



A LAND WITHOUT SIN

A NOVEL

*Paula Huston*

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SLANT



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Though many of the historical events described in this story actually happened, I have used this history for my own fictional purposes. When episodes in this book do not match up with historical fact, that is the reason. At times I have taken novelistic liberties with real historical figures. The main characters in this novel are all fictitious, however, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental and most definitely unintended.

This novel is dedicated to Mike, beloved husband,  
best friend, and fellow pilgrim.



## *Chapter One*

Tikal, Guatemala, 1993

I was looking for my brother. Whether or not Stefan even wanted to be found, I did not know. By now he could be the neo-Che of the Lacandon jungle, or lying in his own filth in a Chiapan jail, or even dead. Because of the way our family is, we'd only been in the same country at the same time on a very sporadic basis for the past sixteen years, the most recent occasion being his priestly ordination, so it was hard to say what was going on with him. But I was ready for anything.

In my clothes were sewn a false passport bearing a two-year-old photo of him, the best I could do, and a one-way ticket out of Mexico, in case we had to scramble. And because I didn't know whose list he might be on, I had a fake passport of my own, one of several made for me when I dated a USIA man stationed in Burma. This USIA man's theory was that no American female could be overly prepared for extended stays in international hotspots, and since it looked like that's where I would be spending most of my time, I took him up on his offer. A helpful fellow indeed, he also taught me how to throw a knife, a handy trick he no doubt picked up in CIA school, even though he would never admit he'd been.

Besides the false passport, I had a false job, thanks to a fellow freelancer I first met back when I was still schlepping my cameras through war zones on behalf of the Associated Press. I bumped into Dirk a month ago in Burundi right about the time I heard about Stefan's disappearance. Dirk told me that a Mayanist named Bource was looking

for a good photographer who was used to roughing it and used to the jungle and didn't care about making campesino wages for the next couple of months. Given the annual income of most freelancers, this could have been almost anyone—under normal circumstances, it would have certainly been Dirk, who would go anywhere, anytime, as long as there was a good chance of dying in a heroic manner and/or securing himself a book contract with a major publisher. But Dirk was getting married, a recent trend among my footloose cronies. “I'm thirty-eight,” he said, as though that would explain it. However, thanks to Dirk's new direction in life, I now had my cover and an airtight excuse for snooping around in Central America, where I had not been for nearly ten years and which I had not missed in the slightest.

My false boss for the false job, Bource, turned out to be a bespectacled, formerly-handsome Dutchman in a red baseball cap who asked me, in a gloomy, preoccupied way, to please call him Jan. He, of course, did not know he was helping me in my scam, and clearly was not the kind of man who would understand the need for duplicity. He'd told me to meet him in Guatemala, in the island town of Flores, which was not exactly where I needed to be. But we were at least pointed in the right direction, and I could afford to be patient.

Jan's son Rikki, a mere sixteen but already, I noticed, a stunning young pre-man, was extremely efficient and not at all gloomy, and the family truck, as his father had requested, was loaded and ready to roll at 3:30 that afternoon. We were headed for Tikal, perhaps the only Maya site in Guatemala with 100 percent name recognition, though I myself, being more focused on current events than dead civilizations, had always vaguely supposed it to be in Honduras. I'd been set straight on this by my Aviateca Airlines seatmate, a bearded Berkeley rainforest savior headed for the Biosphere Reserve, and his lecture pretty much covered my knowledge of the Mayas.

I spent the hour before we left doing a final check on all my photography equipment. Though I still had only the haziest notion of what my new job would entail—Jan had been stubbornly close-lipped about it—over the years, I'd learned what you should haul into the jungle if

you were going to be there for a while. For instance, you never foray into boonies of any kind without your spare camera; in my case, that means hauling a second Canon EOS-1. Besides the two cameras, I had packed a tripod and a tiny can of WD-40, plus silica gel to protect the film from jungle rot.

