks it’s territory.”

Elmanda is angered by what he is seeing but is powerless to do anything. Valencia is staring at The General with unadulterated hatred.

The spider walks apprehensively over the unusual soft damp terrain of Emilio’s tongue. Emilio’s throat has instantly dried up through fear and he fights the desire to gulp. He closes his eyes and tries to think of any knowledge he has of black widow spiders. ‘Would the acid in my stomach kill the spider before it panics and tries to bite me from inside?’ He starts to gag as the spider walks to the back of his tongue, but he contains the convulsions. The spider, not liking its unstable environment walks back towards daylight, and The General scoops his prized black widow back into the box.

“It must be your lucky day!” The General bursts with laughter at his own wit, and the others quickly join in, eager to please. Elmanda sees an

opportunity, figuring that if he doesn't do something now then they are almost certainly doomed anyway. He elbows the skinny boy in the eye, knocking him to the ground, and quickly grabs his shotgun, aiming it at Cathos's head. The General stands, evaluating the situation.

“So what now, you gonna kill my brother?” He sneers, while winking slowly with his left eye. The signal is one that the brothers have used many times before. Cathos rolls into the bushes beside him, while Pancho sends a powerful burst of machine gun fire towards Elmanda, ripping his torso in half. Everything seems to move in slow motion as Karl watches Elmanda's chest erupt and split in two. Elmanda's torso slumps to the ground while his feet and legs remain standing for a brief moment, spurting a geyser of dark red blood. Karl watches helplessly, Emilio's jaw is wide open in disbelief and Valencia wails with grief and rage, tears streaming down her face. The General loves the drama. It makes him feel alive. As Valencia's cries die away, he starts sniggering through the mournful silence. He raises his right hand and fires a round of bullets towards the heavens in celebration. A blue hummingbird drops beside Elmanda. Its one remaining wing flaps in Elmanda's reservoir of blood. Seeing the bird hit the ground makes The General double over in hysterics. He throws his rifle on the ground, unable to control his maniacal laughter. Composing himself, The General lights a cigar and turns to face Emilio, Karl and Valencia. Wiping tears of laughter from his bloodshot eyes he starts plotting.

“You young people have really put a smile on my face today. So! I'm going to give you a once in a lifetime opportunity. I'm going to give you a chance to live! Life holds little value to me, what is the difference between your deceased friend over there and the thousands of bugs we tread underfoot everyday. If there were a God would he really value one creature's life higher than another? No! So! The deal is this.” The General pauses for a moment and looks at Emilio, seeing a bright, young, athletic individual, which spells trouble. He turns his attention to the shuddering, overweight lump of confusion that is Karl. He then stares at Valencia's ample chest for no reason other than kicks. Putting a finger to his lips in thought, he reveals his plan. “Ok. You're in luck, you've turned up at the perfect time. We are just about to take a shipment to Mexico. Once we're there you can kindly take it over the American border for us. We are always looking for new staff to help us with this type of thing. You see, we have had problems getting our supplies over the border recently. Our young Peruvian mules have been getting busted at border checkpoints, costing us more than we are willing to give away. The authorities will seize a certain percentage of whatever we try to ship. But you are different, you do not fit the usual stereotypes they look

for, so we have an increased chance of success. If you do succeed in your little mission, then we will set you free. If you do not, then you will probably spend the rest of your lives in jail! Now, I cannot say fairer than that!”

Karl looks over to Emilio with grave disappointment. Emilio hangs his head in shame, feeling responsible for Elmanda’s death. Pancho, who is holding Karl at gunpoint, turns his assault rifle and smashes it around the back of Karl’s head, knocking him to the ground in agony and drawing blood. Emilio’s ever-confident demeanour is hit with a wave of realisation. Karl lies on the ground, bleeding from his ears. Elmanda is dead in a pool of his own blood. Valencia is silent, with tears flooding down her cheeks, unable to take her gaze from Elmanda’s motionless body. Horror engulfs his consciousness, as the idea of not leaving the Amazon becomes a distinct possibility. Karl is pulled from the ground and pushed face forward against the cargo truck. His hands are tied tightly and uncomfortably behind his back. With his head pounding and his vision blurred, he slumps in submission, crying hysterically. The General turns face to face with Valencia and blows cigar smoke into her nostrils as he takes handcuffs from his utility belt. He locks her hands behind her back and dangles the key in front of her face.

“This is purely business. The rulebook goes out the window out here. Every chance has to be taken to stay ahead. But I think we will get along just fine, sweetie.”

Valencia feels sick with anger. She doesn’t acknowledge him. He grabs her arm and drags her towards the truck, pushing her in the front cabin passenger seat, before signalling to his brothers to round up Emilio and Karl. He climbs into the driver’s seat and lights a fresh cigar, as Cathos prods his gun at Emilio, telling him to lead Karl onto the back of the open topped truck. As Emilio gets on the back of the truck he sees a symbol on one of the first aid boxes stored under the metal bench. The symbol depicts a snake eating it’s own tail, the same symbol used by Vipercom Pharmaceuticals. There are far more important things to worry about right now, and the thought slips to the back of his mind. The skinny boy drags Elmanda’s corpse into the thick green vegetation, and then starts loading the cocaine parcels into a series of large black holdalls. A few of the packets have been perforated by the gunfire, and have seeped brilliant white rocks onto the boggy blood splattered terrain. Once he has finished, he lifts the heavy holdalls up one by one to the others, who stack them at the far end of the truck. Once everyone is settled in the back of the truck Cathos knocks through to the front cabin to signal they are ready. They drive hastily across the uneven ground, until they reach a muddy road. Half an hour flies by, as

Emilio, Karl and Valencia sit grief stricken. The General's cigar causes the front cabin to fill with thick smoke, causing Valencia to start coughing. Emilio hears her from the back, and screams out helplessly, not knowing what is happening to her.

“Valencia!”

Valencia remains silent and unmoving. The General shakes her by the arm to get some kind of reaction, and she shrugs him off in disgust.

“How are we supposed to have any kind of fun together if you don't lighten up?”

Valencia puts her hands together and starts muttering prayers under her breath. The General laughs at what he perceives as fear.

“Not even God can save you now, my love!”

“You are going to hell!” Valencia rages.

She reaches over and scratches him, digging her long nails deep into his cheek and running them across his face, drawing blood. He is angered and elbows her in the face, putting all his weight behind it.

“Jodienda puta! Look what you made me do! Don't fuck with me or I will fuck you!”

Blood dribbles from Valencia's nose, and she is left nursing her face. She will not give The General the satisfaction of seeing her weep. She is stronger than that.

## Chapter 15: Flight to Guatemala City

The General guides the cargo truck off the boggy terrain and onto a long rainforest airstrip, ripped out of the dense jungle surroundings. The once stately trees now form a rotting border along either side of the roughly gravelled strip. The sudden increase in speed as the truck travels across the runway flings Emilio and Karl about on the hard metal benches as if they were riding a roller coaster. This, combined with Elmanda's death still raw in his mind, sends convulsions through Karl, who turns and hangs his head over the side of the open back truck to vomit up the paltry contents of his fragile stomach. Pancho looks on in amusement, enjoying Karl's suffering. Cathos couldn't care less.

Vision in the truck's front cabin is virtually non-existent, thick cigar smoke circulates with no outlet, as the windows are purposefully shut tight. The lack of oxygen available is the least of Valencia's concerns as she is leered at by the vulgar beast beside her. Her nose has stopped bleeding, but is throbbing with pain.

At the end of the strip a silver haired man stands next to a white and blue private jet. The General drives up alongside the aircraft and opens the driver's door, releasing a cloud of trapped smoke before casually stepping out and approaching the man.

"Ah, Mr Stevens, my friend! How are you today?"

"Where have you been, you're two hours late!" The man responds, removing his mirrored sunglasses and extending his hand for a formal handshake.

"We have had a few set backs, but we are good to go now!"

As The General talks, the skinny boy is busy loading the luggage compartment with the cocaine-laden holdalls from the back of the truck. He has this procedure down to a fine art, emphasizing the regularity of the operation.

"Wow, these guys don't mess around!" Emilio eyes the impressive aircraft.

"I'm not feeling so good, Emilio!" Karl mumbles, clutching his stomach. Emilio ignores him, trying to catch what The General is talking about. He can only hear a mumbled drone of conversation so he edges closer to the side of the truck, but as soon as he does Cathos shunts him, and then ushers them out of the truck at gunpoint. The unwilling mules are escorted over to the aircraft. Valencia is made to board first; she is guided by Cathos straight

through the surprisingly luxurious cabin, boasting cream leather reclining chairs and walnut tabletops. She is pushed into the cockpit where she is tied to one of two extremely comfortable grey seats. Valencia sits in a vexed silence staring at Cathos, trying to figure him out, as he pulls on the rope to ensure her hands are restricted properly. He seems more subdued and thoughtful than his volatile brothers. Emilio walks up and in to the cabin of his own free will. Karl stops walking a few yards from the plane, as his angst is getting the better of him once again and the small plane seems a step too far.

“Keep walking, boy.” Pancho shoves Karl roughly, causing him to fall to his knees. As he looks up at the boarding steps his chest tightens and he struggles to breathe, almost as if someone were trying to smother him.

“I can’t do it. I’m going to die on that plane.”

Pancho points his machine gun down towards Karl’s head and places the tip of the barrel inside Karl’s blood stained ear.

“If you don’t do as I fuckin tell you, you will die before you even get on that plane!”

“I don’t feel so good. I have to lie down!” Karl collapses forward, breaking his fall with his face, head turned to one side, cheek resting on the muddy gravel. Pancho turns to Ray Stevens with his palms upturned.

“Have you ever seen such a chocha?”

Ray shrugs it off, uninterested in the situation, and even less interested in replying to the psychopathic Pancho. Drunk with fear and horror, Karl feels the earth spinning wildly. Pancho is unsympathetic and impatient. He turns his rifle around and places the wooden butt beside Karl’s head, holding the upturned gun like a golf club.

“You better hope I’m off my swing today, stupid. But looking at the size of your big fat melon head, I got a feeling I won’t miss!”

Pancho takes aim at Karl’s head, as though lining up a distant golf pin on an imaginary course. After swaying the rifle lightly he goes into a full golf swing. As he brings the rifle across his shoulder and prepares to violently strike down upon Karl’s head Ray grabs the gun.

“Just drag him up into the cabin and tie him to one of the seats. We’re already two hours behind schedule. We don’t have time to fuck around ditching a body, and this lard ass will be way harder to move as a dead weight.” Frustrated and humiliated by being told what to do, Pancho drags Karl onto the boarding steps, before kicking him in the head as hard as he possibly can. Karl yells in agony and pulls himself up the remaining steps, eager to avoid another kicking. He crawls into the cabin and shakily pulls himself to his feet. Pancho shoves him roughly into the seat next to Emilio.

The boys are tied firmly to their seats with thick green rope and gagged with leather straps. The tight rope digs into Karl's rib cage and puts pressure on his already fragile stomach. The General is busy counting out one thousand US dollars in cash onto the bonnet of the truck, before handing it over proudly to the skinny boy. One thousand US dollars for one day's work is more money than the boy could make in two whole months in the city. Despite his good upbringing and better judgement, without the cartel there is no way he could pay for his mother's hospital bills and support his brothers and sisters.

"You've done well today, boy! Now take the truck back and get yourself back to your family. We will meet again in a fortnight." The General pats him firmly on the back and then boards the plane, assuming the seat at the back of the cabin behind Pancho and Cathos, who are seated directly behind Emilio and Karl.

Ray carries out some last minute checks outside the plane before boarding and walking through to the cockpit. The engine is fired up and immediately shakes the cabin, producing a drone loud enough to drown out any conversation. Karl is in a state of panic, claustrophobic and wounded, bound, gagged and terrified. The plane starts to slowly crawl along, then gathers pace and rises, momentarily touching the ground, making the plane bounce violently. Karl has his feet pressed flat to the floor in distress. The plane balances out and gains altitude quickly, making Karl vomit into his gagged mouth and causing him to choke. Pancho seeing Karl's struggle to breathe and nudges Cathos. The brothers' laugh raucously, revelling in Karl's distress. Emilio looks on helplessly until Karl manages to compose himself, swallowing the sick back down and slowing his frantic breathing.



## Chapter 16: Land of the eternal spring

After three hours of uncomfortable, tense flying the jet nimbly touches down on a rough runway beside a reservoir, deep in the Guatemalan jungle. Crocodiles vanish into the vast lake and toucans watch warily from the trees jutting out of the water, as local villagers flock to greet the plane.

The General is the first passenger to emerge from the jet, lighting a fat Cuban cigar as he takes in his surroundings. Stepping down from the plane he waves mockingly at the Mayan villagers who have been eagerly awaiting the plane to help refuel and earn a humble wage, blissfully unaware of the corrupt cargo they are helping to ship. The aircraft can only fly three thousand miles before refuelling, and their journey is twice as far, so a pit stop is necessary. Guatemala, still recuperating from decades of civil war, is having its society ripped to shreds by the surging influx of drug runners.

“Do you need to go to the bathroom?” Ray Stevens asks politely as he turns to Valencia. Valencia nods her head vigorously, having fought the urge for the past hour. Ray unties her, and the two of them make their way into the cabin and towards the exit. Pancho, seeing Valencia walking freely through the cabin, reacts angrily.

“Where the hell is she going? And why have you untied her?”

Ray looks around swiftly and judgmentally at Pancho.

“I have business other than flying your hostages and crack across the world! I’ve only just had these refurbished and I’d like them to remain clean and urine free! And by the way, Pancho, the next time you murder someone in my plane, you can be the one to replace the blood stained seats and scrub the cabin. Now, can’t we just let these people relieve themselves in a civilised manner so that we get on with our jobs hassle free?”

Ray Stevens fixes his gaze, not giving an inch, fully aware of how volatile and unreasonable Pancho can be. “And another thing. Take those goddamned muzzles off these kids! How are they going to fulfil their task if they die of suffocation before they even get to Mexico!”

Twenty years ago Ray wouldn’t have given a damn about the hostages, but the older he gets the younger they look, and his conscience is starting to get the better of him. In fact, he has his mind set on this being his last mission before he retires from the game altogether. As far as Pancho is concerned, Ray is pushing his luck.

“Never tell me how to do my job, old man. Never!”

“Don’t talk to me like that. These people could have been using the toilets aboard this plane if it wasn’t for you trying to flush the body parts of that poor girl down the pan after you chopped her up!”

“She was getting on my nerves!” Pancho stares vacantly at nothing in particular, as the hostages listen on in despair.

“Yeah, well, the toilets haven’t worked ever since. So I’m untying these people so they can go in the bushes outside.”

Pancho looks towards The General for back up, but The General has no interest in what he views as a petty dispute. Ray waves his hand dismissively towards Pancho, and turns away mumbling to himself, wondering why he bothers trying to reason with unreasonable people. Pancho reluctantly unties the hostages from their chairs and releases them from the plane to relieve themselves in the bushes.

A couple of teenagers push fuel drum trolleys over to the aircraft. Ray checks the silver drums to make sure they are not leaking and that the original seals are intact. Once happy with the condition he pays the boys handsomely and lets them commence with re-fuelling his pride and joy.

