By Anton Swanepoel

What If You Fell In Love With The Person You Were Hired To Kill?
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

Description

Book one in the Laura series.

An ancient secret, with untold power, lies in the heart of a vast jungle; its whereabouts lost...until now.

For years, international spies, operatives with a taste for blood, have sought a mystical relic, a treasure, and with it knowledge that could destroy the world. As unsolved murders ring the globe, an unsuspecting woman, Laura Electa Valencia, tries desperately to escape her own troubles: the brutal, unexplained death of her parents, an abusive ex-boyfriend, and the loss of her job at the local library.

On a cruise, charted for exotic locations and unknown love, Laura is catapulted to the heart of intrigue, with deadly consequences. The demur librarian, baffled by the turn of events, skirts near-death and descends into a sphere of deceit, where even the dead cannot be trusted. Unbeknownst to Laura, she is the key, and every nation on earth would kill to have her.

From the first to the last page, this is a novel filled with excitement, chicanery, romance, and a body count that puts 007 to shame. Travel to far-away lands, well known to the author, and walk actual ruins in search of riches and awesome power.

Adventure awaits...explore the road less traveled and discover The Jaguar Prophecy.

Recommended for mature readers.
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Chapter 1: Meeting an Angel

Laura closed her green eyes slowly and tilted her head backward. A half-full glass of red wine stood on an oak table next to her, long forgotten and not her taste. Soft rain joined the few freckles on her slender face and caressed her lips as a lover’s kiss. In response, Laura lightly moved the tip of her tongue eagerly across her lips, lifting nature’s nectar into her mouth. The taste was tantalizing. Still anchored in Cozumel, the rhythmic crashing of the waves against the ocean liner’s hull fifteen decks below calmed her thoughts. A refreshing September coastal breeze gently played with Laura’s curly, long, red hair where she sat on the highest open deck of the ship.

It was past midnight, yet Laura had to get out of her cabin. Being claustrophobic, her mind clawed madly at the walls in the confined space. Thoughts of the past two weeks ran amok in her head: a job she loved for five years lost; a daring invitation from Nick, an online pen friend she had never met, to visit him in Spain; a promise to her roommate Suzy to find love; and accepting her parents’ brutal death. Fresh ocean air filled her lungs and dropped the chains around her mind. Carelessly, her thoughts jumped from one happy memory to the next, and then lingered over her vacation. She had a weeklong Caribbean cruise, already on its second day, followed by a week in Spain. At 25, this was her first big vacation, first time on an ocean liner, and the first time out of America, a three-for-one deal.
Mumbled voices to Laura’s left ripped her back to reality. Curiosity forced one of her eyes half open. A large swimming pool to her left ran up to the closed end of a horseshoe-shaped mahogany bar, where one could flirt with the bartender while in the pool. Disco lights above the bar danced together with the gibbous moon’s smile on the pool. Oak deckchairs and tables lined the swimming pool and complimented the darkly stained teak floor. Two muscular men sat at the bar on Laura’s side of the pool, beers in hand, having arrived while she was lost in thought. Laura brought her arm up and glanced at her watch. It was 1:15 am with six hours until the ship was to depart for Grand Cayman, its second stop after leaving Miami.

For a moment, Laura closed her eye. Undecided, she opened both eyes and slowly picked her passenger ID card off the table. For a second, she stared at the name on the card, Laura Electa Valencia. She gently bit her lower lip and thoughtfully flipped the card around in her hands as she scanned the pier below. A number of late-night bars and nightclubs lined the pier. Laura sighed. *An overnight stop and I am on the ship – typical. Although, I still have six hours before the ship is to depart. I can still have some fun. Ha, me party? Who am I kidding?* Laura giggled softly. *If that party animal Suzy was here, she would drag me by my hair to the first bar. Okay, tomorrow, I promise I will ask the cute dive instructor’s name.* Satisfied, Laura replaced the ID card and closed her eyes then folded her arms on her lap.
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Three decks above Laura, a sniper dressed in black stealthily moved across the ship’s radar deck to its edge. A smile graced Laura’s lips as she peacefully drifted into sleep while the sniper carefully unslung a highly customized, silenced M110 sniper rifle and lay down. Thirty messengers of death waited to be guided through a night scope and laser sight in single or full auto mode. With a slow and steady heartbeat, the sniper scanned the bow of the ship and then chambered a round as his trained, merciless eyes located his target. Focused, he made one last adjustment to the night scope and then took aim.

A tiny red dot shot out into the darkness and hit Laura in the chest. Emotionless, the sniper released the safety catch then held a deep breath as he readied for the kill. Laura’s heart raced as she licked her lips and flirtatiously smiled at the instructor in her dreams while a red dot felt her ample left breast, playing with her nipple, erect and visible through her wet cotton blouse, before it savagely sought her heart.

“Evening.” Rough and deep, the voice ripped Laura out of her dream. Her bone-chilling scream pierced the air as she jumped out of her chair. Her heart pounded as she breathlessly brought her shaking hands to her mouth and stared white-faced at the large Russian in front of her. Defeated, the red dot disappeared into the darkness.