Next, I pulled out my lenses. For an unsentimental person, I have a strangely passionate relationship with my lenses. First, there's my workhorse, the 50mm macro for up-close work. Some of my best photographs over the years have been headshots, particularly of children, particularly in dire circumstances. I'm drawn to those faces. Somehow we click, those skinny kids with the big, sad eyes and me. Which is maybe why my one and only award of any consequence was for a shot of a baffled Afghan toddler—two, maybe?—standing in front of a just-bombed, still-burning house.

But I don't confine myself to close-ups. There's also my beloved f2.8 Ultrasonic, a slick 300mm lens for distance work, at which I'm not bad. I've found that if you're willing to plant yourself in front of a scene, foregoing any fussy instincts to "arrange" the elements to suit yourself or other people, things turn up in the darkroom later you could swear weren't there during the shoot.

Last, I dragged out my two trusty zooms, the 28-105 and the 100-300 Ultrasonic, which is great for daytime photography. Based on the infinitesimal amount of information gleaned from my taciturn boss, I didn't know how much of that there would be—outside daytime work—but the circular polarizing filter went into the pack anyway. Taking photographs at the equator is tricky business. The humidity level is so high that you might as well be shooting through fog, and that problem gets amplified by a persistent, jungly sun-glare that turns the sky silver; the polarizing filter is just about your only recourse here. Another reason to add my Minolta 4F strobe meter to the pack, which is good, I've found through years of jerry-rigging in the jungle, for measuring ambient light.

Light was actually going to be the biggest problem. One of the few things Jan let slip was that a lot of the shooting would be in the dark,

either night shots of carved inscriptions, where raking lights could be used to bring the glyphs into sharper relief, or inside the pyramids themselves. I'd done some of this during a project involving Thai temples, my one major credit and a plum that would probably not fall out of the tree again, thanks to the precipitous end of my relationship with Robert, professional adventurer, poetic genius, photographer extraordinaire, and, as it turned out, major jerk.

One thing was clear: this gig with Jan and company was not going to be a big *National Geographic*-style operation like only Robert or someone of his ilk has the clout to command, with porters along to carry light stands and strobe lights and generators. We couldn't even take Jan's truck all the way in to where we were going. Three big packs was all we could handle. For a minute, I allowed myself to muse wistfully: a Norman 200 strobe setup would be just about perfect—we'd used them in Thailand—but then we'd have to have electricity, which last time I checked, didn't exist inside most crumbling Guatemalan temples. Instead, Jan could provide me with a single rickety light stand, some quantum battery packs for off-camera flashes, and a couple of big lanterns. That would have to do.

In my obsessive little way, I also checked over my art supplies, though it was doubtful they could be replenished in Flores or even in nearby San Benito if something were missing. There were plenty of good drawing pencils, a graphite stick, and fine-tip pens, plus extra ink. Hauling loose drawing paper in a backpack is a recipe for disaster; I had found that out the hard way years ago. So I'd decided on a couple of ringed sketchbooks with 90 lb paper in them, which I put inside plastic bags to protect them from molding. On a whim, I'd also brought along rice paper and Conté crayons, though rubbings would no doubt be tough, given the depth of the carvings.

At 3:30 sharp, we drove the loaded truck off the island and onto the earthen causeway that crosses the lapping lake water, bouncing past the Santa Elena airport and onto the highway to Tikal, the only asphalt, Rikki informed me, in the whole Petén. I'd already noticed that Rikki did at least 85 percent of the talking.

Riding around in remote places with strange men was something I was used to, and in spite of the big question mark concerning my brother, I could feel myself getting primed for a new adventure. I knew a dog once who ran like a racehorse, tongue streaming back, black ears flying, and could run like that for hours and then go unconscious for half a day in the sun, twitching and dreaming, and wake up and start running again. There was nothing this dog was running toward, nothing it was trying to catch. Running was it, pure and simple. That was me at the start of something new.