Valencia, Emilio and Karl step down from the plane, followed by the Llera brothers and walk hastily to the edge of the ancient looming jungle, headed for an old, clapped out truck beside a row of twisted trees. The forest is so dense in this spot that there is no way of escaping through it. Pancho is walking directly behind the group, aiming his gun and finding the situation highly amusing.

“Excuse me! But I’m going to need a bit of privacy!” Valencia says proudly, realising Pancho is following them into the trees. She is trying her best not to let her vengeful anger get the better of her.

“You will go where I can see you!” Pancho arrogantly responds.

“Well, I can’t fucking go while people are watching!”

“You’re telling the wrong man, lady! I don’t give a fuck if you go here or sat back on that plane!”

Emilio hates the way Pancho is talking to Valencia and cuts in to back her up.

“Maybe you could turn your back for the lady!”

Pancho takes his assault rifle and aims directly at Emilio’s groin.

“Maybe you’ve got a big mouth. Maybe you think you have big balls. Maybe you keep talking then we will see how big they really are!”

Valencia doesn’t want any harm to come to Emilio so she duly drops her pants and knickers and crouches down on the ground as low as she can in an attempt to conceal herself. She starts to pee, mainly because she’s desperate but also because she’s determined to just get the uncomfortable situation over with. Pancho laughs at the episode and glares at her in a predatory manner. The boys turn their backs and urinate quickly. Zipping themselves back up they stand between Pancho and Valencia with their backs facing her

to form a barrier to block the vile pig's sight. Pancho takes a cigarette from the packet in his breast pocket with his left hand, placing it on his stained bottom lip. He sparks up, while glaring at the boys with hatred and holding his gun on them, feeling the urge to kill them both and leave their remains to be consumed by the reptiles. Pancho raises his rifle and starts lazily aiming at each of the boys in turn, in a crude, undignified selection process of who to murder first. Cathos walks up behind Pancho and places his hand on his brother's shoulder. He can see his brother is pent up with anxiety and close to the edge.

"Pancho, let me take over while you get yourself a drink. Things don't need to get out of hand again."

Pancho reluctantly lowers his gun and gives the boys a dirty look before walking away. Cathos turns to the hostages and points to a spare deckchair beside The General and Ray Stevens, twenty feet away.

"I'm going to cut you some slack. Remember, there's nowhere to run. We will be leaving soon."

Cathos walks away and Valencia rushes over to Emilio, wrapping her arms around him.

"I thought he was going to shoot you square in the head, his eye's looked black, as if he was dead inside."

Valencia's choice to run to Emilio hits Karl with intense jealousy. Feeling rejected and left out, pangs of hatred bubble up inside him.

"Hey, I could have been killed just then as well, you know!" Karl vents his frustration directly at the entwined pair.

"I know! Are you ok, too?" Valencia feels slightly awkward, but is reluctant to release Emilio from her embrace.

Valencia looks at Karl's despondent face. She doesn't want to get in the middle of the two boys, and so relinquishes her hold on Emilio. They are all under enough pressure as it is, and she doesn't want any bad feelings to get in between any of them. She side steps away from Emilio, embarrassed at her strong show of affection.

"Don't give me that crap! You don't care." Karl spits, unable to tame his anger.

"Don't you ever say I don't fucking care, Karl. I've just lost a member of my fucking family, you asshole!" Valencia points her finger right in Karl's face.

"Whoa, whoa, calm down, seriously!" Emilio soothes, getting in between them.

Valencia walks away from the argument, keen not to lose her head completely. She walks over to the teenagers who are peacefully filling the

airplane with fuel. She stands beside them and returns their respective smiles, which she finds difficult to fake as she mourns for Elmanda while trying to suppress her rage.

Waves of sickness, heartache and betrayal surge through Karl's body.

"You know how much I like her, Emilio, why didn't you push her away?"

"You're joking, right? You can't be serious, Karl."

"All these years I've been walking in your shadow, watching girls acknowledge you and look straight past me. And all the time I've been loyal, being your best pal, and this is how you repay me."

"She just wanted a hug, it's no big deal, calm down. She's grieving."

Karl starts ranting. As his temper boils over he reaches for a shard of glass from the carcass of the old truck and stabs it into the tree beside him in frustration. He then starts pacing around, toying with the glass, before squaring up to Emilio.

"It's more than that, Emilio. You lead us into all this, and now we are fucked! We are going to die."

"Don't say that, Karl! It's not like that!"

Fuming with blood red rage Karl swings to punch Emilio with his right hand, keeping the glass in his left. Putting all his bodyweight into the punch he clumsily loses his balance and falls onto Emilio, accidentally pushing the glass into Emilio right shoulder. Lying on the floor with Karl on top of him and in considerable pain Emilio reacts angrily.

"You fuckin idiot, get off me!"

Scrambling up, Karl sees blood on his hands and gasps in horror and disbelief.

"Holy fuck, Emilio. I've fucked up!"

Emilio sits up, watching the blood oozing from the top of his ripped shirt and tries to catch his breath.

"No fuckin way, Karl. Oh shit!"

"I didn't mean to stab you, man!"

"You fuckin happy now!"

Valencia looks back, hearing the heated argument between the boys. She sees Emilio clutching his shoulder, which is pouring blood. She instantly starts running towards them, yelling for help. The three brothers and Ray look towards the direction of the commotion and see Emilio's shoulder dripping with blood.

"Looks like I won't have to kill them! They are killing each other." Pancho quips. The General and Cathos start laughing, and pass the vodka bottle round again. Ray sighs at the inconvenience.

"For fuck's sake, it's always me that has to clean up the mess."

“That’s right, gringo! You’re our chapero! Pancho taunts disrespectfully.

“Don’t fucking start, Pancho, or I’ll leave you marooned out here!”

Ray gets up in a temper and storms off to his plane to fetch a first aid kit. He grabs the kit and walks over to the kids.

“Pass me the vodka!” He shouts back to Cathos.

Cathos takes one last gulp and spins the half full bottle of vodka across the ground, much to the annoyance of his elder brothers. Ray investigates the deep cut, which has luckily missed any major arteries and tendons.

“It’s just a flesh wound! You’ll live kid!”

Ray opens the vodka with his teeth and takes a swig, before pulling the large shard of glass out of Emilio’s shoulder. He then pours the vodka generously onto Emilio’s shoulder, making Emilio howl as the excruciating pain runs through him. He tries to compose himself and looks up at Karl while Ray wraps the white bandage tightly around Emilio’s wound.

Valencia stands over them, relieved that the situation is not as serious as it had at first looked. Ray laughs, realising the state of paranoia they are all in.

“That should stop the bleeding. You’re lucky. Another half an inch to the left and this could have caused some serious damage! I think we should get you all back on the plane before you kill yourselves.” Ray dusts himself off and saunters back towards the plane. Emilio hauls himself up, and then extends his good arm to help Karl to his feet.

“I can’t take any more of this! Where are we going now?” Karl whimpers.

Emilio smiles grimly “We’re going to Mexico, my friend!”

## Chapter 17: Baja California - decommissioned air base

The plane descends onto the long, desolate runway of an abandoned military base, at precisely one minute to midnight.

There is a dilapidated metal aircraft hanger and an old air traffic control tower. Around the perimeter is a thirty-foot high metal fence, topped with barbed wire.

The plane crawls slowly towards the enormous hanger, where it comes to smooth halt. Pancho gets up from his seat slowly and goes to untie Karl from his chair. Before freeing him, he punches him as hard as he can in the stomach, mortifying Emilio to his core. Ray walks into the cabin from the cockpit and sees Pancho taking the cheap shot at Karl.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Leave the boy alone. You’re getting worse!”

“You disrespect me one more time old man, and it’ll be the last thing you ever do!”

“Real smooth, Pancho!” Ray looks at him in disgust.

The General and Cathos step off the plane nonchalantly, unconcerned by the bickering. Ray follows, unwilling to waste any more of his time or energy. Pancho pushes Karl out of the plane and down the boarding steps, keen to inflict as much pain as he can. Karl’s exhausted body hits the concrete hard. He lies motionless for a moment, trying to compose himself, before struggling to get to his feet. Valencia goes to help him up, but Pancho pushes her back violently. Dehydrated and in immense agony Karl stares directly up at a row of long, low hanging lights on the high ceiling. He closes his eyes briefly and silently recites the Lord’s Prayer to himself, in a desperate attempt to change the tide of circumstance. He then slowly gets to his feet and is immediately pushed at gunpoint, along with Emilio and Valencia, to the centre of the aircraft hanger. At the back of the hanger are a white van and a black sports car. To one side is a metal door. Through this door appears an enormous man, dressed in full military attire. His greasy black beard, dark sunglasses and camouflage cap almost completely conceal his face. Emilio has a strange feeling of déjà vu, but before he can place the man he is distracted, as Ray emerges from the jet carrying a briefcase, jacket and hat. He steps down from the plane, looking back nostalgically one final time.

“I have to leave immediately, I have an appointment tomorrow afternoon.” He addresses The General.

“Yes, I remember you saying. I will contact you in two weeks.”

“Very well. Adios!” Ray has no intention of seeing The General or his brothers ever again, despite his loyal alliance with them for the past decade. Ray turns away without acknowledging anyone else and heads towards his prized black 1981 Pontiac Trans AM. As he starts the engine he looks at the three kids with guilt. He slowly drives past them, knowing how the Llera brothers dispose of their mules once they are through with them. He puts his foot down and drives away from the airbase, leaving his conscience behind.

The fat soldier stands looking the mules up and down, with his eyes particularly fixated on Valencia’s voluptuous body.

“Where did you find the girl?” He asks in a husky voice. The General ignores the question and begins his own interrogation.

“What the fuck happened with Diego? I heard you shot him in a hotel in Lima? Have you got shit for brains? We don’t need that kind of attention.” The General’s tone is dangerous. Emilio suddenly realizes where he has seen the obese soldier before.

“He was pissing me off. I tried to get him to leave with me that night, but he wouldn’t listen!” Replies The Mammoth defensively.

“It was a fucking mess. And this organisation will not tolerate unprofessional conduct!”

The Mammoth sees Pancho focusing on him, as if he is sizing up his prey.

“I get the message, it won’t happen again!” The Mammoth backs down, aware that he needs to defuse the situation if he wants to walk away.

“You’re fuckin right it won’t happen again!” The General growls. “Now, get these kids out of my sight, and if they try anything stupid, then kill one of them to teach the others a lesson!”

The Mammoth takes the massive shotgun that’s strapped over his shoulder and points it towards a door. Emilio enters the room first, followed closely by Karl and Valencia. There are lockers on the left hand side and benches fixed to the back wall. Boxes of military uniform are stacked everywhere. The Mammoth closes the door behind them and locks it shut. As soon as the door is locked Karl sets upon Emilio with pent up rage.

“Well done, Emilio. I hope you’re real proud of yourself! You know you always think you’re so smart, but take a good look around you. We’re fucked!”

Emilio feels massively responsible and keeps thinking back to the airport where he first saw the man with the scar. Emilio is confused as to why the man was at the same hotel as them in Lima, why The Mammoth killed him, and why he’s here now. It just doesn’t make any sense to him. He also wonders why The Mammoth asked where they found the girl. It was almost as though he was expecting the boys all along. Emilio feels like crying but instead vents it as anger.

“Fuck you, Karl. It’s not my fault we walked straight into a fucking drug cartel. It could have happened to anyone! Sorry for trying to do something amazing with my life, for trying to help others, for not sitting on my ass and watching the world go by. Do you really think I ever meant for any of this to happen?”

“Your wrong! It is your fault, and it couldn’t have just happened to anyone. This is ridiculous. You dragged me down to South America, lying through your fuckin teeth, then lead me on some crazy wild goose chase through the rainforest without knowing where the hell you’re going. And then you ignore the advice of the people that went out of their way to help us. We should never have stopped. Elmanda told us not to. He knew it could be dangerous, but you wouldn’t listen. You had to try and steal drugs to make money for your own personal gain. You’re selfish. I don’t believe you

ever cared about curing cancer, you just had some crazy deluded dream about how you could become rich and famous, and as soon as you saw an easier way, everything else went out the window. And now Elmanda's dead and we're probably next!" Karl pauses mid-outburst because he can't see any emotion from Emilio or Valencia and it starts to plague him deeply. "I just don't get you guys! We're being held by a fucking drug cartel and you don't seem to give a shit! Especially you, Valencia, you've just lost someone who was like part of your family!"

"Of course I fucking care, Karl!" Valencia screams savagely at the top of her voice. The boys are stunned into silence. Valencia puts her hand on her chest to compose herself. She waits, absorbing the silence, reflecting on what Karl has said. Staring at the wall in front of her she replies without making eye contact.

"Elmanda wouldn't want me to sit here feeling sorry for him. He would want me to stand up for myself, to work out a way to get out of this situation. I won't let it get the better of me, otherwise these vile pigs will have won."

"Valencia is right. We have to stay focused, what good is it going to do if we all start breaking down and turning on one another?" Emilio says firmly. Karl ignores Emilio and focuses on Valencia.

"You should be pissed off with Emilio. If he hadn't been selfish and gone after the drugs Elmanda would still be alive!" Karl says viciously.

"Yes, Emilio made a stupid, selfish decision. And Elmanda and I could have kept walking away, but when you told us what was happening we decided to go back and try and pull him out of there. That was our choice, Karl. No one forced us to turn around, we just got unlucky and they stumbled across us before we could get back to Emilio. What's done is done, there's no changing the bad decisions of our past, we just have to move on and learn from them.

"Yeah, you're right!" Karl is amazed by Valencia's positive outlook.

"My only thought right now is turning the tables on these pigs. I would love to murder each and every one of them." Valencia states calmly.

Karl, unable to see how they could ever turn the tables when everything is stacked against them, breaks down in tears, the sheer weight and pressure of the situation too much for him to bear any longer. Emilio and Valencia stare as he slips down onto the cold, hard concrete floor and starts sobbing into his hands in despair. Valencia stoops down and puts her arms around him, hugging him tightly.

"We're going to get out of this mess, you hear me, Karl!" Valencia soothes.



Karl nods his head, wiping the excess tears from his cheeks. He desperately wants to believe what Valencia's saying, but his gut instinct is telling him otherwise. He is worrying so much it makes him feel sick.

"I'm sorry. This is crazy. I just feel so exhausted."

"We have to stick together and stay positive! We need to stay focused!" Valencia tries her best to lift his morale.

Karl is finding it difficult to buy into Valencia's positive words.

"We're gonna die out here, aren't we?" He weeps pitifully.

"We are not going to die, Karl! Now stop being such a pussy." Valencia loses her patience. "You can sit here feeling sorry for yourself, but don't expect to get any respect from me for it, especially in this situation. We all need to be pulling in the same direction, Karl. You speak about Emilio being selfish, but you have to think about how your actions may affect other people, too. And right now, you need to try and make an effort for us."

"Yeah, I'll try and make an effort, but it's hard." Karl feels weak and exhausted, but is prepared to try and control his anxiety. "Are these guys real soldiers?" He asks, trying to get a grasp on the situation.

"I think they probably were, and if they still are, then they are corrupt as hell." Responds Emilio.

"If I ask you guys a personal question, will you give me an honest answer?" Valencia asks. Karl perks up, intrigued by what Valencia might be about to say.

"Shoot!" Emilio replies.

"Do I smell? Because you guys have an unusual odour going on, and I'm getting paranoid I may smell the same."