“Apologies if I startled you. Care for a drink and company?” The Russian’s voice was softer now as he held out a cocktail drink to her. Laura crossed her arms and breathed deeply as she tried to calm herself. Hesitantly, she looked past the Russian to his friend at the bar, who reassuringly raised a beer at her. Laura’s mouth went dry as she returned her gaze to the man in front of her. Dread ran its bone-chilling fingers along her back before it choked her. The Russian’s fake smile failed to hide the terror in his eyes that urged Laura to run and caused a cold shiver to run down her back.
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

“Nnnnooo...thank you. I am just leaving.” Laura’s pulse raced and she clenched her jaw. She stepped around the Russian as he placed the drinks down. Crippling pain ripped through Laura’s arm as the Russian grabbed her wrist. Tears formed in her eyes as she stared into eyes that hinted of the dead soul behind it. Mercilessly, he tightened his vice-like grip on her wrist while his eyes sucked the thought of screaming from her mind. Laura’s legs gave in, and he effortlessly held her up by one hand.

“Laura, give me the data, or you will not see the sun rise today.” The unemotional voice tore at Laura’s heart, just another target, just another job. Icy fingers crawled up Laura’s spine and paralyzed her with fear. Her lips trembled as she tried to speak and failed. Who is he? How does he know my name? What data? Laura flinched as something hard painfully rammed against her chest. Instinctively, she looked down and gasped. A small-caliber pistol was bruising her ribs. Goosebumps sprang up on Laura’s neck as a cold shiver ran through her body. I am going to die. Why me? Tears of sorrow freely rolled down her cheeks as she desperately sought help from the men at the bar. Despair sucked the hope out of her as both men slowly walked towards her, pistols in hand.

The Russian released her wrist and dropped her hard on her knees in front of him. Thank goodness he has some humanity in him. Maybe I can convince him… Pain shot through her body as a knee into her chest drove the air from her. Laura gasped as she painfully tried to breathe. All hope shattered as powerful fingers grabbed her throat and choked her. Laura’s feet dangled in the air as the Russian lifted her off the deck.

“Give me the data, Laura. This is your last chance.” Laura’s strength and life were quickly leaving her. The world around her spun as her vision faded and seconds became eternity. Coldhearted, the Russian lowered Laura to look into her fading eyes. She gave him no such pleasure and looked up into the blackness she would soon join. Out of the darkness, a light winked at her.
The bullet took the Russian in the back of his neck, exited through his windpipe, and missed Laura’s face by inches. The man’s grip on Laura faded, and they both fell hard to the deck. Darkness threatened to take Laura as soft rain smeared the crimson blood on her face.

“She shot Yegor! Kill her!” the bartender yelled. Laura fought to stay conscious and grabbed the rim of the table. With effort, she pulled herself half up and lay her dizzy head down on the table. Laura’s heart stopped as she looked past the drinks on the table. Red-faced, the bartender lifted his pistol and took aim. Laura’s eyes widened and her lips trembled as he expertly squeezed the trigger. The sound of hail falling on wood filled the air, and wood splinters flew in all directions as bullets ripped into the deck. Mercilessly, the men were gunned down in front of Laura. The bartender took a bullet in the right shoulder and back, while the second Russian took three in the back and one in the head. Both men fell mere steps from her. Mesmerized, Laura stared at the cocktail drink in front of her that glowed in the most beautiful way as a red dot danced in the glass.

“Uuuuhhhhh.” The bartender’s moan snapped Laura’s attention away, and her heart stopped. Satisfaction filled his face as he raised his pistol and aimed at Laura. He would be the one to score the kill shot even if it was the last thing he did. Laura jerked as multiple bullets slammed into him and instantly ripped his life away.

Laura shuddered and tears ran down her cheeks as the red dot played with her lips. For an agonizing second, she helplessly waited for the bullet to end the nightmare and then collapsed onto the deck. As her head cleared the table, the glass exploded and vodka mixed with drugs stained the tablecloth. A blinding flash of pain went through Laura’s mind as she hit the deck hard with her head. Hopelessly, Laura clung to consciousness as she fought the darkness and lost. The red dot hungrily searched for Laura, hidden behind the table. Failing to find a clear shot, it retreated.
As the sniper made his way down from the radar deck, Laura slowly came to and was greeted by a blinding headache. The rain had stopped, and if it was not for being soaking wet and miserably cold, she would not have even bothered to open her eyes. *Please let this be a dream.* Searing pain flashed through her head as she opened her eyes and quickly closed them again. Her left temple had a heartbeat of its own, and the world around her started to spin.

Slosh, slosh, slosh.

A hollow pit formed in Laura’s stomach as footsteps on the wet deck approached her. *Get up, Laura. Get up, run, run.* Laura’s exhausted body ignored her mind. She clenched her jaw and swallowed as the person came closer and closer. *Who is it? Is it the sniper coming to finish me off?* Her lips trembled as the footsteps stopped at each of the dead men. Her mouth went dry. *Is he making sure they are all dead? What will he do when he finds me alive? Will he cut my throat with a knife or shoot me in the...*

Slosh.

The sound next to her stopped her thoughts while dread clawed up her spine. Fvitely, she tried to stop her body from shaking.

“Ppplease don’t kill mmmee,” Laura whispered as someone knelt next to her. A warm hand gently touched her right shoulder.

“Don’t be afraid. You are safe now.” Laura’s heart rejoiced as the soft and confident voice flowed over her and calmed her nerves. Warmth chased the cold out of her body when a jacket was placed over her. Laura gasped when powerful arms lifted her carefully up and carried her away from the dead men she did not wish to see. The man’s warm and well-toned body pressed against hers and assured her mind of his capability to protect her.
Eagerly, she opened her eyes and looked thankfully up at her rescuer. Piercing, brilliant blue eyes met her gaze and drew her in. Time waited for them as their souls danced and flirted. Then, shock and emotion overwhelmed Laura, and she threw her arms around his neck and tightly held on. Her body shook as the rivers of emotion poured out of her, and as the world around her started to spin, she lay her head on his shoulder. Laura did not mind the darkness that clawed its way over her consciousness. She felt safe in his—safe for the first time in years.