We drove for perhaps an hour. A big stretch of scenery was taken up by a sluggish-looking military outpost, the jumping-off point, Rikki said, for raids against Tikal-based guerrillas during the eighties. My ears pricked up. Though I'd been in Guatemala during those days, I hadn't been in this part of the country. Guerrillas were of vital importance to the Stefan question. I wanted to ask Rikki more, specifically if he knew what was happening on the Chiapan guerrilla front, but thought it prudent to shelve the interrogation about southern Mexico until his father was out of earshot. In fact, Jan was probably an empty well anyway. Men like him tended to avoid politics completely. In every messed-up country I've ever been there are the Jans—foreigners not connected with the government or business or humanitarian projects, scholarly oddballs who meander right through the middle of battlefields and whose sole reason for being is tied up in what has become of the pink river dolphins or whether Australopithecines ate more meat or vegetables.

We stopped briefly at the entrance to the park while Jan checked in at a guardhouse, then took a narrow dirt road that veered away from the groups of straggling tourists heading toward the Great Plaza of Tikal and went straight into heavy forest where we clattered along for some time seeing nothing but trees. Rikki explained that this was a guard road that would get us a couple of miles closer to where we were going, but that the last part would be a hike. Ahead on both sides was nothing but green.

After a while, the ribbon of brown ahead of us began to narrow and

then, abruptly, vanished. Jan nosed the truck between two magnificent ceiba trees and turned off the engine. The windows of the truck were open to the screechings and strange cries and hollow boomings of the jungle, noises that reminded me of lush and deadly Burundi. Above everything else was the crashing in the trees that signaled monkeys were moving in. Something orange and yellow flashed in front of the windshield and landed on a branch not far off the ground—a black toucan with his brilliant beak. Jan opened the truck door.

The pack was heavy but all right. Once upon a time, I'd been lost in a rainforest and was not hot to repeat the experience, so on the trail I stuck close to Rikki. It was strange to think that several hundred tourists were climbing pyramids only a mile or two away and we could neither hear nor see them. In spite of the weird airlessness you get in jungles, the climate wasn't so bad. I'd expected to sweat—I remembered sweating a lot when I'd been in Guatemala before, though maybe that had just been nerves—but instead there was a pleasant balminess I was immediately grateful for. Jan handed me a water bottle. As I was upending it into my mouth, it began to rain, just a dripping at first, as though it were coming straight from the trees, and then a more serious thrumming that signaled a downpour on its way. He motioned, and the three of us huddled together beneath a tall shrub with six-foot brilliant green leaves that ended in fringes.

"Look," said Rikki, crouching. I squatted beside him and in the dim, rainy light saw a weaving line of leaves marching steadily off into the forest. Leafcutter ants, large but dwarfed by the pieces of leaves they carried, which were at least five times their size.

Jan was not interested in the ants. He said in his prim *Nederlander* way, "There is a small temple where we are going. If it keeps raining, we can sleep inside."

"So put on the ponchos?" said Rikki.

"Yes."

We each dug into our packs and draped ourselves in khaki rain gear, then hoisted everything back on our shoulders and went out onto the trail. Ten minutes later the sun broke through and steam began rising

from the forest floor, and after another ten minutes Rikki said, “Can we stop? I’m dying inside this poncho,” which of course I was also, but not about to admit it. Jan looked back at the two of us and just then a shaft of weak sunlight caught him right across his Dutch face, and I saw him old in the way you sometimes see people on film when you are developing it and realize you have seen the future. There’s an age one has to be for this to happen and it’s not my age, not yet, but sometime within the next six years.

In spite of what my extensive preparations for this trip might suggest, I was not actually terribly worried about Stefan yet. We’d been out of touch more than we’d been in it—my fault, mostly—and for a long time, if we communicated at all, we went through Jonah. Jonah, no doubt voted “least likely to become a monk” in his high school yearbook, was indeed a monk, based at a Camaldolese Benedictine hermitage in California (“Camaldolese” equaling “reasonable hermits who live under a rule,” he once told me, laughing). This was where Stefan in his late twenties, no longer seeking enlightenment in Nepal, no longer hammering away in grad school, spent three apparently fruitful Big Sur years. Fruitful, in the sense that he seemed to have finally figured out what he was going to do with his life and why he was going to do it, though I couldn’t in a million years grasp his logic. As a monk, Jonah was unable to change addresses whenever he felt like it. Thus, he provided us a convenient mailbox.