Emilio laughs. Karl stoops his head and sniffs his armpit.

"Well, I'm aware that I'm starting to stink, and Karl always smells like a wet dog!"

Valencia puts her hand over her mouth trying to hide her beaming smile, triggered by Emilio hitting the nail on the head, because it was Karl's odour that set her off to begin with.

"Yeah, that's right! Kick a man when he's down. Of course I'm starting to smell a bit. We haven't had a proper wash or a change of clothes since the village. What do you expect?" Karl responds hotly.

"But seriously, how bad do I smell?" Valencia tries her best to keep a straight face.

Emilio leans over to Valencia and softly places his nose next to her smooth neck. Valencia closes her eyes as he gets close, feeling an electricity run through her, all the way down to her abdomen.

"Yep. You definitely stink. And there was me thinking it was Karl."

The remark doesn't register with Valencia, who is feeling blissfully warm after Emilio's close contact. Emilio takes her silence as a sign she's offended and tries to rectify the situation.

"Just kidding, Val!"

Emilio lies down on one of the benches beside Valencia to get some much-needed rest. Karl and Valencia sit in thoughtful silence.

In the adjoining room, The Mammoth and the Llera brothers are sitting in front of two long wooden desks, on top of which a few old-fashioned computer terminals and printers are gathering dust. The obsolete equipment is surrounded by empty coffee cups and cigarette packets. The men are orchestrating the next phase of their mission. At one end of the desk are a package of cocaine and four bottles of bourbon, one of which is nearly empty. The General fills a stained shot glass with the dregs of the bottle. He reaches over and snatches the white parcel of cocaine, throwing it down in front of him on the desk. Cutting a slit into the clear plastic parcel he dabs his finger into the powder and rubs it onto his gums, causing them to go numb instantly. He then spoons out a large amount of coke onto the grubby desk. Using a credit card he breaks down some of the bigger rocks and divides the lumpy powder into ten long, thick lines. The General takes a twenty dollar bill from his bulging leather wallet and rolls it into a cylinder, before hoovering three of the generous lines up into his nostrils, shuddering as the toxins start to instantly surge through him. The General relaxes back in his chair and lights another Cuban cigar, offering the twenty dollar bill to Pancho, who wastes no time demolishing the remaining seven lines of blow with uncontrollable greed. Cathos watches his brothers' demeanours change and rolls his eyes.

"Why do you have to pollute your head with this shit? I don't want no fuck ups this time."

The General laughs and raises his shot glass to Cathos, before necking it and immediately opening another bottle.

"You hear this, Pancho, our brother wants us to keep a clear head!"

The General fills Pancho's shot glass and Pancho raises a similar toast to mock his brother, before knocking the shot back and placing the upturned empty glass onto the desk, while staring blankly at his brother.

"Relax, Cathos. You're too uptight. Have a drink!" Pancho grunts.

"Not right now. Someone needs to make sure everything is done properly!" Counters Cathos.

“How about you? You’ve been sat there with an empty glass for the past half an hour and you haven’t said a word?” Pancho patronizingly addresses The Mammoth.

The Mammoth looks at the three brothers, who all stare directly at him waiting for a response, as an uneasy silence descends.

“I’m just listening. I’m tired, that’s all, but yeah, I’ll have another.” The Mammoth tries to keep his cool. The General pours a shot of warm Bourbon, filling the glass carelessly until it overflows on to the messy desk. The Mammoth drinks the liquor quickly and then stands up.

“Right, I’ll go load the dope into the van and get a couple of hours sleep. You’ll want me to drive again, I guess?”

“No! Not this time!” The General says sharply. “Cathos can drive. Have another drink, take some blow!”

The Mammoth feels uneasy. He senses a hidden agenda and begins to feel paranoid.

“We’re friends, right?” The General smiles dangerously.

“Yeah, a long time!”

“Well, friends play games. How about we play a game.”

The Mammoth breaks into a sweat. His hands get clammy as he reaches for the bottle of Bourbon. He pours himself another shot, which he hopes will take the edge off the uncomfortable feeling that he is struggling to ignore.

“I don’t know. We’ve never played games before.” The Mammoth shifts nervously in his chair. “What’s this about, man? You pissed about Diego?”

“Yeah, I fuckin am! The General slams his hand down on the table. “I tell you to kill him discretely. And so you shoot him in a fucking hotel. And then you get on a fucking plane from Lima airport directly to Baja, instead of meeting us in the rainforest, because you’re too fucking lazy. Are you stupid? How do you know you haven’t been followed here? And now all of a sudden I get a call from Vipercom saying they want to meet me at the Salt Mine. It’s not fucking good. I haven’t seen them in three years. If we do our job properly they leave us alone, and now there are bodies turning up in hotel rooms, and we look like some Mickey fucking Mouse outfit.”

While The General speaks Pancho walks to the back of the room where an old red axe is hanging on the wall. He looks over his shoulder at The Mammoth who is shrinking into his chair as The General barks at him. Pancho slowly lifts the axe from the wall and turns. He walks up behind The Mammoth silently and swings down to the ground, across the Mammoth’s outstretched right leg. An agonised wail rises from the enormous man.

As the sound echoes through the vast building Karl and Valencia look at each other and shake Emilio from his slumber. Emilio springs to his feet as the howls grow louder and more desperate.

A second and third hack leave The Mammoth's foot hanging grotesquely from his ankle. He bellows in pain as he falls from his chair like a massive sack of potatoes, gripping his lower shin. Turning onto his colossal belly he flaps frantically around like a dying fish.

"Jesus! Sounds like someone's getting butchered in there!" Emilio whispers.

The Mammoth crawls slowly through the door, leaving a trail of gore and a symphony of maniacal laughter behind him. Pancho follows him, determined to chop the foot clean off. Pancho swings again at the slowly moving target, successfully performing the brutal amputation.

"They're fucking killing that fat solider, aren't they?" Karl paces up and down nervously with one hand on his head and one on his hip.

"Oh my God, it sounds like it. Karl, cover your ears!" Valencia says strictly.

"You gotta be kidding me! He was one of them. We are so screwed!" Karl walks to the corner of the room with his fingers muting his ears while humming to himself to block out the horrifying sounds.

The Mammoth gets to his remaining foot and hops along twice before crashing back down to the floor with his eyes drowning in tears. Again, he tries to get up and spring along to get to the wide-open hanger doors but he keeps falling. With every failed attempt the Llera brothers have a new surge of hysterics.

"Look at this pinche culero! Dirty scumbag; hopping around like some fuckin fat kangaroo!" Pancho mocks in a demented frenzy.

The General and Cathos can't stop laughing, watching The Mammoth scramble out desperately onto the surrounding arid plains with blood streaming from his severed stump. The General walks back into the hanger to fetch something while Pancho lights a fat marijuana joint outside the hanger doors. He offers it to Cathos who refrains, opting for a standard cigarette while he watches the show. The General walks out of the hanger with an old flamethrower strapped to his back to a fanfare of whooping and a hollering from his goading brothers. He marches up comically to The Mammoth, who has lost so much blood that he can hardly move.

"Please stop the bleeding, don't kill me, I have a daughter!" He pleads desperately.

“I know. I’m doing her a favour. Pedazo de mierda! By the way, you’re fired!”

A sputtering eight-foot stream of ferocious fire is unleashed onto The Mammoth. Two thousand degrees melt his skin and cook his eyeballs instantaneously. He squeals like a live pig being thrown on a bonfire and wriggles helplessly while his flesh bubbles and pops. Cathos and Pancho look on like wide-eyed children at a fireworks display, as the blaze illuminates against the dark of night. The General keeps activating the torch with devastating bursts as he tries to completely cremate The Mammoth’s enormous carcass. The limited propane gas runs out, and the General stands frustrated over the hollowed smoking corpse. He walks back to his brothers to a round of applause.

“Let’s go celebrate not having to listen to that fat fuckin idiota again! And Pancho, you can go clean up the blood this time.”

## Chapter 18: The salt mine

After an hour of scrubbing the hanger floors with an oxygen bleach to make any forensic investigation futile, the Llera brothers enjoy several hours of debauchery, re-enacting The Mammoth’s demise. Cathos lays off the juice, to make sure at least one of them can hold it together for the next phase. The three brothers eventually fall asleep in their chairs.

Emilio, Karl and Valencia are fully awake. Karl is going out of his mind, his imagination conjuring up ever-darker scenarios. Emilio and Valencia sit quietly with their backs against the wall, unsure of what will happen next.

Dawn breaks through the cracks in the hanger's metal panelled roof. The rays hit the floor like spotlights. Cathos awakens first and walks off to make coffee with a cheap black percolator in the corner of the room. The spurt, bloop and hiss, combined with the aroma, stirs The General and Pancho, who both reach for more cocaine to re-invigorate themselves. Cathos parks mugs of black coffee under the powdered noses of his brothers and walks towards the locker room, picking up a machine gun, which is carelessly dumped on one of the defunct printers. Cathos stands outside the locker room and knocks on the door, calling out instructions.

"Stand against the back wall with your hands in the air where I can see!"

The three petrified figures duly line up against the wall. Cathos unlocks the door slowly and moves in with his machine gun at the ready. He pulls Valencia forward and slaps her on the backside.

"Now walk out into the hanger and get in the back of the van."

Cathos guides the group to the open van doors. They huddle together in a corner, wedged between the hefty stacks of cocaine-packed holdalls, which are stacked up to the ceiling. Cathos leers at Valencia as he shuts the rear doors of the van.

The General and Pancho laughingly exchange insults as they walk towards the hanger doors. They slide the doors open, allowing Cathos to drive the van out. The brothers close the hanger doors behind the van, padlocking them shut, before jumping into the front cabin and setting off for Baja California Salt Mine.

"Where do you think they are taking us?" Valencia asks quietly.

"I don't know!" Emilio replies uselessly.

Karl is no mood to talk, letting the motion of the truck gently lull him to sleep. As he falls asleep his head crashes into Valencia's lap, and he awakens, embarrassed and determined to fight the desire to sleep, but after ten minutes he finally surrenders, and falls asleep on Emilio's shoulder.

"Sleeping beauty, right!" Emilio makes an attempt at humour to lift the painful silence.

Karl slips into a lucid dream and finds himself back in their suite at the Hotel Tropicana, sitting on the black leather sofa with his feet up on the glass coffee table watching a documentary about the Barkley 100; the toughest and most demanding ultramarathon on the planet. The documentary states that only 14 people in 30 years have ever completed it. All of a sudden he hears Valencia's voice call out to him in a sultry tone from the bathroom.

"Karl, I'm in the shower. Could you come in here and soap me up?"

The dream feels so real. He stands to attention with sexual urges and walks to the bathroom with his heart beating so vibrantly that he is starting

to have trouble breathing. As he gets to the bathroom he sees the door ajar with copious amounts of steam arising from it. Karl puts his hand on the door handle, but as soon as he does so he hears a knock at the hotel room door. He is going to ignore the knock and continue into the bathroom when a second knock is followed by Emilio's voice.

"Yo! Karl! Let me in."

Karl thinks about answering the door, but he knows he'll never get this opportunity again. Ignoring Emilio's constant knocking he walks into the steamy bathroom, where a glass shower screen is concealing the body within. Karl begins to get undressed, his chest thumps with desire. Naked, he walks to the side of the screen, takes a deep breath and steps into the shower. To his horror he sees Pancho, fully dressed, standing under the shower head soaked to the skin, holding a large Smith & Western handgun. Karl is rooted to the spot, feeling exposed, vulnerable and helpless.

"Would you wash my gun, Karl?" Pancho speaks, but it is Valencia's soft voice emanating from his mouth. Pancho raises his gun, pointing it directly at Karl's cranium and fires. Karl jumps out of his skin, awakening suddenly.

"How you doing, Karl? You've been asleep for the past three hours." Emilio asks.

"Feels like it's only been five minutes." Karl nurses his head as if checking it's still in one piece.

The van passes a road sign, which reads Baja California Salt Mine. The deep shaft salt mine is active and produces four million tonnes of salt a year, most of which is exported to the US. The van pulls up to the security gates. A short, plump, bearded guard stares out of the small white kiosk gatehouse. He nods to the Llera brothers and opens the gate without question. The van drives on down a salt trodden track, travelling through canyons of salt pyramids to the grand industrial mining facility itself. On one side of the grounds are old office blocks and maintenance warehouses. Within walking distance is the mineshaft, which is bored out of the facing hillside. At the opening of the mineshaft are a series of walkways, which have been constructed for mechanics to be able to carry out regular maintenance work on the hydraulic conveyor system. The entire mechanism is vast; the yellow paintwork has been ravaged by time, revealing the rusting metal beneath. A network of pipes lead from the opening of the shaft to the top of the steep hill. At the top of the hill the land flattens out as it leads to the perimeter fence, which runs the length of the hillside, and surrounds the entire mine.

The van is steered through enormous grey metal doors into a giant warehouse at the back of the office blocks. The van grinds to a halt, the

Llera brothers jump out and walk confidently past a row of seemingly abandoned cars, forklift trucks and production machinery.

The brothers' wander into a dated looking reception area, where they are greeted by a towering black man with a clean-shaven head and goatee beard. He has an intense authority which he has used to climb the food chain and become general manager of the mine.

"How are we today, gentlemen?" He enquires with concern, as he can smell the strong liquor a mile off.

"How we are is none of your concern, Dwight!" Pancho snaps, sensing the critical tone.

Dwight doesn't respond to Pancho, but turns to The General to try and diffuse any potential hostility.

"Need I remind you, General, that the representatives of Vipercom are here on site because your employees don't know how to behave. They haven't been to the mine for over three years and now they have taken it upon themselves to check my side of the operation with a fine-toothed comb."

"I know, I know, and I can assure you that I take this kind of thing very seriously. I took immediate action. I fired the guy responsible only last night."

"Good! Luckily for you I run a pretty tight ship down here, so there's not much chance the Vipercom guys are going to discover any of our side projects. But we don't want any bloodshed here. I'm serious!" He looks directly at Pancho. "General, you know how important this visit is for us. Remember, I have a legitimate business to run here."

"Are Vipercom going to turn the screws again?" The General knows perfectly well what the answer will be.

"Every quarter they take a couple of heads from me, and they still expect the same turnover, you know how it works!"

"You're at the wrong end of the business, Dwight!"

"I'm at the right end for keeping my hands clean!" The man responds, looking judgementally at Pancho.

"Well, someone has to do the dirty work! And that's why they pay us the big bucks!" Pancho boasts, reacting to Dwight's critical tone.

"Let's get to work gentlemen. And Pancho, please feel free to check your ego in at reception, you can pick it up on your way back out!"

Cathos laughs, siding with Dwight, as he knows exactly how big-headed his volatile brother is.

"We have mules, a girl and two boys. They don't fit the stereotypes border control usually look for." The General tells Dwight.



“Excellent. We only have two people, and for this shipment we could do with more. Where did you find them this time?”

“Same place Vipercom has had us guarding for the last couple of years.”

“What are they protecting out there, anyway?”

“Plants. That’s all it can be. There is nothing else. It just happens to be conveniently close to where we’ve been growing our coca!”

Dwight shrugs. “Better go and fetch your guests.” He steers the conversation back on track.