“Are you an angel?” Laura whispered before fainting.
Chapter 2: Bringing Up Bad Memories

In a room inside the ocean liner, Victor turned Laura’s passenger ID card around in his hands. His eyes admired her as she peacefully dreamed in his bed. He had dried her off with towels as best he could before tucking her in, damp clothes and all. His five foot seven inch solid frame shook as he laughed. Am I an angel? Far from.

Knock knock.

Victor glanced at Laura one last time then walked over, opened the door a fraction, and slipped out. A stocky man dressed in a gray suit greeted him in the hallway.

“I’m Special Agent Josh Williams from Homeland Security.” Josh’s outstretched hand hung in the air with his words. Victor’s large eyes and open mouth were his only greeting.

“What are you doing here?”

Josh’s hazel eyes narrowed at the question.

“What am I doing here? Have we met?”

“No. I meant Homeland Security.” Victor’s cold voice failed to convince Josh, who studied him for a moment more with his hand on his chin.

“My partner, Agent Parker Thompson, and I were with the Mexican government’s help, investigating a cross-border case. Due to the ship being registered in Miami and us being close by, the Mexican government asked us to take over the case.”

“ID.” Victor’s voice was stern.

“What?”

“Your FBI ID.”

Josh gritted his teeth and then reluctantly entertained Victor.

“Name’s Victor. Here’s the girl’s passenger ID card. She is asleep now. I’ll be happy to answer your questions while she sleeps.” Victor thrust the card into Josh’s hands.
“I have been told the ship’s doctor already made a visit and she is fine.” Josh slowly placed the card in his pocket.
“Correct.”
“Well, then I am questioning her now.” Josh more commanded than said and made for the door.
“No can do. Doctor’s orders. She has to rest.” Swiftly, Victor slid in front of Josh and blocked the door. Josh’s eyebrows dropped as he locked eyes with Victor for a moment.
“Very well. Let’s hear your story. Follow me.” Josh spun around and then briskly walked away. Victor followed Josh to an empty corner table in one of the staff’s dining rooms. A collapsible aluminum table and eight plastic chairs decorated the room. Victor and Josh sat down on opposite sides of the table. Slowly, Victor formed a steeple with his hands. Josh’s eyebrows dropped as he analyzed Victor for a moment, then swallowed. Strange. This man is not intimidated by being questioned by me; that is a first.
“Where are you from?” Josh pulled out a black Aspinal leather mini notebook from his jacket pocket while he waited for an answer.
“South Africa.” Victor’s taut voice hinted of repressed anger.
“You live there now?”
“No.”
Josh clenched his fists as he took a deep breath. Flames of anger started to burn in him. He had a long week behind him and was in no mood for Victor’s unasked-for arrogance.
“Then where?”
“Nowhere. I am backpacking the world.” Victor’s voice taunted Josh as much as his answer.
“You have your passport with you?”
“Yes.” Victor slowly took his passport out, having anticipated it would be asked for.
“What work are you currently doing?” Josh intently studied Victor’s passport. Victor Ramon Adalhard. Josh looked up when Victor did not reply.
“Hunting hot girls.” Victor smiled then leaned back in his chair, which made Josh turn light red.

“Are you trying to be funny?” Josh snapped as he glared at Victor, who leaned forward in his chair again.

“Look, Josh. I just told you I am backpacking. And if you really studied my passport, you would have seen that the stamps show I have been travelling for eight months now through a number of countries. So I probably have no job, and even if I did, what does it have to do with this case?”

Josh’s face turned a darker red, and he gritted his teeth. Veins formed mountain ridges on his face, but he held his composure.

“Fine. Tell me what happened.” Josh forced every word slowly past his teeth.

“It was late, and I was lonely. So I went hunting for a hot girl. I came on the deck, and there was one just lying around. Feeling like a caveman, I dragged her back to my dungeon.” Victor answered with a straight face and then sat back in his chair.

The table bounced as Josh, crimson-faced, slammed his fist on it and then spat out. “Are you trying to piss me off?”

“Special Agent Williams, sir, there is a man who urgently wants to speak to the investigator in charge.” A wide-eyed Mexican police officer stood in the doorway, too afraid to enter. Josh righted his jacket and then took a deep breath.

“What is it about?”

“It is a passenger, sir. He claims he saw the whole thing happen. He says he can identify the shooter.”

“Take me to him. Mr Adalhard, wait here,” Josh barked as he stood up to follow the officer.

“No, I will be in my room,” Victor defiantly answered and stood up. White-knuckled, Josh glared through narrowed, flame-spitting eyes as Victor calmly walked out of the room. Josh used every grain of control not to explode and cause a scene. He took a second deep breath, calmed himself, and then turned to the officer.
“Take me to the witness.”
“Yes, sir. Follow me.”

Half an hour later, Josh knocked on Victor’s cabin door, having completed his questioning of the passenger who witnessed the killing, a drunk nut who still smelled of booze and claimed aliens came down and killed the men with red lasers. The door lock disengaging, pulled his attention to the door.

“Oh, it’s you. Found your killer?” Victor’s words dripped with sarcasm, and Josh’s face turned blood red as he clenched his fists and bit his teeth. With effort, he slowed his breathing and took a deep breath before he responded.

“Mr Adalhard, you and I have a real problem with each other.”

“Problem is all you.” The remark was snappy, and laced with disgust.

“Step outside now.” Josh snarled.