Over the past several years Stefan had sent a series of slightly disturbing letters to Jonah, intermixed with a couple of red herring versions of the same thing to me, then several somewhat more disturbing ones to Jonah, and then silence. This silence had gone on for only eleven weeks so far and probably meant nothing, given the fact that Stefan and I share the same penchant for secrecy and independence, not to mention how long the gaps between letters usually were. But Jonah, who for a monk is quite the worrywart, was by definition trapped and helpless to go check things out on his own. He had put a call through

to the diocese in southern Mexico where Stefan was stationed, only to discover that no one had anything to say about my brother's whereabouts. Stefan was not there, but as far as they were concerned, he was not missing either. When I made my own call, I ran into the same stone wall. This, I found irritating. Though as I say, I wasn't yet particularly worried about Stefan, I didn't like their attitude, and told Jonah I'd make the trip if I could set it up.

Now I was here, or at least in the country next door, and it came to mind that there was a fairly major difference between my brother and me that might be important to consider. This was Stefan's rather weak attachment to earthly life. He liked it well enough, but didn't cling, not enough to make him a fighter, anyway. He was much more passive in that way than I was, which used to drive me crazy when we were kids and probably explains why, for his own good, I was always trying to boss him around even though he was four years older than me.

For passive, I am not. Soon after the Thai temple project, when Robert and I still liked each other well enough to sign on for another joint adventure, he convinced me to go to Cambodia to help him snoop around the former killing fields. Something he needed for a new book project, he said, and I, with all my vaccinations up to date and realizing I'd grown a lot fonder of him than I'd been of anybody in a long time, said sure. We had the teamwork thing down cold. We understood each other's vision, which meant we could help each other take better pictures. And he was bright and sexy and made me laugh. So Cambodia felt like an investment, the kind I'd never been willing to make before.

Not for long, though. We spent a couple of nights in town prior to heading for the refugee camps, just to plan things out, and somewhere in the middle of that, Robert showed his cards. Our hotel was your typical tiny equatorial affair, heavily reliant on bamboo. I remember there was an enormous spider plastered to the outside of the window screen. Robert, wearing nothing but his boxers and his handsome skin, was propped up in bed on one elbow observing me with his connoisseur's eye, which had put me into full basking mode. And then he said, apropos of nothing, "If you had a knife and you woke up and some guy

was in your sleeping bag with you, would you stick him?"

"This person isn't you?" I asked, still clueless.

He shook his head. "Some guy. You don't know him."

"Well, sure," I said. "Of course."

He shook his head and gave me his famous wry smile. "Wow."

"Wouldn't you?"

"No guy's going to crawl in with me, baby. How about this? You've got a gun and you're out in the boonies and some guy is stealing your pack with all your food and chances are good you won't get out alive without it. But you know he's hungry and he's got a family to feed."

"But I'll die if he takes my food?"

"Right."

"I'd shoot him."

He stared at me admiringly and shook his head again. "If he's begging for mercy?"

"If he gives the food back, okay. Otherwise, it's him or me."

"This is so wild. This is exactly what I thought you'd say."

"Really." I was beginning to pick up the tone here, one I recognized through hard experience, though this was the first time I'd ever heard it coming out of Robert.

"How about if the guy who's taking your food is me? We've been lost for three weeks and we're out of everything except toothpaste and four crackers and suddenly I snap and grab for the pack and you've got a gun . . ."

"What's going on here?"

"Just wondering, is all."

"What do you think I'd do?"

"I hate to say, really." He peered into my face. He was still grinning, but I was not. "Oh, come on now, Eva, lighten up. This is just a . . . what do you call it? Party game? Something to pass the time."

I stared back at him. "I wasn't bored. Were you? Is this relationship starting to bore you?"