Cathos walks to the van where a mechanic is waiting, smoking a cigarette. The man has a round, friendly face with wide green eyes, which watch loyally over Cathos as he opens the rear doors.

“Hey, Higuain, how you doin?”

“Ah mi amigo, I’m happy. What we got here.”

“The usual. Mules and cocaine. I’m gonna take these three to the training room and leave you to do your magic with the shit.”

Cathos ushers the teenagers out, leading them through smoke stained corridors to a classroom. Higuain hauls the holdalls onto a pneumatic trolley, ready to be taken into the adjoining garage for packing into the waiting cars.

Valencia opens the door and enters the large training room first. As she enters she sees five rows of folding chairs. At the front of the room is a large whiteboard; at the back is a projector and a black-curtained photo booth. There is a large window, which is propped open to give the stuffy room some much needed oxygen in the absence of any air conditioning. Sitting in the second row on the far right hand side are a young couple. The girl is almost skeletal, with purple hair and numerous facial piercings, the boy looks a few years younger than her, with cropped hair and a body encased in comfort fat. They both look stoned. Emilio, Karl and Valencia are brought into the room and take their seats in the back row, as directed. The young couple look round at the new arrivals, and are immediately concerned by what they see. Jaded, grubby, and terrified, they are a far cry from the free-spirited couple they have joined.

Members of The General’s organization approached the young couple as they were travelling through a small town a couple of miles from the salt mine. The couple were trawling bars trying to score marijuana when they came to the attention of The General’s cousin Mata. Mata told them that if they helped take a couple of big packages of marijuana over the border they would be given \$5,000 up front and another \$5,000 on delivery. The couple had taken small quantities over the border many times before, so this was just a step up, and maybe even a way out of drug running. \$10,000 would set

them up. Mata gave them \$5,000 and then drove them to the salt mine, where they were introduced to Dwight. Dwight eased their concerns by telling them they could walk away any time they wanted.

Sitting in the training room with Pancho, Cathos, and their machine guns, the couple look at each other fearfully. Dwight and the Llera brothers stand in front of the whiteboard displaying a map of Baja California, and then Dwight begins to brief the five mules.

“Ok. Here at the mine we will be loading three vehicles with stock for export into North America. Each of the cars will have one guard until you reach Tijuana, which is approximately eight hours from here, so you’ll get there by nightfall. Once there, the three guards will get out and you will then drive your vehicles to the border. You will get through border control using the passports and driving licences that we are going to supply you with. Once each car is through the border our contacts within the San Diego police force will escort you to our rendezvous point on the upper east side of San Diego. Here you will receive payment and then be sent on your way.

The skeletal girl puts up her hand to ask Dwight a question.

“Yes, what is it?” Dwight asks abruptly.

“Exactly how much is being loaded into each car and exactly what are we exporting?”

“It’s none of your concern!”

“It is our concern! We have a deal and the deal is for two packages of marijuana. Is this a set up? How will we know who your contacts in the San Diego police force are? This is crazy!”

“You needn’t concern yourself with these minor details!”

“These are not minor details! There is something more serious going on here that we haven’t been told about. Look, thanks for the opportunity, but we have changed our minds! You can proceed without us!”

Dwight looks down at his paperwork and smiles, shakes his head and begins to laugh. The General joins in, and soon Pancho and Cathos catch the laughing bug. Dwight then composes himself.

“That will not be possible. You do not have the luxury of changing your mind!”

“But you said we could walk away whenever we wanted!”

“Well, it looks like I’ve changed my mind, doesn’t it?” Dwight turns his attention to her boyfriend. “What about you, buddy boy? You got any questions? Anything at all?” The couple are intimidated and fall into silence. “Good! I’m glad we’re all clear on the whole question and answer thing!”

Dwight turns to Cathos.

“We need to get their photos taken for their new passports.”  
Cathos guides the group over to the old black booth and has them take turns to sit on the small swivel chair behind the faded curtain. Once all the pictures have dropped out of the collection vent Dwight gathers them up and disappears down the hall to pass on to the team’s forger, who quickly conjures up legitimate driving license and passports for the mules.

## Chapter 19: Load up and hit the road

Fresh from having their passport photos taken, Emilio, Karl and Valencia seize the chance to check in with each other while the Llera brothers are caught up talking amongst themselves.

“What if we get caught going over the border? We’ll go to jail, and what will happen to us then?” Karl is close to hysterical, pulling at his own hair painfully hard, unable to control his emotions. Valencia puts her arm around him to try and comfort and stabilize him, looking directly at Emilio with an anxious expression. She pulls Emilio in to form a group hug, to deliver her thoughts without being overheard.

“I say we grab their guns and murder every fucking one of these bastards right now!” Valencia breathes with focused anger.

“No, we can’t do that, we can’t do anything right now. We don’t how many of their people are on this site, plus they have security. Look, lets just drive towards the border and stick as closely together as possible. We should wait patiently for our moment and then try to get the hell out of this situation.” Emilio whispers.

Valencia drops her head to think. Raising her head she winks at Emilio to silently signify her agreement. Karl looks at Emilio in desperate hope as he stands wiping his tear filled eyes.

The young couple cling to each other desperately as they stare out of the opened window and over the quarry, talking quietly to one another.

“I reckon I could climb those metal pipes on the mineshaft. If I could get up there then I could easily climb the fence above it. What about you, Logan?” The girl asks; her eyes fixed on her target.

“I couldn’t climb that thing. You’re talking crazy, Shannon, it’s too risky!”

“Well, if we stay here we’re as good as dead or worse; we could end up in prison for the rest of our lives. I just can’t face it!”

“Don’t be stupid, we could get the drugs over the border, we’ve done it before.”

“Not the amount they have in mind. And we don’t even know what we’re smuggling anymore. And what if we do get over the border? They said that we could walk away any time we wanted, and that was bullshit. If we do make it across the border, what makes you think they’ll let us walk away then? I’m sorry, babe, but I’m not waiting around to find out!”

Shannon looks round at the Llera brothers who are so caught up in their conversation that they don’t notice her slyly opening the window fully and slipping out. Logan tries to grab her arm but she pulls it back. He follows

after her, scared of being left behind, but he is less nimble than Shannon and falls as he tries to clumsily scramble through it. Emilio, Karl and Valencia watch Shannon and Logan running for the mineshaft, with the Llera brothers temporarily oblivious.

“What the fuck!” Shouts Pancho with a grimace of shocked realization, as he notices Logan running across the quarry. He walks up to the window and lets rip a few rounds from his machine gun, shattering the glass and ricocheting off a steel strut which supports the grids of walkways stretching out from the colossal mine shaft opening. Pancho fires another wave of bullets, which spark loudly as they hit the metal hydraulic pulley system, pipes and platforms, narrowly missing the moving targets. Logan and Shannon jump over the railings and onto the maintenance platform, which runs down to the shaft itself. Dwight, hearing the punching machine gun fire from down the hall sprints back into the training room, wondering what the hell is going on. As soon as he becomes fully aware of the situation he vents his frustration on Pancho.

“Cease fire! What the hell do you think your doing? They can’t go anywhere, there’s no way out over there!”

Dwight kicks the remaining shards of glass from the windowsill and hurdles through the empty frame in pursuit of the fleeing figures.

Shannon and Logan stand hesitantly peering down at the vast mineshaft void below them.

“Well this was a shitty idea! There’s no way of climbing over this thing! The drop goes on forever!” Logan is distraught.

Shannon turns and sees Dwight heading down the platform towards them.

“It’ll be a cinch, like gym class back in high school, just don’t look down or even think about what you’re about to climb over!”

“I can’t climb that thing!” Logan frets, looking over his shoulder as Dwight walks coolly and calmly in their direction, convinced they won’t venture much further.

“I wanna live, Logan!” Shannon yells in sheer panic as Dwight advance ever closer, forcing her to step up on to the edge of the first long pipe and balance her way nimbly along it, placing one foot in front of the other and pulling herself up through the overhanging pipes, trying her hardest not to look down at the seemingly endless chasm below. She hurries across three other adjoining pipes, losing her balance momentarily before regaining her composure and pulling herself victoriously up on to the flat land. Shannon looks back at Logan briefly, mouthing the word “sorry” before jumping straight on to the tall perimeter fence. Once clear of the fence she runs out

on to the main road, waving her arms in front of an approaching lorry which stops for the young woman before driving off with her.

Logan places his foot out in front of him onto the first pipe, his heart pounding with fear. Dwight has finally caught up with him and is just a meter behind with his arm out over the mineshaft, trying to grab the back of Logan's T-Shirt, but he is just out of reach.

"Come down, boy! Don't be stupid now!" Dwight addresses the shaking teen.

Grabbing an overhanging pipe, Logan tries to pull himself up, but he has no upper body strength, and loses his footing. He throws up in his mouth as he is left hanging over the never-ending drop.

"Help! Fucking help me, I don't want to die!"

"Just hold on, I'm not having anybody die on my mine today. Now just do as I tell you. Take deep breaths and concentrate on your grip!" Dwight speaks calmly as he grabs a safety harness from a grey metal maintenance box attached to the railings.

"Be careful, boy, just stay still. I'm going to throw you this harness. Looks like I'll have to loop it around your neck!"

Logan nods, struggling to remain calm, his legs kicking as he tries to adjust his grip.

"Once the harness loop is round your neck I will pull it tight, but don't panic, it's just so I can catch you if your hands slip. I'll pull you in before you suffocate, ok! Have you got all that?"

Logan's fingers slip as he tries to re-gain his grip once again, he cannot gain the same tight hold as he had held just moments before as the blood is cruelly draining from his fingertips and his bodyweight is becoming too much for his feeble grasp. Dangling by one arm over the abyss Logan starts whimpering like a young child. Dwight throws the loop but misses Logan's head.

"Now stay still, boy! I'm going to try again."

Dwight throws the harness again, but hits Logan's arm. Logan's body starts to jerk as his legs kick aimlessly. His aching fingers go numb. He feels the harness being thrown against his torso repeatedly, as he looks up at the sky wondering if this is the last time he'll ever gaze at the heavens. The perspiration from Logan's palms make it impossible for him to maintain his grip, and the laws of physics take over. He falls, hitting a series of sharp-edged conveyor plates on his morbid descent, eventually landing on a long rusty post sticking out from the mineshaft wall, which pierces his back and perforates his stomach leaving him hanging like a slaughtered pig on a meat hook.

Dwight looks down into the dark void and slams his fists in frustration. He doesn't care about the boy; his only concern is whether the Vipercom representatives find out about the incident.

Below, unseen from above, a couple of miners stand startled, Logan's blood dripping from their boiler suits.

"Of all days!" Dwight curses, as he peers down into the darkness. He pulls out his cell phone and quickly organises a clean up operation. With a deep breath, he turns to face the Llera brothers, who are watching with amusement from the training room window. Dwight makes his way back, his face like thunder, trying to concoct a plausible excuse to offer the miners. He climbs back through the broken window and addresses his audience.

"What did I say to you this morning? No bloodshed! And now I have this! You'd better pray no one finds out."

"Or what!" Pancho drawls, looking to get a rise out of Dwight.

"Or else." Dwight stands his ground.

Pancho starts sizing Dwight up. "You don't control me. Nobody controls me, man. Fucking puto!"

"You need to teach your brother some manners, General!" Dwight growls.

"Well, you are kinda disrespecting him. He was only trying to stop the mules from getting away. Now we have to hope that girl doesn't go running to the cops!" The General replies, sticking up for his volatile sibling.

"We own the cops around here. You know that!"

Pancho takes his machine gun and points it at Dwight. Emilio, Karl and Valencia have backed themselves silently into a corner, determined to make space between them and the increasingly charged atmosphere.

"Oh yeah, hide behind a gun! Real brave! If you have a problem, why don't you settle it like a man!" Taunts Dwight.

The General is growing bored. He knows from the look in Pancho's eyes that he's about to flip. He can't be bothered to clean up after him, so he pushes the tip of Pancho's gun slowly downward until it's pointing at the floor.

"Enough of these games! Let's get these mules loaded!"

He walks out of the room and Cathos signals for the teenagers to follow, while Pancho and Dwight exchange vindictive glances. Dwight walks out of the room with his head held high, to collect the fake passports and driving licenses.

The group are guided back down the corridors and into a large maintenance workshop. To the far right of the garage sit three estate cars, one green, one red and one black. They all look like normal family cars. The

black one has been jacked up and the wheels removed. Higuain stands to one side, in front of a metal work bench, wrapping cocaine parcels in foil, then coating them in aviation grease before finally wrapping them in a layer of cellophane, in an attempt to throw the dogs at the border off the scent. The cocaine is then packed into the car tyres, twelve kilograms in each wheel. Higuain is an expert mechanic who has made incisions in the wheel hubs, so that the vehicles are still robust enough to look normal and drive properly.

“Woah, this is major!” Karl murmurs as he watches the processes in action.

Emilio and Valencia are both taken aback as the task in front of them becomes a harsh reality. Dwight walks in behind the group, holding the fake documents, and starts dishing out orders, putting his negative episode with Pancho out of his mind for the time being.

“Obviously, we’re a couple of mules down now, but we have to keep on moving. We won’t be able to ship all the cocaine, but we can move most of it. You all know the routine by now, so Cathos and Pancho might as well hit the road with the mules, and leave us to tend to Vipercom.” Dwight is eager to see the back of the Pancho and get back to the mine to check on the cleaning process.

“I have two cars finished already, so your mules are good to go.” Higuain cuts in.

“Ok then.” Dwight motions to Karl. “You, fat boy, you drive the red estate and Romeo and Juliet are taking the black one. We have registered the red estate to you, fat boy, so that all the details match your passport and driving license, and the black is registered to Romeo over there.”

“I don’t believe this!” Muttered Karl, staring at the old red estate.

“You got something to say, kid?” Responds Dwight.

“No!” Karl mumbles.

Dwight pauses, looking at Karl in disgust for a moment, before turning and speaking to The General.

“I’m going to ring the Vipercom representatives now and find out where they are. Hopefully they haven’t started looking underground yet. I’m still trying to work out what to say to them in case they heard the machine gun fire!” Dwight puts his cell phone to his ear as The General turns to his brothers to hand over the fake documents and bid them farewell.

“Here are all the passports and licenses. I’ll see you two when you get back. Cathos, make sure everything runs according to the plan. No fuck ups!”

The General and Dwight walk off towards the office blocks, their only concern now that Vipercom don’t turn over too many stones.



“Hey, we’re good to go!” Higuain claps his oily hands sharply. The Llera brothers stand up slowly and beckon the young group to the vehicles. Pancho pulls Karl toward him like a rag doll and then pushes him into the driver’s seat of the red car, before sliding into the passenger seat next to him. Karl is forced to drive off, scared out of his grubby, sweaty skin, constantly checking his rear view mirrors, terrified of losing sight of Emilio and Valencia. Cathos turns to Emilio and Valencia and takes a lighter approach, opening the door to the black car and inviting the couple to enter of their own free will. Emilio is keen to keep up with Karl and he jumps into the driver’s seat and takes off to trail Karl as closely as possible.

## Chapter 20: Road to the border - Part 1

Emilio concentrates on keeping as close to Karl as possible as they head through the desolate landscape along the main freeway, where even the cactuses growing amongst the bone-dry rocks look parched. After three hours non-stop driving Karl is desperate for the toilet. He has been putting it out of his mind for the last half hour, but now he can’t think about anything else, and knows he won’t be able to hold it much longer, Gathering his courage he clears his throat to get Pancho’s attention.