“12 August, five years ago, Brooklyn Bridge, 2 am.”

Josh’s blood evaporated from his face and left it snow white, while his lips trembled. His shoulder hung as he dry mouthed stared at Victor. For a moment, words failed Josh, and then slowly he turned his gaze to his shoes, where his heart lay.

“That was an accident.” Josh’s soft voice was filled with regret.

“You shot a young unarmed girl.” Victor snapped while his eyes reflected the rage that was held back.

“I was drunk. My wife just left me. I was suicidal. I thought she was trying to attack me.” Josh pleaded.

“She came to you, an officer in a marked car for help, and you shot her.” Anger spiralled through Victor. Every muscle in his body wanted to snap Josh’s neck.
“She walked into the car, and when I got out, she had a knife, and I must have thought she came at me and reacted.” Josh whimpered, and cringed under Victor’s eyes and his own condemnation of his actions that night.

“A knife she pulled out of her gut, having been stabbed several times with it, after she was raped. She pleaded for help and stumbled. Then you shot her; a witness saw it.” Victor growled through his teeth with a voice that hinted of a dark past.

“I was drunk.” Josh yelled, and then continued in a softer voice. “And I am paying the price every day for my mistake.”

“You should have gotten the chair. I have no idea how you managed to stay in the force. Probably because the witness was a beggar. Even in South Africa, your case made headlines. Now, Laura is resting and I am pissed off. You can question her when she wakes up, and then I will talk to you.” Victor’s hate filled voice tore at Josh’s emotions.

“I will be outside.” Josh’s heart plummeted to his shoes when Victor slammed the door in his face. He leaned with his palms against the wall while his head hung. Desperately he tried to push the memories back into the dark pit he stored them. That night broke him. At the trail, he just let his lawyer handle everything. Josh could not even get himself so far to read the case file of the evidence collected against him. He was fully prepared for jail, and actually welcomed it, yet the charges were dropped for lack of evidence.
Inside the room, Victor placed his back against the door, and slowly slid down to the floor. A sea of anger washed over him as he dropped his head in his hands. His body rocked as tears streamed down his face, while sorrow hugged his heart as memories that haunted his dreams filled his mind. The only women he ever loved, raped and slain in front of him, while he was helplessly forced to watch. That night sealed his heart, and set him on a different path. Slowly, he looked up at Laura, still peacefully asleep. Now, fate brought you to me. And mercilessly you are unknowingly hammering down every wall I put around my heart. Victor wiped the tears from his eyes and took a deep breath. ‘Can I love again?’

Four hours after passing out, Laura slowly came to. Her headache had diminished to a dull manageable ache. Soft expensive silk sheets caressed her body, pressed down by the weight of a thick down feather duvet. Where am I? Is it safe to open my eyes? Laura held her breath as she carefully listened for any indication she was not alone. Her slightly racing heartbeat was her only reward. Lying on her left side, Laura slowly opened her eyes and curiously took in the room. A closed door was in front of her, possibly leading out of the room. The bathroom was towards her feet, its door open. A pinewood study desk and matching chair were next to the bathroom door. This is not my room. This room is larger and classier than mine, probably one of the First Class rooms. Whose room am I in?

“Morning sleepy head.”

Laura gasped and jumped out of bed, then bolted for the door.

“Crap.” Laura uttered as she went down face first, her left foot entangled in the bedding. The soft plush gray carpet broke her fall, and only her pride was bruised.
“Easy there tiger.” A man laughed as he knelt beside her. The mocking voice infuriated Laura, and she snapped her head up to glare at the man. Brilliant blue eyes met hers and washed away all anger. His smile was contagious, and warmth flowed through her body as she smiled back. A lock of hair fell over her eyes, and she clumsily blew it out of the way. Embarrassingly, it fell down again, and annoyingly blocked her view of the man’s athletic body. Laura gasped as he effortlessly picked her up by the hips and placed her on the edge of the bed, then sat down next to her.

Distracted, Laura licked her lips while her eyes eagerly caressed his body. Crew cut dark blond hair, well groomed, clean-shaven, early 30s, and come here sparkling blue eyes. He had on running shoes, with black tracksuit pants and an UnderArmour short sleeve compression T-shirt that strained to contain his flawlessly sculpted muscles. The perfect ancient Greek Spartan warrior’s body, ready for some action.

“Well, shall we do this?” Laura’s jaw dropped, and the fuse to her memory banks blew and left her with a response. Shit. The man is attractive, but this is moving a bit fast for me. I need to get out of here. Oh no, he is getting up and walking to the door. Is he going to lock it so I cannot escape?

“Oh, by the way, I am Victor.”

“Do what?” Laura blurted out, and immediately regretted the question. Victor stopped and slowly looked over his shoulder. His eyes flirtatiously flowed warmly over her curves. 5ft 4 inches, slender petite build with soft green eyes, long curly red hair, and ample breasts; B+ cup Victor guessed. Laura shifted uneasily as her body responded sensually to his caressing eyes. Embarrassed, she folded her arms over her hard and erect nipples, and tried to still the butterflies in her stomach.

“Your talk with the police. An agent is outside the door waiting for you to wake up.” Victor stepped forward and pulled the door open.
“She’s awake.” Victor matter of fact stated as he poked his head into the hallway. Leaving the door half-open, he walked over to a small bar fridge next to the bed. He took out an orange juice, then teasingly looked at Laura and winked. A jolt of excitement surged through Laura, and her face reddened.

“Want something to cool you down?” Victor smiled. Laura grabbed a pillow and playfully threw it at him just as Special Agent Josh stepped into the room.