His eyes shifted then, and he reeled in the little cruel streak I hadn't known was there. Until, of course, we got safely out of the country

and then it was, as I already figured it would be, goodbye dear Eva and best of luck and it's been truly grand and I'll never forget you, which naturally he did the second the next decent-looking female dove into view. But I'd told him the truth. I'd shoot. Because obviously—he'd just proved it—if I didn't take care of myself, who would?

I could not, however, say what Stefan would do if his life were similarly threatened, and that made everything more uncertain. If he were being held captive, for example, would he even try to make a break for it? Or, good Catholic boy that he was, would he be unable to resist the call to martyrdom?

## *Chapter Two*

Jan and Rikki and I had come upon something that looked like a small hill covered in shrubs and tree roots but that turned out to be a temple in disguise and the apparent object of our soggy hike. Rikki and I set up camp while our leader went somewhere with his high-powered battery lantern and didn't come back for nearly an hour. "What's he doing?" I asked Rikki, who said, "He's checking things out inside the temple."

"So we'll be at it tonight already?"

He nodded. "My dad has been planning this for a long time."

"What's he up to? Do you know?"

He started to say something, then stopped. He didn't shake his head, didn't lie, just stopped.

"Sorry," I said. "I forgot it was a big secret."

"Not really a big secret," he said. "But he can't take a chance of it getting out there. He's got his reputation to protect."

That sounded like a direct quote. In fact, Jan had been quite adamant about the conditions of my employment. I was hired for three months, no more, and this was a private project, paid for out of his own pocket. I must agree not to discuss our work with anyone, nor could I sell any of my photographs or drawings afterward. My glum boss was up to something potentially ludicrous, it sounded like, or maybe even illegal. And I was making almost nothing in the way of quetzales for the privilege of sharing this adventure. "Are there snakes in that temple?"

"Víboras. Si. Maybe."

I saw a porter get bitten once, by some kind of viper. We had been in a place where there were no doctors for two hundred miles and only one functioning jeep. I don't like snakes.

Pretty soon Jan came back, silent as ever but with a hot little glow behind his glasses, and I could tell that whatever he was hoping to get on film was still there exactly as he remembered it, and tonight I would find out what it was. But first there was dinner to cook—a pot of beans and rice—and some fluffing up of the nest (I like a cozy tent) and then sitting by the cook fire for a bit while the sun started its long slide into the trees.

An hour later, Rikki and I were standing in front of the passageway, loaded up like pack mules with my equipment, waiting for Jan to set up a light inside the chamber. This was not one of those strange steep Tikal pyramids like the ones in the rainforest savior's guidebook, but something much smaller and flatter that we were able to enter near ground level through a stone doorway that looked like an open mouth. "It *is* a mouth," Rikki explained when I asked. "The mouth of a Witz monster. It takes you into what they called Xibalba, the Underworld."

I raised my eyebrows.

"The land of the dead," he added helpfully.

"Why is the temple so small? Aren't they usually much bigger?" Straight out of the guidebook, but Rikki didn't know the difference.

"This is an older section of the city," he said. "It was probably built around 50 B.C., seven hundred years or so before the big pyramids were put up. Lots of times, they just built right over the old ones, but this one must have been in the wrong spot."

Just then Jan called out that we should come in, and we shuffle-crouched down a long passageway filled with rubble, a perfect hideout for víboras, to a tiny room with a low stone bench at the back. Beneath the bench was an open shallow pit. Even in the dubious light from the big battery-powered lanterns, traces of red on the walls made it clear that this room had once been plastered and painted.

Jan seemed to know exactly what he wanted to do, though I could not figure out what he thought was worth photographing. The room seemed entirely empty except for the bench. He spent some time arranging the two lights in different ways, then beckoned. I went and stood beside him. He pointed to the faintest traces of something black on the wall behind the bench. If this keeps up, I thought, we might actually get through the entire three months in sign language. I moved closer, squinting, and made out what looked like a hieroglyph, the merest squiggle.

“Can you photograph this?” he asked me.