“Excuse me sir, but I gotta take a leak.” Pancho ignores him. “Serious dude, I don’t think I can hold it much longer, can we pull over for a minute?”

“No, just keep driving, we have a tight schedule!”

“You don’t understand. I’m desperate, I don’t wanna pee myself!”

“Don’t piss in this car, hold it in, just concentrate on the road!”

“I’ve been holding it in for the past half an hour. I’m sorry, I’m pulling over”

“You’ll keep driving if you don’t want a bullet through your fucking loco brain! Now put your foot down, you’re driving like a pussy.”

The threat reminds Karl of his dream, which sends shivers through him, making his urge to go even worse. Karl knows Pancho is unhinged and keeps driving. His face becomes impassive once again. He puts his foot down, upping the car’s speed from seventy to one hundred miles an hour, but every slight bump and shudder of the car goes straight to his bladder, making

him feel faint. Seventeen agonising minutes later Karl passes out at the wheel, soaking his pants and the driving seat. As he loses consciousness he falls onto the steering wheel, locking it hard left, sending the car hurtling off road onto the rocky plains. His right foot jams on the accelerator pedal and the speedometer maxes out as the car reaches one hundred and forty miles per hour, headed straight for a cluster of giant cacti. Pancho breaks from his stoned state and grabs the wheel, trying desperately to steer the car away from the obstruction. The car hits a series of rocks, caving the right rear door like a hot spoon through soft ice cream and flipping it like a coin, sending it rolling into the cacti, where it comes to rest upside-down.

Emilio quickly follows Karl's car off the road, and pulls up behind the wreck. He jumps out and sprints over to the scene of the accident.

"Karl! Karl! Oh fuck, please God, let him be in one piece. I'll never make fun of him again, I promise!"

Emilio goes straight to the driver's side and looks through the bust window frame, where Karl lies motionless and bleeding from his ear. Emilio knows that you're not supposed to move anyone from the scene of an accident for fear of doing further damage if they have suffered spinal injuries. He reaches into the wreck and places his hand upon Karl's. Karl responds, squeezing Emilio's hand tightly before slowly opening his eyes. All he can see is a hazy blur, and is unsure of what is happening.

"Karl, can you hear me, are you ok?"

Emilio goes against his better judgement and begins to pull his friend from the wreckage, dragging him across the coarse sand, leaving a trail of blood from where his face smashed into the driver's wheel. Cathos walks up behind the wreck, holding Valencia at gunpoint in case either she or Emilio try to take advantage of the situation. As they approach the scene the smell of gasoline fills the air. Pancho pulls himself from the passenger window and gradually gets to his feet. He stands looking back at the wreck, bruised and shocked, but surprisingly unscathed. He walks around the car, taking it all in, until he sees Karl sprawled out on the ground. The sight of Karl infuriates him. He approaches Karl at speed, kicking him in the head as hard as possible, then drops to his knees, thumping Karl in the face with his hairy knuckled fists. Emilio jumps between them and takes several painful blows to his rib cage. Pancho lifts his trouser leg and grasps the large bowie knife, which is strapped to the inside of his ankle. Thrusting the blade out in front of himself, he tries to stab Karl in the stomach. Emilio grabs the knife-wielding arm with both hands and restrains it as best as possible, putting his back into Pancho's chest as he moves in. Karl rolls out of the way. Pancho uses his immense physical strength to pull his arm free and swings for

Emilio's back, which is now exposed in front of him. Emilio darts forward, narrowly avoiding Pancho's lunging blade, which slices through the fabric of his shirt. Emilio feels the baking sun on his exposed skin. Cathos, calmer and more calculated than his brother, sees the situation is spiralling further out of control and is keen to clear up the mess and progress to the border as planned.

"Pancho! We have no time for this!"

Pancho reluctantly stands back, struggling for breath, defeated by his eighty a day chain-smoking habit. He gives Karl a filthy look, signalling unfinished business. Cathos throws Pancho an assault rifle to keep the hostages at bay while he checks the damage to the vehicle. Pancho takes great pleasure in aiming the assault rifle at Emilio and Valencia who are kneeling down by Karl's side. Pancho aims the gun at Karl's head and feels the familiar sensation of pent up anger rippling through his body, making his trigger finger twitch excitedly. Karl feels nauseous and close to death. Cathos emerges from his inspection dismayed.

"We need to take the wheels off. It's so messed up, we can't use it!"

Cathos wastes little time going to the boot of the undamaged car and getting the tool kit from under the spare wheel. He throws the weighty kit at Emilio who awkwardly catches it, pushing him off balance.

"Remove the wheels from this vehicle and then place them behind the rocks over here." Cathos demands. He looks at the tyres and racks his brain, thinking about how they are going to get them all transported.

Emilio sets about removing the wheels from the upturned car. The sun beats down upon his exposed back as he strips the wheels from the wreckage, rolling them across the ground and stacking them up behind the rocks. After thirty minutes labouring in the blistering heat the task is complete. Pancho, who is standing guard, thinks he hears something approaching and turns to the freeway. Heat rising from the roads distorts the view. For a time he can see nothing, but as he gazes into the distance a speck appears on the horizon, over a mile away.

"Hey, Cathos, we got company!"

Cathos springs to attention like a meerkat.

"Shit, we don't need any rats."

Pancho taps his gun smugly.

"Rats can be eliminated, and let's face it, we're gonna need another car."

Cathos ponders for a moment and then agrees.

"Ok, here's how it's going down. You! The girl! You flag the car down when it gets near. Tell the driver there's been an accident. We will take cover

behind the wreckage. You draw the driver over to see the accident and then let us take care of the rest.”

Valencia is reluctant, and airs her views as she is growing in confidence around the Llera brothers.

“Do not bring anyone else into this! I will not help you to trick anyone!” Pancho doesn’t care for Valencia’s stern tone and lays down the law.

“We will take whatever action we feel is necessary. And if you don’t do as we tell you then we will kill the fat boy.”

Valencia is left little choice, as she can tell from Pancho’s tone that his words are a promise, not a threat. Cathos drives the black car behind the rocks, before joining Pancho, Emilio and Karl behind the wreck. Valencia is forced to stop the approaching car by herself, as anyone passing is more likely to stop for a vulnerable young woman.

In the approaching vehicle is an elderly couple. They look on inquisitively as they see the young woman waving in the distance and the wreck of a red car. The man pulls over and jumps out of the car, rushing to Valencia, his expression as concerned as if she was his own daughter.

“Are you ok? What’s happen? Is anyone in the car?”

Valencia looks into his kind, wrinkled face and bursts out crying. She knows her deceit may mean their death. Unaware of the reason for her tears the man holds Valencia and pats her on the back reassuringly as he escorts her over to the wreck.

“You are in grave danger, a gunman will appear from behind the rocks. When he does, run to your car as fast as you can.” Valencia speaks urgently, while pretending to bury her face in her hands in despair. The old man stops in his tracks for a moment and looks at her in confusion and trepidation. Pancho sees the hesitation, calculates that the man is far enough from his own car to make escape unlikely, and jumps out from behind the wreckage with his assault rifle aimed at the man’s head. Seeing a gun being aimed at her husband’s head, his wife climbs out of their car and runs to him, determined to stand by his side regardless of the situation. Pancho rolls his eyes as she stands between the gun and her husband. The old man jostles with his wife, pleading with her to calm down and let him deal with the situation. Unable to control herself, she proceeds to tell Pancho off.

“You evil bastard, how dare you hold a gun to my husband’s head?”

Pancho is unamused and hits her round the head with the back of his gun, the hard solid steel handle knocking her to the ground, leaving her in immense pain and briefly unable to move. Her husband goes for Pancho’s throat in anger, trying to get a grip in an attempt to strangle the rogue. Pancho fends off the older, weaker man. Holding him at arm’s length he

strikes him in the same manner as he struck his wife. Lying powerless on the floor, the old man looks up at Valencia in disbelief. She is raging inside at Pancho's treatment of the innocent couple. Cathos has been watching the drama unfold unsympathetically.

"We should put them in the car and then destroy any evidence."

Valencia is horrified by what she is hearing.

"You don't need to do that, they're messed up enough as it is. Just destroy the car, that's all you gotta do!"

Pancho starts laughing at Valencia's worthless pleas. Cathos is working his next move, eager to get to the border without anymore incident.

"Pancho, drag the couple into the car over there."

"No, you're not taking them, I won't let this happen." Valencia cuts in, before lying over the injured couple.

Emilio and Karl look at each other in agreement and then run over to Valencia to help screen the couple. Cathos looks on, frustrated, glancing at his diamond watch.

"Pancho! We don't have time for this, brother."

"I say we waste these useless mules. They are nothing but trouble."

"Maybe we should kill one of them." Cathos agrees, his temper finally snapping.

Pancho grabs Karl, putting him in a headlock and choking him. Karl struggles to breath, turning blue in the face. Pancho gives Karl a sly punch to the stomach and Cathos puts a gun to his head while he's restrained.

"If you don't move your asses and get in the car then your friend is dead!" Cathos has had enough. Valencia and Emilio reluctantly stand back, fearing for Karl's life, as he is being choked so badly his arms are starting to dangle lifelessly. Cathos can tell Pancho is intent on murdering the boy and doesn't want the situation to get any more complicated than it already is.

"Pancho, come on. Let's just set fire to the wreck, and get going."

Pancho squeezes Karl's neck viciously in a last ditch attempt to inflict permanent damage before releasing him. Karl falls to the ground in a fragile heap.

"You stink of piss, anyway!" Pancho spits as he walks off to drag the elderly couple alongside the wrecked car.

## Chapter 21: Road to the border - Part 2

Opening the battered car's fuel cap, Pancho pulls a disgusting grin, the likes of which Valencia and the boys have never seen before. A horrific look of victory, almost as though this depraved act of brutality will somehow get one over on the troublesome young group. He produces a box of matches from his pocket and with one deft swipe he tosses the lit match into the heart of the fuel tank and starts walking away from the wreck. The car explodes into flame, engulfing the elderly couple and sending debris raining down across the rocky landscape. Realising he has misjudged the fallout, Pancho starts sprinting. As he runs he is struck by a chunk of metal, which digs into his back, knocking him to the ground. Emilio sees that this is their shot at freedom, and shouts to Valencia as he stoops down behind Cathos forming an arc with his back. Valencia pushes Cathos backwards, causing him to fall over Emilio's arched frame. Valencia grabs for the machine gun, while Emilio pushes his thumbs into the furious man's eyes. Cathos roars in agony as his eyeballs start to dislodge, and relinquishes his grip on his gun.

Valencia tears the firearm from him, and stands with her shoulders set back and head held high, holding the gun confidently. She looks for a clear shot at Cathos, as Emilio pushes his body away, keeping his thumbs firmly planted in the bleeding eye sockets. Pancho looks up and sees Valencia aiming the gun at his brother and charges at her. Valencia catches the movement out of the corner of her eye and turns, instinctively squeezing the trigger. Pancho screams in agony as his groin is riddled with bullet holes. Emilio releases Cathos in shock. Partially blinded, Cathos hobbles to his brother's side and crouches beside him. Pancho is losing blood so fast that he has no chance of surviving. Valencia stands transfixed, showing no sign of remorse, before raising the gun a second time and firing directly at Cathos. Emilio and Karl look on, stunned, as his jaw is torn away from his skull in a shower of blood and flesh. Valencia keeps firing, until his face is completely shot away, and the ground is a deep, satisfying red. Emilio stands behind Valencia, shocked and horrified. After a few silent moments he speaks softly.

"I think it's time to go."

Emilio shoves Karl, signalling for him to get in the black car, before turning slowly back to Valencia, who is standing majestically over the carnage. Emilio tears himself away from the bloodbath and jumps into the driving seat. Valencia feels no sympathy for the brothers, only a sense of righteousness. Emilio can see Valencia bending down and saying something to the corpses, but he doesn't care for what is being said, he is more eager for her to get in the car so the group can escape. Valencia walks with

measured dignity back to the car, and casually slides onto the back seat, taking her hair band out and reorganizing her black locks, as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened. Emilio slams his foot down on the accelerator, adrenaline surging through his veins. The car spins and fishtails along the sandy road, until eventually the wheels grip and Emilio gains control. The group travel silently down the long open freeway.

“What the fuck just happened?” Karl whimpers.

“Revenge.” Valencia calmly replies.

“Why did you have to kill them? It’s bad enough the old people were killed. Now we’re the fucking murderers. Fugitives, man! Accomplices to murder.”

“Don’t worry, Karl, you haven’t killed anyone.” Emilio’s voice lacks confidence.

“Yeah, but she fuckin has. We should turn her in and tell the cops everything.

“Hey, those pigs killed Elmanda, they deserved to die.” Valencia retorts angrily.

“I’m not going to jail for something I haven’t done, man. No way!”

“We can’t turn her in, Karl. If it wasn’t for Valencia we wouldn’t be free right now.” Emilio reasons.

“We’re not free, we’re criminals. She killed Cathos, man. He didn’t kill anyone. And what about those poor people, those poor innocent people, they’d probably never done a bad deed in their lives, and they’ve been killed, and for what? And what now, Valencia’s just murdered the fucking General’s brothers. He’s gonna find out! We’re as good as dead! I might as well just get a rope and hang myself from the next tree.” Karl eyes are streaming with tears as he rocks forward and backwards in the passenger seat in a futile attempt to comfort himself.

“Just try and chill, Karl!” Emilio is in no mood to console Karl, as he’s feeling immense pressure from the current situation.

“Everyone just shut the fuck up, I am not a murderer! I was trying to protect you guys! We had to escape! They would have killed us all, and you know it! Look, let’s just all calm down a minute. No one is looking for us yet. It could take hours before anyone finds and reports the accident. We may need to drive off-road as soon as possible though, because this road could go on for miles, and this is the way they’ll come looking for us.” Valencia speaks calmly.

“We’ve gotta get off this road, man, we have to get off this road. Emilio, let’s go off this road right now! If we don’t were going to get caught, for sure!” Karl’s frantic panic grates on Emilio’s raw nerves.

“I will, Karl, but we have to make sure we make the right turn!”

“How will we know when to make the right turn?”

Emilio looks over at Karl several times trying to think of a reply.

“Yeah, I don’t actually know!” He concedes. “Valencia! Do you have any ideas?”

Valencia looks out of the window and across the orange sandy plains to the distant cliffs beyond.

“None!” She says quietly.

“Great, that really helps. Thanks!” Emilio runs his hands through his hair, as if to coax a thought from his brain.

“Something really smells around here!” Valencia pinches her nose. Karl shamefacedly removes his damp trousers and hangs them out of the window, winding the glass up to hold the trousers in place.

“Did you wet yourself, Karl?” Asks Emilio

“I passed out at the wheel. Pancho wouldn’t let me go take a leak, and I couldn’t hold it. What was I supposed to do?”

“I can’t believe it. You may have just saved our lives by pissing your pants.”