“Water will be fine, thanks.” Laura’s face was crimson as she looked at the floor.

“Here you go.” Victor’s voice pulled her eyes up at him, and a shockwave went through her body as he winked at her just when she took the bottle. Laura almost dropped the water, and nervously she swallowed. *What am I going to do? This man is just too much for me. I have not had anyone flirt with me in years. What is wrong with me? He infuriates me and all I want to do is kiss him.*

“I’m Special Agent Josh Williams from Homeland Security.”

“Yes.” Laura blurted out while her mind milled over the question if Victor can kiss her. Josh frowned, and then eyed Laura up and down for a moment.

“Are you okay? I need to ask you some questions about the incident on the deck.”

“Mmmm.” Laura responded while she took a sip of water, more for distraction than thirst. Josh held out his hand to Laura, who ignored it. Questioning she looked at him. *I do not trust this man. Is he really FBI? What is he doing in Mexico? O, crap, if he is not real, then Victor is a lie as well. Damn Laura, you have had your emotions cloud your head. People died and all you think about is kissing a stranger, get a hold of yourself.*

“Can I see your ID?” Laura’s voice was firm. Annoyed, Josh shot a glance at Victor, who just smiled. Slowly, Josh withdrew his hand and sat down at the end of the bed. He nodded, then took out his ID and held it out to Laura. Relief filled Laura as she looked at the picture ID and badge.
“Thank you.” Laura’s soft voice did not hide her embarrassment. Josh replaced his ID before he removed a small digital voice recorder from his right jacket pocket. He activated it and placed it next to Laura on the bed, then removed his notebook and pen from the same pocket before he started.

“Okay, let’s start at the beginning. Tell me all that happened on the deck and what they wanted.”

Laura told Josh everything she could remember, from the time she left her room until the time she woke up in Victor’s room. For three hours, Josh followed her story while he periodically asked her background questions.

“Who were they, Special Agent Williams?” Laura curiously asked as Josh reached for his voice recorder.

“They were all professional hitmen. Very dangerous and immoral men who did some evil acts.” Josh intently noted Laura’s reaction, and his eyebrows plunged into a frown when Laura’s eyes widened and her face went white.

“All of them?” Laura whispered, then took a pillow and hugged it tightly against her chest when Josh slowly nodded.

“The sniper, he missed me, right?” Laura asked confused and Josh gently bit his lip in thought, the question puzzled him as well.

“Men like that do not miss.” His soft voice did not lessen the blow of his words. Josh let his words sink in for a moment, then continued sternly. “You have powerful enemies that want you dead Miss Valencia. You really have no idea as to why? Or what data they seek?” Open-mouthed Laura shook her head.

“You have no idea what the data could be, or what it could be stored on then?” Josh tried a different angle of questioning. Again, Laura shook her head, and hugged the pillow tighter. Josh’s eyes narrowed as he analyzed Laura’s every movement. 35 years of experience on the force, told him she was hiding something, but what?

“Are you sure you have no idea why they came to you, or what data they are looking for?”
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“No. I already told you several times. I do not know what they were looking for.” Laura snapped. Irritated and exhausted, she stood up and walked to the door as she continued. “Can we finish this at a later stage? I would really like to take a bath and freshen up.”

“Very well Miss Valencia. However, you will need to use this room’s bathroom. We are currently searching your room.” Laura spun around with icy eyes as anger raged through her body.

“How dare you search my room without my permission?” Laura spat out. Disgust ripped at her gut.

Slowly, Josh stood up and walked over to Laura. His eyes accepted her stare challenge as he commented. “Miss Valencia, you are a suspect in a multiple murder case. I can arrest you now if I like.” Laura refused to back down and held Josh’s stare for a few seconds.

“Fine.” Laura snapped, and then stormed over to the bathroom. Furiously she tried to slam the door shut, but lost her grip on the doorknob and stumbled into the bathroom.

“Shit.” Laura uttered as she tripped over the toilet and landed in the bathtub.

“Josh will send up some of your clothes.” Victor laughed as he closed the bathroom door, and then turned to Josh. For a moment, Josh stared speechless at the bathroom door, then gave Victor an angry look as he nodded his agreement. Who does he think he is, judging me? He was not there. He does not see her face in his dreams. Let it go Josh. It is in the past. Focus on the case or you will have another breakdown. Assassination on an ocean liner. I knew it was going to be a mess. If the Mexicans do not want a case, you know there is trouble.

“Don’t you have somewhere to be, Josh?” Victor asked mockingly.
“I am not done questioning you, Mr. Adalhard.” Josh’s teeth sliced his words up as he forced them out. Slowly Josh turned then walked white knuckled out of the room. For a moment, Victor listened as Laura filled the bath, then walked to the door. He needed to think away from her. Years in the field as a private security operative for elite clients, in extremely hostile environments, told him Laura was at the center of something larger than she realized.
Chapter 3: Who Are You Really?

On deck, Agent Parker’s brown eyes thoughtfully stared at the ocean, then up at the dark, threatening clouds that conspired in the distance. Slowly, he dropped his gaze and followed a cargo ship as it lazily made its way out of port and past the ocean liner, Blue Diamond, he stood on. Thunder rolled in the distance, and a light breeze started. Excitedly Parker drew in a deep breath. He loved the smell of the ocean. He smiled as he ran his fingers through his thick black hair, and then looked at his watch. 9:31 am. The ship’s departure was already delayed by over two hours. Special Agent Josh handled the interrogations while he, a new Fledgling, did evidence gathering as part of his training under Josh.