“I don’t know if I can pick anything up.” I hated saying that—photographers never admit defeat—but it was true. The lines of the glyph were so faded I could hardly see them with my eyes.

“Try,” he said. “Take as many photographs as you need. Try everything you can think of.” He was leaning in close to the wall beside me and his arm brushed mine. I remembered that sensation—someone’s tensed muscles coming into sudden contact with my skin—from sitting on the couch beside Bruno, aka my father, watching boxing when I was a kid. Bruno looked upon boxing as a blood sport, especially when it pitted a noble white guy—i.e., Rocky Marciano, Ingemar Johansson—against one of those “black kopiles,” as he called them, sad that I’d been born too late to witness Marciano’s glory days. My father was not exactly with the times, especially when it came to race relations in our fair city of Chicago. Back then, he had the massive forearms of the steelworker he was, and when, at six, seven, eight years old, I felt one of them brush up against mine, I always got a disorienting jolt.

No jolt this time, however, or at least not a nasty one. Jan’s forearm was tense but radiated a pleasant warmth, the likes of which I had not experienced since abandoning co-ed tent life after Cambodia. Well, well, I thought, glancing down at the corded muscles, the bone-deep jungle tan under its gray pelt. Then I went back to squinting at my hieroglyphic quarry. Without actually touching the wall, I ran my fingers lightly above the painted area. Sure enough, there was a slight bulge in the plaster, just enough to bring out the glyph a little, which meant

a light held to one side would cast a bit of a shadow, which we didn't need.

"Rikki, come here," I said. "Try holding your light this way." Rikki trotted over and I stood him behind me and made him hold the light square on the glyph in a line directly above my head. Since height-wise he had me by at least six inches, the plan worked out nicely. "Okay," I said. "Can you steady that without the light stand? If you can, I'm going to use the stand for an off-camera flash."

Jan said, "Rikki can balance the lantern against my shoulder." So that was how we did it: the tripod up as high as it would go, me on tiptoe sighting, Jan breathing down my neck, and Rikki pressed up against his father, stabilizing the light.

After a while, I switched over to pencil and sketchbook and attempted to draw what I could hardly see, though once I began, the shape unfolded fairly naturally. It was a single glyph, quite simple, that looked like a four-petaled flower inside of a squarish double oval. At the bottom, below the oval, was a group of painted streamers, blown sideways. I made four different drawings, a close-up of the glyph on its own and then in context, holding them up silently for Jan's approval and getting a thumbs-up each time.

It was clear that this particular tomb had already been stripped, either by robbers or archeologists. My boss himself was the most likely candidate—how else would he know about the glyph? Then I felt someone watching me and turned to meet Jan's blue stare. He'd noticed me speculating away, exactly what he'd hired me not to do. "Quite a place," I said. "Never been in one of these before." I shook my head like an admiring tourist and added a heartfelt "wow." He narrowed his gaze, then turned abruptly toward the passageway. Rikki and I fell in line like two ducks behind him.

Night in the jungle is like nothing else on earth. The darkness is absolute and has an underwater texture to it, as though you are flutter-kicking through it in a wetsuit, with limited air. The forest

sways—a moving kelp bed of trees, insects, nocturnal creatures hunting for food—and the ground swells and sinks, an oceanic illusion of tides and the rising backs of whales. I lay awake in my sleeping bag, listening to the sea-surge of the jungle, and thought about Stefan.

Before I got on the plane to Guatemala, Jonah gave me all his letters, hoping they would help me contact the people I needed to find in Chiapas. It was strange to read the words my brother had written to someone else, someone who not only understood his singular worldview but shared it. I knew the child version of Stefan well, better than I've ever known another living being. We were best friends back then, true *compadres*, the only people either of us could trust. But since we'd grown up and became who we were, we had found ourselves on totally different roads, and I could no longer predict what he would do or why.