An hour of travelling up the same stretch of highway makes Karl feel sleepy. His head lolls on the headrest, which is bouncing steadily with the motion of the car. He drifts in and out of sleep until he falls completely into a lucid dream. Within his dream he is walking through the Death Valley basin. The heat is so intense that his arm is starting to sizzle, but he feels no pain. At the end of his arm a suitcase is chained to his wrist. The suitcase has contraband inside it, and is identical to the one he remembers seeing at the Casino. In the distance is a lavish swimming pool oasis with a thatched poolside bar. The bar is being tended by Samuel from the Tropicana Hotel who stands, massaging his handlebar moustache. A diving board assembles itself and Valencia appears, walking provocatively along it. She is clad in a skin-tight pink bikini, flicking her dark hair flirtatiously. Karl becomes aroused. She stands at the tip of the board and springs three times, before launching herself into the air, where she completes a full rotation, finishing in a pencil dive. Samuel holds a perfect ten score card up, as she swims towards him for a Pina Colada. Karl starts to jog, anxious to meet up with her. He hears a scampering sound behind him and turns nervously. Three evil, fanged, monkey-frogs spring frantically towards him. He feels helpless, which cause his legs to vanish beneath him. He is besieged by the ravenous mutated monkey-frogs, which feast on his sizzling arms, eating him alive and causing him to awaken suddenly with fear, jolting bolt upright in his



seat. Emilio looks over to him, but says nothing. After another hour on the highway the group approach a rare turning in the road, which branches off in three separate directions, heading north, northeast and northwest.

“I think we should just try and head home.” Emilio says wearily.

“Where’s home?” Valencia’s voice is quiet and introspective.

“If we make it back to New York, you can come and live with me.”

Emilio offers.

Valencia looks down to her grubby unkempt nails and smiles.

“Whoa, hold up! What do you mean “if”? You don’t think we’ll make it, do you.” Karl is immediately fearful and agitated.

Valencia shuffles up behind his seat and wraps her arms around him.

“We’re gonna be fine now, Karl. You don’t have to worry anymore.”

Valencia is not entirely sure of what might happen, but clings to the illusion she has painted for herself in the meantime. “Let’s go north east then, Emilio, and get onto the smaller country roads for the time being.”

Emilio steers off the highway onto a country road that leads through a string of small villages.

“I feel weak. I’m starving. I’m exhausted, and I swear to God I’m starting to waste away. I must have lost a ton of weight this week. What do you think, Emilio?”

Emilio looks at Karl, slumped lethargically in the passenger seat, and scans his friend’s torso, eventually coming to the conclusion that Karl seems to have lost little, if any, weight at all.

“Yeah, Karl. A ton of weight, for sure.”

Karl savours the rare ego boost, before slipping back into his usual sombre mood.

“We should really try and find somewhere to get something to eat.” Karl has started to daydream about French fries.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Emilio looks across at the slumped lump. Karl returns a bewildered grimace. “Money! We have no money.”

“Hey, Valencia’s just murdered two members of a drug cartel, do you really think she’s gonna give a crap about stealing candy bars from a service station.” Karl responds thoughtlessly.

“Stop calling me a murderer, Karl. And I’m not a thief! Don’t ever say that about me, I’m a good person, I just couldn’t let Elmanda die in vain.”

Valencia responds scornfully, hurt and irritated by Karl’s careless comment.

“But how are we gonna pay for food and gas if we don’t have any money?” Karl sulks.

Emilio’s head sinks, Valencia doesn’t reply, but starts rummaging through her pockets until she frees a leather wallet and holds it aloft in triumph.

“Where the hell did you get that, has it got any money in it?” Emilio asks, seeing the wallet in his rear view mirror.

“I had a feeling Cathos wouldn’t be needing it anymore.” Valencia replies with a smug grin.

Karl swipes the wallet from Valencia’s clutches and rifles through the accordion layers, pulling a wedge of twenty-dollar bills free.

“There must be at least four hundred dollars here! You know, I never would have thought of going through the pockets of the dead back there.”

“All I was thinking about was survival, just like Elmanda would have wanted. I thought these might be handy, too.” Valencia pulls out the fake documents that were made for them at the salt mine.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Emilio strikes the steering wheel jubilantly, inadvertently setting off the flat sounding car horn. The travellers enjoy a brief window of elation before falling back into an awkward silence for a further hour, Emilio constantly checking every mirror at his disposal, paranoid that the next car they meet will contain an assassin, eager to capture them, dead or alive.

## Chapter 22: Road to the border - Part 3

The group roll on, until they reach the outskirts of a small town. As they get closer, four green and white painted pumps come into view, standing tall in front of a matching convenience store.

“Great! A gas station!” Emilio sighs with relief.

“Get me some soda and chips, and see if there’s any kind of clothing in there. I can’t keep travelling like this!” Karl pleads.

An old man wearing a green cap and matching overalls walks out of the store and over to the car. Emilio and Valencia get out of the car and stretch their aching limbs, after hours of being cramped up in a confined space.

“What fuel you wanna?” Asks the attendant, peering into the car and seeing Karl sitting in his underwear, doing his best to pretend everything is completely normal, in spite of the fact he is half naked and looks like he’s just gone ten rounds with a heavyweight champion.

“Fill her up with the best gas you’ve got.” Emilio answers, as he and Valencia walk over to the convenience store for much needed supplies.

The pair walk into the store, which is well air conditioned and immaculate, despite the old fixtures and fittings. The grubby pair shovel an abundance of cold soda cans into a basket with a thirst driven intensity. The attendant walks back into the store and sits on a high chair behind his counter, his gaze fixed on a baseball game on a small TV. He peers up from his game every now and then and watches the customers suspiciously. Emilio’s shirt has a distinct cut down the back of it. Valencia is the only person who looks respectable. The couple continue to trawl the store, picking up large bags of crisps, pre-packaged fajita wraps and tacos.

“Hey, Valencia, check it out!” Emilio points over to a cheap pair of bright yellow floral swimming trunks hanging in amongst a selection of miscellaneous items. “Karl’s gonna love these!”

Valencia laughs devilishly and grabs the trunks without hesitation, keen to escape the pessimistic cloud that’s been hanging over the group for the past few hours.

“Where the hell are we, anyway? And how are we going to get home?” Valencia questions as she walks further down the oddly diverse aisle, swiping a giant pack of jelly sweets.

“We’re gonna have to do it the old fashioned way. We’re gonna need a map!” Emilio points out a cylindrical rotating rack parked in the corner of the shop. Valencia walks over to the rack and pulls a road map from it.

“Wow, this map is older than me!” Valencia peers at the small print on the back. “It’s gonna have to do.”

She throws the map into the basket. Striding over to the counter she empties a ton of goods onto it. The attendant keeps his head down, engrossed in his game, not acknowledging the customers standing in front of him. Valencia opens her mouth, but the man cuts in before she’s able to speak.

“That’ll be 1300 Pesos and the same for the gas.” He states, without even looking at the merchandise.

“2600 Pesos for this and the gas! Your kidding! Some of this food is passed the sell by date!” Valencia is dismayed. The man peers up at them and replies deadpan.

“You act like you’ve never been in a gas station store before. You want value you can drive a hundred miles to the nearest Wal-Mart.”

“You’re ripping us off!” Valencia sniffs, as she drops a fistful of notes onto the counter.”

“Nope, you have a choice. Buy at my prices or go somewhere else. You’re not from around here, are you?” He replies, eyeing the pile of crumpled notes suspiciously.

“We are from a place called none of your damned business.” Valencia grabs two of the large brown paper bags and heads back to the car, with Emilio close behind her. Once out of the store Valencia cracks open a can of soda and downs it in one, feeling partial relief.

“What was that guy’s problem?” She crushes the soda can in her hand and throwing it on the ground petulantly.

“He’s going stir crazy, that’s for sure. I don’t get it, we’re probably the only customers he’s had all day.” Emilio shrugs.

“Yeah, you’d think he’d be happy to have some company.” Valencia places the grocery bags on the roof of the car before turning her attention to Karl, who is looking expectantly out from the open passenger window.

“You can relax now, stinky, we got you something to wear!” Valencia takes the trunks from the bag and comically displays them in front of him.

“Oh, very funny! Is that seriously all they had!” Karl snatches the trunks.

“You’re lucky they even had these!” Valencia replies, straight-faced, in spite of the fact she picked them deliberately from an array of much more muted and less embarrassing colours. Emilio looks on, giggling. Valencia then takes the map from one of the grocery bags and unfolds it. She bends over the bonnet, spreading the map out across it. Karl wriggles into the trunks and gets out of the car to stretch his legs, admiring Valencia’s posterior as he gorges on warm candy bars and wraps, foraged from the bag of groceries. Valencia has purposely put her body on display in an attempt to get Emilio to notice her in a different light, but he is focused on the map and shovelling tortilla chips into his mouth. Valencia realizes she’s wasting her time and sighs, slumping down on the hood to concentrate on the map.

“Ok, so we know we can’t get into the states through Tijuana, because by the time we get there they’ll have people looking for us. And I reckon it will be the same with the border at Mexicali.” Emilio muses.

“How about the border at San Luis Rio Colorado?” Points out Valencia.

“Looks like it’s the only way. According to this map it’s roughly a three-hour drive. And look at this. The highway runs close to the east coastline beside the famous Sea of Cortez.”

“Oh wow, do you think we could drive close to the Sea of Cortez? I’d love to experience it!” Valencia asks excitedly.

“I don’t see why not, if we have to travel to San Luis, then why not take the scenic route.” Replies Emilio.

“What’s so special about the Sea of Cortez, I mean, I’ve never even heard of it.” Karl butts in.

“It’s a young sea, formed from massive earthquakes and volcanic activity that happened something like five million years ago.” States Emilio.

“Five million years ago! You call that young?”

“In relation to the age of our planet, yes. But the most interesting thing for me is that they are so many varieties of fish, and many different species of whales, dolphins and sharks. And you know how much I love my sharks, Karl. I’ve heard the Sea of Cortez referred to as the world’s aquarium. So that should give you some idea of what it’s like, Karl.”

“So it’s like a tropical fish tank.”

“Yeah, I guess you could put it that way.”

“Well then why didn’t you just say that in the first place, instead of going off on one about the history of the world? I can’t believe you two, anyway. Valencia’s just killed some twisted drug smugglers and you guys are planning on going to the seaside.”

“I’m going out my mind with worry, Karl. I’m trying to do whatever I can to cope with this situation.” Emilio kicks the tyre of their car. “So I say we go to the fucking seaside and try to chill out.”

“Amen, I hear that.” Valencia puts her hand up for Emilio to dish her an emphatic high five.

“Do you see what I’ve had to put with all these years, Val? Let’s get going! I’ll put the groceries in the trunk.” Emilio grabs the bags from the roof and slips around to the back of the vehicle, opening the trunk and placing the bags inside. “Ok, we’re good to go!”

The black car slides on through forgotten back roads and up winding, barren hillsides. After a few wrong turns and toilet stops they find their way onto a road that hugs the coastline from an elevated cliff edge, giving them a stunning panoramic view of the Sea of Cortez. Rippling turquoise blue and emerald green water is bordered by pale, almost white, sand. Valencia is in awe of the ocean’s beauty. The calming sea soothes their ragged nerves.

"Wow, it's beautiful isn't it?" Valencia sticks her head out of the window and inhales the refreshing air. The sea is sprawling and vast, the polar opposite to the enclosed Amazon rainforest that was her home.

"Can we go down to the beach for a little while? We'll probably never get the opportunity to experience this part of the world ever again."

"No way! We have to keep moving, we can't chance being caught up!" Karl continues to err on the side of caution.

"Hey guys, can you make out what that is on the water? Out there in the distance? Is that a whale?" Valencia completely ignores Karl.

"Of course we can go to the beach! That's the whole reason we came out this way! Come on, let's go down and get a closer look!" Emilio overrules his anxious friend.

He continues along the coastal road until an opening appears, leading down to the deserted beach. Emilio parks as close as he can to the sands, and Valencia excitedly throws her shoes onto the back seat and hops out, sinking into the warm sands. She runs down to the water to get as close as possible to the angelic leviathan rolling playfully in the depths. Emilio and Karl run after her, soaking up her feeling of elation.

"There are two of them! I think they're Blue Whales! We're so lucky! They're extremely rare!" Valencia calls excitedly.

"We are anything but lucky." Karl puts a dampener on the occasion.

"You really know how to ruin a joyous moment, don't you, Karl?" Emilio says sternly.

"Excuse me, but has it occurred to any of you guys that we're driving a car with a shit load of drugs stuffed in the tyres?" We are running from a major drug smuggling operation who are sooner or later going to realise we've stolen their drugs and murdered two members of their family, and they're going to be pretty fucking pissed with us, don't you think?"

"Yeah, we have to unload this car, Emilio. We need to destroy the drugs." Valencia agrees.

Emilio hadn't forgot about the cocaine at all. It had been playing on his mind, along with the murders, swirling around his brain like a washing machine of thoughts. Emilio was selfishly elated at the thought of getting away with a huge quantity of narcotics.

"See Emilio, even Valencia speaks sense." Karl says patronisingly.

"Hey, what do you mean 'even Valencia speaks sense'? Like I'm the last person that could possibly have a sensible opinion! Well, I'm the one who saved your sorry asses. If it wasn't for me you'd both be dead meat."

"Don't read too much into it, Valencia, it's not always so easy for girls to think logically, that's all!" Emilio laughs, trying to wind her up, but she isn't biting.

"God, I thought my life sucked a week ago, now it's even worse!" Karl changes the subject back, unable to shake the weight of their problems from his shoulders.

"You know what? I get fed up of hearing people moaning about their life when all they are doing is taking it for granted! Human beings are miraculous. We should all just stop and appreciate the fact that we are conscious of our existence and able to witness the existence of all other life." Emilio rants.

“Here he goes again!” Karl rolls his eyes, as he’s heard the same lecture a hundred times before.

“Look, I don’t think we should be so hasty about getting rid of the coke. I mean, why don’t we try and sell it?” Emilio throws his idea out into the open.

“No fucking way! Are you trying to get us killed? Is that it? Because it seems like every time we get out of any kind of trouble all you’re thinking about is how you can throw us back into danger again. Can you believe what he’s saying, Valencia! And who the hell are we going to sell the drugs to! You can’t just walk into one of those cash converter stores and hand a load of drugs over the counter.” Karl responds angrily.

“If we sell the drugs then we’re no better than the guys who killed Elmanda, and think of all the lives we would be helping to corrupt.” He continues righteously.

“Think of the money, Val. Haven’t you always wanted to go to America and live the good life?” Pleads Emilio, trying to get her on his side. Valencia stops for a moment, turning her head away from Emilio as if trying to find room for clear thought. The money would make her life more comfortable and stress free, but over-riding those selfish desires is her determination not to have anything to do with the business which is tearing the rainforest apart and ruining the lives of so many otherwise good souls, makes her resolute in her intention to destroy the evil narcotics.

"Not at the expense of others, Emilio. So here's what's happening, we're going to bring all that evil shit from the car and set the whole fucking lot on fire right here of the beach. The tide will take the ashes away and wash our hands of this whole mess."

“Come on, Val! This shipment is nothing in the grand scheme of things! Destroying the drugs we’ve got here isn't going to make a difference."

"You know, if everybody thought like that then the world would be a shit place to live in." Valencia doesn’t want to hear another word on the matter, and turns her attention back to the ocean.

“Emilio, I really think we should stay one step ahead and get moving.” Karl says anxiously.