Parker laughed. Fledgling, an apt name for a newly trained agent from The Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, FLETC, for short. The weight of 20 life-taking slugs he painstakingly dug out of the ship’s deck pulled on his jacket pocket; all were peacefully asleep in the evidence bag. The sniper’s handiwork was already in a Mexican police morgue. Milling the facts around in his head, Parker turned and looked at the newly repaired deck just as Special Agent Josh came on deck. Josh walked over to his apprentice of six months.

“Learn anything Parker?”

“I think the sniper was here to kill Miss Valencia.”

“How do you figure?” Josh’s eyebrows dipped slightly.

“The only place he could have shot from is up there by the radar tower. I checked it out, and you can’t see the bar from there. No bodyguard would pick a spot with such a blind spot, especially close to a public area.”

“Then why did he not kill her?” Josh scratched his chin as he looked up at the spot where Parker pointed to where the sniper shot from.
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

“No sure. However, I think the goons surprised him. He was not prepared for them. He took the first one out with a clean shot to the back of the neck. The other two with stray bullets. I think he expected her to be alone and adjusted for the first one. The other two caught him off-guard when they ran to her, and he just opened up on them.”

“Then why not finish her off after them?” Josh wondered out loud.

“He had to stand up and break cover while firing to take the last two men down. I think that guy, Victor Adalhard, may have saved Miss Valencia. The sniper was probably afraid that more people were coming on deck and took off.”

“That means she may still be in danger. And that the sniper could still be on the ship.” Josh uneasily glanced around.

“Are we impounding the ship?” Parker wondered.

“Can’t. Too much red tape in getting the passengers off. Plus, one of them is a Senator, who has already started making trouble because the ship has not departed yet. We are ordered to stay on board and continue the investigation.”

“There goes my date for tonight. How long is this cruise?” Sadness twisted inside Parker’s voice.

“One week.”

“What?”

“Look on the bright side. You get to see a few Caribbean islands.” Josh laughed and walked away, then stopped dead.

“What is it?” Parker shifted uneasily as he waited for a reply.

“The sniper.”

“Where?” Parker snapped and quickly drew his pistol. His eyes nervously darted around as his heart ran amok.

“High up.”

“I see nothing.” Parker whispered and swallowed hard.

“No, I mean he was high up. It was dark.”

“What? Yes, and your point.” Parker’s eyes questioned Josh.
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

“The drunk witness who claimed aliens used red lasers. How did I miss it? He saw the laser sight of the sniper’s rifle.” Josh’s voice was filled with excitement, and he darted off to question the witness again. With admiration, Parker looked at Josh and holstered his pistol. He did not care being partnered with Josh. Few people knew that Josh single handedly uncovered a terrorist cell that planned to blow up New York station. Or the dozen cold case files he managed to solve. Josh each time begged his superiors to take the credit, and promotions. He feared public notice would put more pressure on his fragile marriage. And then, his wife left him in the end without even so much as a forwarding address. A note that read she found someone else, and an empty house was all that awaited him when he got home. The divorce papers came a month later via her attorney. Parker shook his head, Josh never expected it, that morning his wife made him coffee and told him she loved him, how strange. Josh was never the same after that night on the bridge. How could he be? He lost his wife and shot that girl on the same night, it was astonishing that he could still keep himself together.

Two decks above Victor’s room, six men held an urgent meeting in a luxury stateroom. The smell of cigar smoke and beer hung heavy in the air.

“What the hell happened?” Peterson bellowed, while puffs of Montecristo-Junior escaped with his words. Red faced, he slammed his white knuckled fist on the small pine table. Corona and Heineken bottles trembled in fear as Peterson brought his slender 6-foot frame to its full height. His right eye twitched as he scanned the men around him. Slowly, he adjusted the Cuban cigar that dangled for its life from his lips.

“There was a sniper, sir,” Chris dryly replied from the far right side of the room, where he played cards with Bob and Zack on an oak dining table.
“And we did not know about him? Dammit Chris. You are supposed to be a professional. You are all supposed to be professionals.” Dean cringed where he sat on the couch in the middle of the room, when Peterson’s icy stare moved over him.

“That sniper just took care of three of the best hitmen in town, with the fourth, that African American, missing. You will have to take care of the girl yourself now.” Peterson’s brown eyes burned into Chris, who shifted uneasily in his chair. Eerie silence descended upon the room, the men too afraid to look at Peterson.

Knock knock.

For a second, the men stared at each other in shock, and then scattered to find cover. Guns drawn, the men nervously looked at Peterson for direction. Peterson frowned as he concentrated on the light coming from under the door. His stomach turned, and his heart raced as a shadow passed by the door. *Is this an assassination? Does the sniper know about us? Damn, how many men are outside the room?*

Knock Knock.

Peterson jumped at the sound. His neck hairs stood at attention and goosebumps crawled over his skin.

“Yes?” The word was hollow, without confidence. *Damn that sniper.* The shadow disappeared. Peterson swallowed and tried to calm his racing heart; every beat echoed in his ears. He changed his grip on the Heckler & Koch .45 caliber pistol and drew comfort from it. Quickly, he stole a look at his men. Questioning eyes returned his gaze as they saw the fear in him. Peterson clenched his jaw. *Get yourself together man.*

Knock.

“I’m busy, go away.” Peterson mustered a more confident voice.

“The sun will come up.”