In the morning, after café and scrambled *huevos*, Rikki and I were told we had the day off. After all the hustling, this was a surprise. "I need some time to plan," Jan explained. These were the first words of the day for him, except for whatever he had muttered when the spatula turned up missing. The repressed intensity he'd revealed inside the tomb was gone; once again, he was sunk in contemplation.

"When do you want us back?" asked Rikki.

"Four," he said. "We'll be hiking in to the North Acropolis after dark."

"I didn't know. . ." Rikki began, then snapped shut. They certainly weren't very subtle about hiding things. He gave me an apologetic look and said, "Would you like to see the park?"

An hour later, Rikki and I were standing in the Great Plaza of Tikal. I'd seen pictures, but nothing one-dimensional could come close. The limestone pyramids, black with mold and scraped-off jungle, were so steep their faces looked vertical. Their crumbled roof combs, like broken molars, jutted into the sky high above the trees. Straight up the front of each were wide stairways made of slick and dangerous-looking steps. Rikki gestured toward the only one not swarming with people. "That's Temple I," he said. "The tomb of Ah-Cacaw. They've had it blocked off since the early eighties when a tourist fell a hundred fifty

feet and killed himself.”

“Who was Ah-Cacaw?”

“You’ve never heard of Ah-Cacaw?” He sounded amazed.

“Obviously not.”

“Sorry.” He really was sorry, his face flushed with pity for my ignorance. “He was the king who brought the city back to life when it had been under the thumb of Caracol for over six k’atuns.” He checked my face, and added humbly, “That’s a hundred and twenty years. Caracol was a rival lowland kingdom like Uaxactún. You do know about the Maya wars?”

“Not really. I knew they were good at math. And I vaguely remember from fourth grade that they were supposed to be the peaceful ones as opposed to the bloody Aztecs.”

“That’s what everybody thought for a long time, until they started translating the inscriptions. Now we know they were a major warrior society and fought each other all the time, at first to get sacrifice victims, and then to build empires.” He pointed at a complex of smaller pyramids, some of them encased in scaffolding. “That’s the North Acropolis, where we’ll be working tonight. It’s got layers of older stuff under it. Along with building these two big central pyramids, Ah-Cacaw reworked the whole Acropolis after it had been damaged by Lord Water, the king of Caracol, in the siege of the 500s.”

Just then the sun, which had been hiding most of the morning behind a cottony sky made up of jungle steam and carbon dioxide, broke through, and the grass that stretched between the facing pyramids of the Great Plaza came to green life. I could imagine the view from up top. “Hey,” I said. “I want to climb one of those.”

Rikki seemed pleased. The best one, he informed me, sounding more like an adolescent tour guide every minute, was the 230-foot-high Temple IV, the tallest pyramid in the Petén, “except of course for the one at El Mirador.” I nodded sagely. Of course. I knew that. Didn’t everyone? “But,” he added, “only if you’re willing to hike some more to get there.”

A group of Italians in expensive leather hiking boots must have

had the same idea. Clogging the Temple IV trail entirely, they looked like a family reunion where everyone had actually shown up, even the grandmother in her widow's weeds. She was steadying herself on the arm of a magnetic, blue-jawed Romeo somewhat older than Rikki but definitely younger than thirty-four, which is code for "younger than me." This did not matter; the sight of that glossy black hair combed back along the sides of his sleek head put me in mind of my first love, Peter, the stormy, self-absorbed film student I lived with during photography school, or maybe even of Robert, though neither of them, as far as I knew, had a drop of Italian blood. But they shared with him that restless, seeking quality that women, like stampeding buffalo, rush toward headlong. I like to think of myself as immune to the buffalo syndrome, but maybe not. Somehow, I'm always getting involved with guys who make me even more cynical than I already am.