"We are one step ahead, in fact were several hundred miles ahead. And when they do search for us they not going to think to come in this direction." Emilio responds arrogantly.

"What makes you so sure?" Karl sounds disbelieving.

"You can never be one-hundred percent sure, but you have to think positive, there's just no other way."

"That's easy for you to say! You're always positive. It's a lot harder for me."

While the boys are arguing, Valencia strips down to her underwear and runs into the sea. Karl stops mid sentence to marvel at her semi clad body. She sprints straight through the warm, clear shallows and dives when the water is waist deep, swimming strongly in the direction of the whales. She swims out as far as she feels safe then turns back to face the beach, waving at the boys, who look like matchsticks in the distance. She treads water confidently, then turns to watch the two Blue Whales as they swim away into deeper waters side by side, breaking the surface with their looping tails. Valencia notices a shoal of fish jostling to the surface, barely an arms length to her left. She kicks gently, treading water, keeping her shoulders level with the surface. Fathoms below her a Hammerhead Shark chases a wounded Stingray. Valencia casually swims back to shore, unaware of the predator lurking beneath her. The Hammerhead catches the Stingray and thrashes its head from side to side ripping with its spiked teeth through the Stingray's rough skin, attracting other Hammerheads. Valencia makes the beach just in time to avoid being caught up in a school of sharks.

"You guys sorted your differences out yet?" She gasps, short of breath from the exertion.

"We're getting on just fine, aren't we, Karl?"

Karl is transfixed by Valencia's sopping wet hourglass figure and doesn't respond.

"You know, you don't have to make it so obvious, Karl." Emilio rolls his eyes.

"What's so obvious? Come on, we need to get rid of all that dope."

Valencia starts walking back to the car, oblivious to Emilio's teasing. Karl shoves Emilio in a temper and walks off after Valencia. The three congregate around the car and scratch their heads.

"Ok. So how are we going to destroy this stuff? It's in the wheels we're driving on." Karl is baffled.

Valencia goes to the back seat and reaches into a compartment in the rear door. Walking back to where the boys are stood she presents the Bowie knife she stole from Pancho.

"Thought it might come in useful." She smiles grimly.

"Man, you really do keep your nerve in a stressful situation." Karl is impressed. "I mean, I would have fallen to pieces if it was me killing those guys back there. I wouldn't have thought to go through their possessions, I would be cracking up."

"It was us or them, and I'd rather it was them." Valencia responds quietly.



“Absolutely.” Agrees Emilio.

“We better remove these tyres to do this properly. Emilio, can you start taking the off?”

“No! It’s not possible. The mechanic dude packed these tyres so the car could run on them without much need for air. If we take the shit out, we’ll be running on flat tyres.” Says Emilio honestly.

“Then I suppose we have no choice. We’ll have to run this car to the border as it is!” Valencia slumps down onto the sand in defeat. The boys join her. They lie in mournful silence.

“I think we should get going. If we leave now we can make San Luis by nightfall.” Emilio finds it hard to relax, and is eager to get to the border. Karl gets up and climbs into the front passenger seat. Valencia drags herself from the sun-drenched beach and grudgingly lies across the car’s back seat. Emilio gets into the baking driver’s seat and pilots the vehicle back to the road, and on towards the freeway.

## Chapter 23: Road to the Border - Part 4

Valencia marvels at the expanse of clear blue sky, resolutely ignoring Emilio's overconfident mountain driving on snaking roads that hug cliff edges. Karl grits his teeth at the nerve-wracking experience, moaning at each tremor and freaking out at every pothole. The land eventually levels out and merges with the freeway.

"This is the most beautiful country in the world. It just keeps changing. I could spend the rest of my life here." Valencia is completely wrapped up in the awe-inspiring scenery.

"That's fine, we'll drop you off at the next junction." Karl quips, and receives a swift slap to the side of his head for his trouble, which hurts the ear Pancho had clouted so viciously.

Emilio accelerates along the highway. Valencia puts her head out of the window and then pulls herself up, so her backside is on the window ledge, with half her body outside the car. She sits up straight with her left hand on the roof for balance. Her hair is blowing frantically in the wind and she feels a rush of pure adrenaline shoot from the tips of her toes through her spine and up to her brain. She feels more alive than ever. A truck heads towards them on the opposite side of the road. Valencia's heel catches the inner door latch and her body weight causes the door to suddenly swing open. She shrieks with fear, gripping on to the door as she swings uncontrollably. Karl looks back and panics, fearing for Valencia's life as if it were his own. He clambers into the back and stretches out to try and pull the door closed, but he struggles to get a grip.

The truck driver was having a pretty good day, having picked up an attractive buxom blonde hitchhiker. He'd been on his best behaviour, only looking at her bulging cleavage when replying to a question, which was fine, as the girl was friendly, self confident and inquisitive, and asked endless questions. The conversation has an underlying tinge of repressed excitement, and they are so wrapped up in each others words that they are both completely unaware of their surroundings, and haven't noticed Valencia, who is about to be squashed against the chrome grill of the truck like a hamburger patty. Emilio gently brakes to bring the hurtling black estate down to a controllable speed. He is afraid to hit them too hard, for fear that the door will swing wildly and Valencia will be thrown off, and he is unable to swerve off the highway, as there are barriers along the roadside. Looking in his rear view mirror he sees that there is no traffic behind him. With no other option, Emilio slams on the breaks. The car skids for several yards

before coming to a bone-jarring halt. Valencia jumps down from the window onto the ground. She freezes for a moment, with the droning truck bearing down on her like a hulking metallic demon. Karl jumps out of the car screaming, bear hugs her and pulls her on to the back seat. He then reaches out and pulls the opened door back in, narrowly missing the truck as it speeds by.

“You should never have jumped out of the car, Karl! You could have killed yourself.” Valencia clenches her fists.

“Are you fucking kidding me, I just saved your life! And this is the thanks I get!”

Karl is a little wary of Valencia, having seen her vengeful side. He understands her motive but is surprised by how seemingly easily she executed the two men without blinking a single long-lashed eyelid. It’s almost as if she had done it before. Emilio is just grateful that he and Karl stumbled across the village, as they probably wouldn’t have survived for long without her or Elmanda. Emilio understands her motive. He probably would have done the same in her position. Emilio has met a lot of women but he’s never met one as tough, caring or strong minded as her before. He starts to develop a deep respect and fascination with her.

“I had it all under control.” Valencia brushes the dust from her forearm. “Yeah, just chill, Karl. Valencia was living in the moment.” Emilio backs her up.

“What’s the point of living in the moment if you run the risk of not living at all? That just doesn’t make any sense to me.” Karl sulks.

Karl still has a tight grip on Valencia, so that she is forced to lie across him in a graceless mess. She shakes herself free, wanting her own space. Karl was enjoying the rare closeness.

As the sun sets they approach a small town. Running beside the highway is a small industrial estate; the buildings have long since been deserted, and are boarded up and derelict.

“We should see if there’s a vehicle around here that we could borrow some drug free tyres from.” Valencia suggests.

“I think that’s a bad idea, let’s get closer to the border, and then look at the situation again.” Emilio had been hoping that the others would have forgotten about the drugs, still set on getting the coke over the border, having convinced himself that it will be a piece of cake with their fake documents.

“We have to get rid of these wheels, Emilio!” Karl leans forward in his seat.

“Ok, relax, we’ll look for some spare tyres.” Emilio figures he might get away with only changing two of the tyres, to trick Karl and Valencia, and still keep some of the coke.

He turns onto the abandoned industrial estate. Set back from the rest of the units is a massive, crumbling, black-bricked book warehouse.

“This is a crazy place, man! Look at it! We should hide the car in here!” Emilio drives up to the front of the warehouse, which has massive double doors, the padlocks long ago ripped away from the rotting wood. A few empty cardboard boxes and promotional posters are scattered across the cavernous space, but the warehouse is pretty much empty. Emilio decides to drive in, to hide the drug filled car. Just in case. Karl jumps out and opens the wooden doors. Emilio slowly creeps the car into the dingy gloom and pulls into the far corner, turning the car as he manoeuvres, so that the vehicle faces out toward the doors they came in through.

“Right, I’ll go and find something with a similar wheel size.” Emilio declares.

“You’re gonna start stealing from innocent people now? Great! Why not! We’ve committed so many crimes recently I’m sure another won’t hurt.” Karl replies with cutting cynicism.

“Relax, Karl, we’re just going to switch the tyres with another car. We’re not stealing anything.” Emilio sighs.

“So, you’re gonna put a load of drug filled tyres on an innocent person’s car, so the next time they try and cross the border they’ll go to jail for the rest of their lives. Perfect.” Karl laughs patronisingly.

“Ok, ok, you’re right, it’s probably better to just borrow the tyres and then leave some kind of I.O.U note on the side of the vehicle.” Emilio matches Karl’s sarcastic tone. “Anyway, how come you’ve become so righteous all of a sudden. It’s not that long ago that you went around knocking on all the doors in our neighbourhood asking people to sponsor you, so you could raise money for homeless children. You said you were going to do a video-game marathon.”

“I know where you’re going with this, Emilio. I did do the marathon, and some of that money did go to a homeless person.” Karl defensively waves his hands at Emilio in an attempt to get him to shut up before Valencia hears all the details of the incident.

“Karl, you always play video games for days on end and most of that money, which you were given in good faith, didn’t go to any foundation for homeless children. You brought a new pair of sneakers with it.”

“I did give some of it to the homeless.”

“You gave five dollars of to the alcoholic who lives under the bridge, and he’s not even a child.”

“Ok, I’m sorry, I feel bad about that. Look, as soon as we get back home I’ll get a job, and I’ll go and give the money to charity.

Valencia tries her hardest to keep her laughter from spilling out.

“Alright, now one of use should sit here with the car and the other two can go on a borrowing mission.” Emilio switches the subject back to the wheels, orchestrating orders with his hand.

“Well, I’m not going to be any part of grand theft auto, so I’ll sit here with the car.” Karl sulks.

“Ok, just make sure that if anyone comes into this warehouse that isn’t us, then start the car and drive off, even if they don’t look suspicious!”

“Ok. I got it.”

Emilio and Valencia walk out onto the crumbling streets. Night is drawing ever closer. Light in the warehouse is fading fast, as all the windows are boarded up. Karl contemplates switching on the headlights, then thinks better of it, for fear of drawing unnecessary attention. He sits rigid and alert, his discomfort and paranoia growing as he stares into the shadows. As time passes he starts to feel he is being watched. Wind whistles through the gaps of the boarded up windows, rattling and banging against unseen objects in the darkness. Karl is whipped into a frenzy of irrational fear. He sees something move across the open space in front of him. He clicks the ignition clockwise one notch, turning the electric on. Mournful classical music bleeds into the air. He quickly turns the radio off and searches for the headlight switch, flicking the headlights on and quickly off again, trying to see if anyone is actually out there in the darkness. In the few seconds of light he thinks he sees what looks like a man standing in the far right corner of the old warehouse. Karl screams, his chest convulsing with fear. With trembling hands he flicks the lights on again. The man he thought he saw is revealed as a large poster with a character from a book depicting a man in a trench coat. The man is gazing straight at him, and the picture is drawn so well and looks so realistic that Karl can’t shake the feeling of being watched. Sitting alone in the shadowy warehouse is messing with his head, and he considers leaving the car to try and catch up with Emilio and Valencia, but he remains frozen in the driver’s seat, planning his escape in anxious desperation. Ten minutes later there is another noise and some definite movement in front of the car. Karl peers frantically into the darkness. The silhouette grows in stature as it moves towards him. Karl starts the engine, slamming his foot to the floor, driving directly at the figure, who jumps onto the bonnet to avoid being run over. Karl lets out a long, high-pitched scream, accelerating fast

towards the warehouse doors, smashing through them, sending wooden splinters in all directions, but the man persists in clinging on. Karl swerves hard, locking the steering wheel left and then right. The person is sideways on the bonnet when Karl passes a streetlight at the end of the estate and sees that the man is Emilio, his mouth open wide, screaming for Karl to stop. Karl slams on the brakes and sends Emilio flying out on to the road. Emilio hits the tarmac, rolling as he tries to break his fall. Karl gets out of the car and hurries over to his friend.

“Oh my God! Emilio! Are you alright? Talk to me! I didn’t know it was you.”

Emilio slowly sits up, rubbing the side of his head, which is bleeding.

“Oh God, you’re bleeding.” Karl goes to examine Emilio’s head. Emilio pushes him away, wanting space for a few moments.

“What the hell were you trying to do? Kill me?”

“I didn’t know it was you, it was so dark in there, dude.”

“Karl, there’s no-one on this estate. It’s vacant.”

Emilio drags his sore body up from the rough tarmac and walks slowly around the car while Karl waits by the kerb, feeling unhelpful and redundant.

“Come on, we’ve found identical tyres. Let’s go, Valencia’s waiting for us.

They jump into the car and drive to an alley where Valencia is nervously waiting beside an abandoned car, which has been broken into and gutted out by passing thieves looting the estate for all that it was once worth. Emilio gets to work jacking up the black car and replacing the wheels.

“Ok, I’m down to the last tyre. You guys may as well get in the car.” Emilio says slyly. He waits until Valencia and Karl are in the car and then he removes the hubcap of one of the drug filled tyres and pulls the greasy cocaine parcels from it. He stops intermittently, looking up to make sure he isn’t being watched. He replaces the last tyre and then gathers the jack, along with the parcels of cocaine. He walks to the back of the car, sheepishly placing the items in the recess under the carpet of the boot. Emilio walks back alongside the car and stands by the driver’s door. He is hit with a momentary pang of guilt, which disperses quickly as he opens the driver’s door, gets in the car and drives off with reckless abandon.



## Chapter 24: San Luis Rio Colorado

Night has set. The car rises from a gully along a barren stretch of farmland, bordering a remote village. Emilio sees a white church, with an identical miniature church beside it, standing out amongst the skeletons of abandoned houses. He drives by, trying to fathom the significance of the replica. His train of thought is disrupted by a pot-bellied local cooking fresh chillies over a huge rotisserie by the roadside. The man is wafting the smoky aroma through the air with his stained apron, trying to entice hungry passers-by. The car moves on, racing the occasional tumbleweed past tropical palms and trailer homes surrounded by infertile land and power line terminals. A large green sign draws closer. WELCOME TO SAN LUIS RIO COLORADO is displayed in white block capitals. Karl bursts into floods of tears. Emilio is concerned by the reaction.

“You gotta pull yourself together, Karl.”

“I know, I know. I just can’t take this anymore. I’m sorry.”

“Look, we have to act as calm as possible going through border control. If they sense anything is even slightly wrong then they could pull us over to one side and dig deeper. We don’t want anyone asking any questions, Karl.”

Karl wipes his eyes on his top and mumbles.

“But what if they do stop us at the border?”

“Don’t worry. Our documents look totally legitimate, and the guards will be so busy with all the traffic that they won’t even look twice at us. But we have to play it cool.” Emilio says firmly.

“But will they check the car?”

“What do you mean?” Emilio feels nervousness creep up into his soul.

“The car could be stolen.”

“Oh, I see what you mean. Don’t you remember they said they’d registered the car in my name? They were trying to get us through the border with a large quantity of drugs. It was in their best interest to ensure we got through without any problems.”