“Not until the moon is down,” Peterson shifted uneasily when a brown envelope appeared under the door.
“Dean.” Peterson whispered as he nodded in the direction of the door. Dean swallowed hard, and tried to hide his fear. Why me? Why not let one of the other guys get the damn envelope? What if it’s a trap? Dean wiped the cold sweat from his brow as he tiptoed to the door. He pressed his back against the wall, and slowly squatted down next to the door. Nervously, he picked the letter up with his left hand while his Smith and Wesson .44 shook in his white knuckled right. Sweat dripped into his left eye and distracted him for a second, involuntarily he closed it.

Clomp, clomp, clomp.

Dean jerked as footsteps raced down the hallway.

“Bomb,” Dean yelled as his body exploded into action. Instinctively he jumped for the couch in the middle of the room, hitting it on the top, it toppled over. He rolled twice before he crashed into the far wall. Deadly silence filled the room, everyone too afraid to breathe. Seconds dragged agonizingly by.

“Wait for me, I want to go swim too.” A child called outside.

“Sorry.” Dean mumbled as footsteps playfully disappeared down the hallway. Slowly everyone stood up while sighs of relieve drifted into the air. Embarrassed, Dean avoided the other’s stares as his body shook uncontrollably. Dean’s pistol clattered on the floor, while a dark spot appeared at his crotch.

“Piss in the bathroom like a man.” Peterson’s cold voice cut through Dean and ripped his heart out. Dean clenched his jaw as he struggled to hold back tears while he walked to the bathroom. This is too much for me. I should never have lied to the guy in the bar. Saying I am Mike my twin brother, a mercenary soldier, what was I thinking? I am only a mall security guard. Ex-security guard in fact. But what could I do? I need the money. Tears dripped down Dean’s cheeks as he entered the bathroom. Zack pulled the couch up while Bob and Chris eagerly walked to the table, in need of a drink.
Peterson slowly walked to the couch, and picked the letter up. Opening it, he frowned at the message. —APARTMENT SEARCHED. NULL. DATA ON COURIER. RETRIEVE AT ALL COST.— Peterson nodded to himself. He expected as much. KGB agents had searched Laura’s apartment when Suzy, her roommate, was out for the day, and came up empty handed. Peterson smiled. I know you have the data with Laura, and when I find it, you are dead. 

“Enjoy the trip Laura,” Peterson sneered, then placed the letter on the table. Emotionless he took a silencer out of his jacket that hung over a chair. Chris and Bob ignored him, vodka was more important, besides, they knew what was to follow. Steven and Zack openly stared at Peterson, this was their first mission with him. From the bathroom came the sounds of Dean being sick, then the flush of a toilet just as Peterson disappeared into the bathroom.

“You okay?” Peterson voice was arctic cold.

“Bbetter now.” Dean’s body shook more than his voice.

“I think you should leave the mission.”

“Thank you.”

Zip zip, thud.

Steven and Zack jerked from the sounds. Two silenced shots, and then a thump as Dean’s body hit the tiled floor. Chris and Bob looked at each other and nodded their agreement. No one leaves mid mission, no loose ends.

“Chris, Bob, dump the body.” Peterson barked as he exited the bathroom.

“Boss?” Chris asked. Peterson sat down at the table and grabbed a Heineken, then gulped down half of it. Slowly, he wiped the beer drops of his lips.

“Her apartment is clean, the data is on the ship. It is probably stored on a compact disc, and hidden with music CDs in her cabin.”

“When are we paying her a personal visit Boss?” Chris grinned.

“Tonight.”
Victor scratched his head as he deep in thought paced over the deck. A strong wind that carried the smell of rain to come, tugged at him. Annoyed, he gently kicked a guardrail post, and let his gaze flow over the deck once more. *I have combed the deck now for an hour, there is nothing here. When I came on deck, it was a mess. Three dead men and an unconscious girl. I had to do something. The safest place for her was my room.* Victor frowned as he glanced around him. *What am I doing here? The police cleaned the deck of all evidence, and Josh would have said something if they found anything that could store data.* Mentally Victor recreated the scene as he came on deck, and retraced every footstep. Confused, he stopped as he came to where the bartender died. *Why did the bartender try to kill Laura as his last act? Was he afraid that she will pass on the data to someone else? But who? And Laura, she just does not fit. Who are you Laura? An informant, a spy, or international dealer of sensitive information? Baffled, Victor scratched his head.* He glanced around to make sure he was alone, and then took out his cell phone. Quickly, he found the pictures he took of each of the dead men’s faces, and of Laura, then attached them to an encrypted email. *One thing is for certain; these men are linked worldwide, and Laura is my best lead in finding the puppet master who pulled their strings.* Victor smiled as he pressed the send button. *Soon beautiful Laura, I will know all there is to know about you. However, in the meantime, I think I will take you to dinner. Maybe get past your lies and see who you really are.* Victor replaced his phone and made for his room, unaware he was being watched.

Knock knock.
The sound filled every inch of the empty hallway outside Victor’s room. No answer. Victor’s eyebrows dipped slightly, and he knocked again. Still no answer. *Did Laura leave the room against my warning not to do so until I return?* His lips thinned to match his eyes as he took out his access card and unlocked the door. Slowly, he opened the door and froze. His heart raced. All his senses heightened. *Something is wrong. Why are all the lights off? Where is Laura?* Light from the hallway pushed past Victor to the bed, where the darkness made a stand. Trained eyes darted across the room. An empty bed, a closed bathroom door. No Laura. Jasmine perfume lingered in the air, and hinted she was there. His gaze rested on the closed bathroom door. *Is Laura still soaking in the bathtub?* Victor clenched his fists, then bit his teeth as he carefully stepped into the room.

Clang.