After a minute, as though he could feel my eyes on him, he turned and gave me a long-lashed Italian stare over his shoulder. Now, I'm no great beauty—I've got the deep-set brown eyes, thick wren-brown braid, and long runner's legs of a million other people from my ancestors' part of the globe—but I'm slender and makeup free and come across as calm and non-neurotic, and I think that men, or a certain kind of man, must be drawn to that. This one seemed to be. I sent him back enough of a glance to let him know that if he could manage to park Grandma somewhere, I might be interested, and it was the old thing all over again. He began to slow, pointing out interesting shrubbery to the dour little widow and keeping an eye on me. This was my cue—and then I remembered Rikki. It was a damn shame, but there it was. "We'd better get in the passing lane," I said, "or we'll never make it to your precious temple." His cheeks heated up—he'd apparently seen the whole pregnant interchange—but he took me by the upper arm and towed me around the group of chattering relatives. I felt the Italian shrug as we passed him on the left.

Temple IV was a slog indeed, most of it on a steep trail through cleared but unlevelled earth with a number of immense tree roots acting as foot and handholds. The highest section of the climb involved a

vertical ladder that seemed to lean out backward over the jungle below. At the top of the ladder, there was a bit of a scramble to get safely parked on the flat limestone slabs at the summit of the pyramid, and then we were sitting together, our backs against what was left of the roof comb, staring out over one of the last real rainforests in the world.

“People sneak sleeping bags up here sometimes,” Rikki said. “That’s the thing—to watch the sun come up from the top of Temple IV. The guards usually chase them out, though.”

“Have you done it?”

“My mom and I, when I was eight. Totally cool.”

It crossed my mind, then, that there was no woman in the picture, no wife of Jan or mother of Rikki. Now Rikki spoke of her as though eulogizing a dear departed. Poor kid. I knew enough not to ask, I wasn’t *going* to ask, and then he said, almost offhandedly, “When we’re done here, we’re heading up to Palenque for a while, so you’ll get to meet her.”

“I will?”

“You’ll like her. She’s great.”

I turned back toward the panoramic jungle scene and said, carefully, “Will your dad be with us?” which was code for “So they’re still married?” and he winced and said, “Of course.”

“Rikki,” I said, deliberately changing the subject after an appropriately long pause. “What’s up tonight? What am I shooting?”

“A tomb in North Acropolis. He doesn’t want to do it until all the tourists are out.”

“Is it going to be as exciting as last night?”

That got a smile out of him. “Better,” he said.

“Something to do with the famous Ah-Cacaw?”

He turned to look me in the face. We were sitting two feet apart in the shade of the roof comb, with the sun, just behind the massive blocks, backlighting his head. One of his ears, the one closest to the sunlight, looked translucent, like a baby’s ear or the ear of a very young animal. His lashes were thick as fronds. But he’d be grown up soon enough, out in the world like all the beautiful ones, playing the same

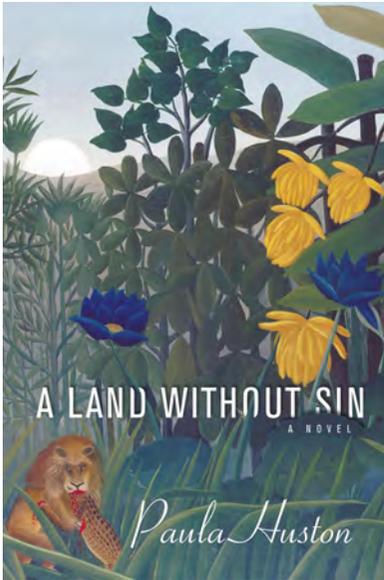
game as the Italian on the trail. “You really don’t care about this stuff, do you?” he said.

“You mean about your precious Mayas?”

Silently, in the way his father might have done it, he put his arm out flat, palm down, and ran it over the scene below us.

I pushed him harder, payback for them keeping me in the dark. “This is all life and death to you two, right? Figuring out what happened here, why they abandoned their big cities? But hey, they’re all dead and gone now, so what’s the big deal?”

“I know,” he said. “I know.” But for a moment he looked startled, as though this were the first time the thought had ever crossed his mind. And I thought, poor kid. Sixteen, and still totally enslaved to his parents. For all our differences, Stefan and I were completely on the same page with the whole filial devotion thing. We’d both blown the family nest at the soonest possible opportunity.



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