“What if they discover our documents are fakes? Why did I come on this stupid trip? I knew it was a bad idea from the start.”

“Stop talking so negatively, Karl! Did you not hear what Emilio just said?” Valencia says with frustration.

Karl starts trying to think rationally and focuses on getting a grip. He begins to breath deeply as he opens the car’s dropdown sun visor. Peering into the small vanity mirror he does his best to adjust himself to try and look as normal as possible. Time evaporates and apprehension grows as the San



Luis border control comes into view. Alongside the four lanes of ever-denser traffic corrugated grey metal barriers, just high enough to display advertising billboards, run for miles up to the border control terminals. Each poster for a big brand product is plastered with smaller posters and adverts for local companies, businesses and goods.

“Why do I feel so darn nervous?” Karl whines.

“You’re always nervous, Karl.” Valencia sighs, as if she’s known him for years.

Emilio is starting to think about the drugs he’s stashed away in the trunk. Until now he hadn’t stopped to consider the repercussions his actions could have on his friends. The more he thinks and looks at Karl in a state of distress, the more he despairs.

“Do I look ok now? Asks Karl, trying his best to compose himself.

“Yeah, you look fine!” Emilio replies without looking. Emilio’s mouth becomes dry and his palms sweat profusely. He begins to tap his thumbs on the steering wheel anxiously.

“I’ve got an idea! How about when we get close to the border you guys jump out and walk through on foot. That way you don’t have to worry, just in case there is anything dodgy about the car.” Emilio suggests, not wanting to put his friends at risk.

“Yeah, I think that’s a good idea!” Karl hopes Valencia will agree.

“No! I say we all stick together.” Valencia folds her arms sternly.

Emilio feels deflated. He considers stopping and throwing the coke away, but is torn by an all-consuming greed.

“You guys are going to get out. You’re going to walk across that border. And I’m going to risk taking the car over by myself, just in case. That’s the end of it!”

“Since when did you become a dictator? And anyway we don’t need the car, Emilio. Once we’re over the border we can just get a coach or something, we still have money, remember.”

“If we get on a coach we’ll be like sitting ducks. Anyone could track us down and kill us.”

“They could track us in this car much more easily. Your idea’s worse. They know what car we’re driving. Think about it, Emilio.”

“Well, what if someone is waiting for us at the border? We’ll need a car to try and outrun anyone who could be there.”

“Well, Karl and I had better stay in the car then!” Says Valencia smugly, realizing she has won.

Emilio falls silent, unsure of his next move.

## Chapter 25: Borderline

The car joins the back of a long queue and crawls slowly towards the border control terminals. Four lanes of traffic flow through four independent checking terminals, each manned by a guard. A detection dog is walked across the four terminals at intervals, picking up various scents, from explosives and illegal drugs, through to human remains. As each vehicle enters a terminal the guards check them over. If they deem anything looks suspicious then the car is pulled to one side for a more thorough examination. Trucks, lorries and coaches are ushered into a separate lane and terminal. The volume of traffic flowing both ways across the border is high.

“Hey guys, if you had to pick between being given huge opportunities in life and having massive parts of life taken away from you or having no opportunities at all but having nothing taken away, which would you choose?”

“What the hell does that mean?” Karl grunts.

“I’d take no opportunities.” Valencia says humbly. “What would you choose Emilio?”

“Well, there is a theory that for every action there are unlimited outcomes, and we actually live every eventuality. So I’d take the opportunities!”

Valencia ponders the thought and looks out of her window to the car on her left. She sees fed up parents ignoring their restless children, who are constantly clambering over one another in the back seat, arguing and giggling in equal measure. She then turns her attention to the car on the right, which harbours a thin, intelligent looking man. He turns his head, sensing observation, and smiles at her strangely. Valencia turns her head quickly back and slumps down in her seat, avoiding eye contact.

Sweat drips from Emilio’s brow as the car edges closer to the terminal. He glances at the guard dog as it walks past terminal two, which they are slowly approaching. Emilio contemplates the guards with an increasing degree of nervousness. He is in his own bubble of silent panic. He can hear jubilant laughter from the couple in the car in front. He yearns for their happiness. He looks over at Karl, who is huddled up with his feet on the glove compartment. Emilio slaps Karl’s thigh to make him take his feet down. Emilio knows if any one of the dogs picks up any kind of scent then it’s game over, condemning the group to a life behind bars. He turns on the radio to try and divert his attention from the stress that’s ripping him up

inside. Through the old, tinny speakers crackles Madonna's Material Girl, which Valencia starts to immediately bob her head to. Emilio turns the radio dial to change the channel.

"Hey, I was listening to that!" Valencia protests.

Emilio tunes into a local radio station, which is reporting that a young girl has gone missing in San Luis and was last seen at a local park. Emilio feels a horrendous cold chill creep down his spine as the story plays on his mind. He starts to think about the despair her parents must be feeling, which makes him woozy and nauseous. What if he gets caught and goes to jail, what anguish will his parents go through? Emilio has been so caught up in achieving something from his ill-fated trip that he hasn't stopped once to consider the consequences of his actions on his family back home. At the back of his mind he battles with delusions of grandeur. A veil of fear descends upon him. Memories of past times without worry are like a lost paradise once taken for granted. The terminals seem like the fiery gates to hell, and the closer he gets, the more they burn away the layers of selfishness, exposing his deep guilt, suppressed for so long. Emilio is caught between two trains of thought. He considers telling Karl and Valencia about the hidden bounty, but refrains, fearing they may not speak to him ever again. He looks at the four queues leading up to the terminal and feels the need to change lane, although each line of traffic is moving at the same snail's pace. Emilio indicates to his left to join lane number three behind a station wagon driven by an obese couple. The car behind flashes its headlights and politely waves Emilio over. Emilio guides the car into lane three and holds his hand out of the window as a gesture of thanks.

The fuming hoard of automobiles creeps closer to the brightly illuminated terminals. Emilio feels faint. There are just two cars between them and the terminal. His right leg hovers over the accelerator pedal, feeling as though it's made of jelly. His energy is sucked from him through fear. He sees the car in front roll forward and presses his jelly leg to the floor, which jerks the car forward, causing it to stall. Emilio then thinks of using this as cover for a last ditch attempt at salvation.

"Whoa did you feel that? I think I just heard the rear tyre burst. I better check it out. You guys wait here."

Emilio jumps out of the car without waiting for a reply.

"I didn't hear a tyre blow out. It certainly doesn't feel like it either." Says Valencia, confused and suspicious.

"Oh God, that's all we need, a burst tyre! Great! Well I'm not doing it. Emilio can fix it himself with the spare in the back." Karl says in a disgruntled tone.

Emilio crouches down to the right hand rear tyre and then pulls a frustrated expression, acting as if something is wrong with it. He opens the trunk, quivering. There is only one car between him and border control. He has little time to get rid of the drugs. He gazes at the drug filled spare tyre beneath the carpet and wonders anxiously how he will get the wheel out without anybody noticing.

In the car in front the overweight couple are returning home from the Baja California Mexican Food Festival. The tall and stocky terminal guard peers into the vehicle through the driver's window. He witnesses the couple casually dipping their hands into family sized buckets of popcorn and slurping on litre cartons of soda, surrounded a pile of old food and drink packaging which has been lazily thrown into the rear passenger seats and into the footwells.

"Passports and driving license please, sir".

The driver accidentally burps whilst opening his sugar coated mouth to answer.

"Oh, sorry! One minute, officer, they're around here somewhere, I'm sure of it."

The couple, although lazy and unorganised are helpful and polite, apologizing profusely for their clumsiness the entire time. "Sorry officer, I'm sure I put my licence in the glove box somewhere! I'm always putting things down and forgetting where I put them." He opens the glove box, which is full of candy, which spills out onto his wife's lap. "Would you like a candy, officer, we have plenty here?"

The officer rolls his eyes and looks back at the traffic piling up. He notices nobody is in the driver's seat in the car behind. At that moment, Emilio springs up from behind the vehicle. He stares at the guard, who stares back, without looking away. The moment is awkward. Emilio feels like he's been caught red handed. The guard stands to attention, waiting for Emilio to do something, as he is uncomfortable with people getting out of their car so close to border control. Emilio shuts the trunk in defeat and walks quietly and slowly back to the driver's door, fearing he has just given the game away.

"Thought I had a blown tyre. My mistake!" Emilio shouts, struggling to keep control of his vocal cords. He gets back into the car and prays Karl and Valencia won't talk to him.

"What was wrong with the tyre?" Asks Valencia.

"Dude, are you alright? What's wrong? There's a tear running down your cheek." Karl has never seen Emilio cry before.

“The tyre’s fine, and so am I. I’m not crying dick-weed, some grit flew in my eye, that’s all.” Responds Emilio, who thinks it’s pointless telling Karl and Valencia what the real problem is. He couldn’t bear to tell them now, anyway. The last thing he wants is everyone freaking out as much as he is.

The guard turns back to the vehicle he is currently dealing with, shaking his head and sighing.

“Just your documents please, sir. We have long queues starting to form, and if you can’t find them right now you’ll have to pull over.”

Two passports and a license are passed out through the window. The guard looks at the garish photos and checks the name and address on the licence, which matches the database information on a monitor on the terminal wall. The guard waves the car through and then stands, arms folded, waiting for the mules to roll up to checking station. Emilio sees the car in front move on and duly restarts his engine, guiding the vehicle over to the terminal. His paranoia is causing his heart to beat so hard that he feels he may actually have a heart attack. He looks in the rear view mirror at Valencia, who seems surprisingly calm. He feels like he’s let her down at the last hurdle, after everything he’s put her through, and everything she’s done for him. He can’t even bring himself to look at Karl.

The patrolman with the detection dog is at terminal one and is just walking over to terminal two. Emilio can’t help but keep glancing at the dog, which is panting in the heat, occasionally licking his chops of foul saliva.

“Passports and driving licence, please!” The guard says irritably. Emilio is still looking at the dog as he slowly pulls the fake passports and driving licence off the dashboard, handing them to the guard with a forced smile.

“What was the problem that made you leave the car?” Remarks the guard, looking at Emilio straight in the eyes as he looks up from the passports.

“I thought the rear hub cap had worked loose, sir, I thought I heard a clank like a tin can hitting the road. I just wanted to make sure everything was alright.”

“Care if I take a look?” Asks the guard, testing Emilio, trying to work out if he’s being honest or not.

“Sure, feel free!” Emilio replies as calmly as he possibly can. The guard squints his eyes and touches the stubble on his chin as he leans into the car, staring down judgementally at Emilio. Emilio watches in the wing mirror as the guard walks to the rear of the car and kicks the chrome hub cap several times.

The guard then unexpectedly walks to the back of the car and opens the trunk. Emilio considers putting his foot down and speeding off, as he's sure the guard will find the illegal packages. The guard roots around, lifting the carpet and checking under the spare wheel, before slamming the trunk shut and walking back to the driver's window.

"Ok, where are you travelled from?" The guard asks.

Emilio is racking his brains for a quick reply. His mind is unusually stagnant through nervousness.

"Errr, San Felipe."

"San Felipe! Lovely. What were you doing there?" The guard smiles coldly, trying to catch him out.

"Fishing mostly!" Emilio answers hesitantly.

The guard looks at Emilio cryptically and then back at his passport photo, then slowly up to the computer screen. All the information checks out with the registration plate.

Emilio is watching the detection dog at the next terminal out of the corner of his eye, tapping his hand on the dashboard nervously, smiling brightly whenever the guard looks at him, willing him to hurry up and let them through. Karl is sweating in silence. The guard is watching the traffic building up, anxious to get it down to a minimum as soon as possible. Karl feels like confessing, blurting out everything that he's been through over the last couple of days.

Over at terminal two the detection dog's ears stand on end. He starts pulling on his lead. The guard and Emilio look over. The guard on terminal two signals to Emilio's guard, indicating that he needs assistance.

"Wait here for a moment, I'm not done with you yet!" The guard tells Emilio, before going over to terminal two to see what the commotion is about.

"The dog has picked up a scent. I've pulled the car over. I didn't want to proceed without consulting you." The young guard explains.

"Ok. You've done the right thing, kid! I'll take over from here, you go and man my terminal!"

The dog pulls in Emilio's direction. He is let off his leash and starts to run towards terminal three.

"Oh fuck, he's got us!" Shouts Emilio.

"What are you talking about Emilio, how can the dog get us? We're clean." Valencia perches on the edge of the back seat to see what's going on more clearly.

“There’s coke in the trunk. The spare wheel’s full of it, and now we’re fucked. I’m sorry. It’s my fault. God, I’ve messed up our entire lives this time.”

Karl leans forward, not wanting to believe what he’s hearing.

“No you fucking didn’t, Emilio. You’re not that stupid, you’re just kidding, please tell me you’re just kidding. Look at me, Emilio, you haven’t just sent me to jail have you.” Karl starts to sob uncontrollably.

“I’m sorry, Karl. You should never have met me, I’m a fuck up!” Emilio cries.

“How could you do this to us Emilio, you bastard, and to think I actually cared about you!” Valencia punches Emilio violently in the back of the head.

“I didn’t know you cared about me, otherwise I wouldn’t have done it!” Emilio tries to make excuses, feeling for a moment like getting a gun and shooting himself in the head to end this tragic moment.

In the depths of their despair, the group fail to notice that the dog has circled around and headed for a silver estate car at terminal two. The guard waves the driver to pull over into a lay-by and, guided by the dog, begins removing the rear seats.

“Wait, where’s the dog?” Emilio looks around frantically.

The group look across to terminal two and see the guard who was initially questioning them lifting a small dead dog out of a black box under the rear passenger seat of the silver car. The guard shakes his head. He’s seen this kind of thing before. Without the required certificate of rabies vaccination, people would sometimes try and sneak animals across the border, but hours of driving without ventilation had caused the dog to suffocate, raw claw marks of frantic struggles to escape line the box. The young guard walks over, and after re-checking the passports and driving licence he waves Emilio, Karl and Valencia on.

“Take the third gate, please.” He smiles.

As the car moves off, Karl closes his eyes, tears of happiness running down his face, as relief nourishes his soul. Choked with emotion and unable to speak, he raises his hand and high fives Valencia in triumph. The feeling is bittersweet. They can’t believe how Emilio put their lives at risk.

“I totally had you all going back there, you both completely fell for it, suckers!” Emilio puts on a jubilant front, trying his hardest to cover his tracks.

“That wasn’t fuckin funny, Emilio. If you were kidding, then you had me fooled. I thought I was going to jail. Don’t ever pull a stunt like that ever again.” Karl is not amused.

“You had me going back there too, Emilio. You’d better not be lying to us now or I swear to God I’ll turn my back on you forever.” Valencia steadies her nerves and tries to see the funny side. She didn’t think Emilio could be so selfish and takes him at his word for the time being, not wanting to think the worst of him.

“Come on, dudes! I wouldn’t dream of doing something so selfish! It’s me, Emilio, your buddy!” Emilio feels remorseful, despite getting the drugs over the border successfully. He can live with himself for the time being, as he knows he tried to do the right thing before it was too late. He presses the accelerator lightly. The car begins to gather speed. His heart skips a beat and then races with excitement. He considers telling the truth, but decides against it. Gripping the steering wheel tightly, Emilio starts to bounce in his seat, completely elated, like he’s just got all the winning numbers for the jackpot.