Victor jerked from the sound, his heart pounded. *Someone just dropped something in the bathroom.* Victor swallowed hard, and his neck hairs stood at attention while he focused on the bathroom. He shivered as cold fingers tingled his spine. Victor took a deep breath; his heart was in hyperdrive. Jasmine tingled his nose as he inched forward.

The first punch took him just below the ribs, and drove the breath out of him. The second, a jab to the jaw, quickly followed by a knee to the groin, instantly dropped Victor. Dazed and in agony, Victor rolled away as the room went pitch black.

Click.
The sound of the door lock echoed in his head, no escape. *Shit, trapped like two rats in a cage. Only one of us will leave alive.* Stabbing pain shot through Victor’s chest with every breath. He ground his teeth and ignored it. *Whoever attacked me is an expert. Stupid. I should have expected someone to be behind the door.* Victor closed his eyes and focused on sound. *One wrong move and I will have him, or he, me. Crap, what about the person in the bathroom? Who is it? Laura or a second attacker?* Victor pressed his lips together as he agonizingly inched past the bathroom door. Satisfied, he crouched down. His heart raced and every muscle tensed up, ready to explode. Anxiously, he waited in ambush.

Splash.

Victor jerked and almost jumped up. *Is that Laura bathing, or being drowned? Did they interrogate her and is now staging her suicide?* Victor clenched his fists and his eyes narrowed. His lips curled up as he forced himself not to foolishly rush forward and seek the attacker to rip his heart out. Adrenaline pumped through him as he slowly stretched his hand out. Cold sweat dripped off his face as his hand touched the bathroom door and sought the knob. *Quick. Rip the door open. Pistol under the sink. Kill.* Carefully Victor turned the knob. 

“Achoo.”

Victor froze, and then slowly released the doorknob, a slight smile spread on his face. *That’s Laura. Now what? Wait. Please Laura stay inside.*

Cree.
Victor’s heart stopped as the bed springs compressed. *Now Victor attack attack.* With effort Victor restrained himself. He closed his eyes to avoid seeing ghosts, and held his breath. *Calm yourself. Think. Let him come to you.* Victor nodded as his mentor’s words echoed in his mind. *Surviving is not rushing for the kill, it is staying alive longer than the rest.* He balled his fists and bit his lip as he tried to concentrate. His leg muscles cramped up. A dark pit formed in Victor’s stomach as death’s icy fingers gripped his heart, eager for the offering to come. *He is close, I can sense him. Get ready. Just and little more. Come to your death. Shit, what if he is sensing me?* Every muscle in his body tightened, ready for the attack, a coiled spring that waited to be released. Blinding pain ripped through Victor’s eyes as the bathroom door opened. Light flooded the room as Laura, naked with only a towel around her hair stepped out of the bathroom. Spellbound, both men, only inches apart, stared at her beauty. Laura’s bone-chilling scream ripped through Victor as the assassin’s knife, cut through the air at her heart. Victor’s body exploded into action and he thrust upwards with his legs and drove his shoulder into the man. Both crashed hard into the wall. Stars filled Victor’s vision as an elbow smashed into his face. Dazed, he dropped to the floor. *Laura.* Dread gripped his heart as the man spun to face Laura and triumphantly launched his knife at her.

*Crack.*
“Aahhhhh.” The man’s scream clawed at the walls as Victor kicked him in the knee and snapped it. Victor launched up and drove a devastating elbow into the man’s temple that stunned him. Blood spattered the wall as nose bone crumbled under Victor’s fist. Swiftly Victor grabbed the man’s knife hand and jerked it up. The stomach turning sounds of the knife as it sliced thought flesh, broke bone, and air mixed with blood filled the room as Victor drove the knife deep into the man’s throat. Blood gushed from the man’s neck, yet he still tried to choke Victor. Powerless, his hands slid off Victor’s neck as a knee into his groin, send him painfully to the ground. As the last breath gurgled out of the attacker, Victor turned around. Laura was frozen in the doorway. White faced, she covered her open mouth with shaking hands and smothered a scream.

“Laura.” Victor’s voice was as soft as his gentle touch on her shoulder, and mechanically Laura looked up at him. Not caring that she was naked, she threw her arms around him; she needed his comfort more than clothes. Her body shook as emotions ripped through her and she released a stream of tears. Reassuringly, Victor held her while he comfortingly stroked her back. After a few minutes, Laura stopped crying, but continued to hug him. Victor gently unwrapped the towel from her head and covered her body. Wide eyed, she looked pleadingly up at Victor with wet eyes.

“Are they going to kill me?”

“Yes.” The softness of Victor’s voice did not stop the word from cutting her heart out.

“Why me?”

“They think you have something of value. And from this man’s actions, they seem to want you dead if they can’t find it.” Laura buried her face in her hands and sobbed, “I don’t know what they want. I have nothing worth killing for.”
Gently, Victor took Laura’s hand and led her to the bed, then turned on the room lights. Thoughtfully, he took a soda from the bar fridge, opened it and handed it to Laura. Her shaking hands failed to hold the can, and softly Victor placed his hands over hers while compassion filled his eyes. Laura fell into his eyes with hers, mesmerized by them. For a while, she sat speechless as he gently ran his fingers through her hair. Slowly she took a few sips of cola and braved a glance at the body. African American, fit, short black hair and dressed as a room server. All normal, except for the knife protruding out of his throat, the dead eyes that eerily stared at the ceiling, and the large pool that formed under him as his life force flowed out of him. Laura swallowed as her mouth watered and her stomach turned, slowly nausea rose up in her.

“Gonna be sick.” Laura whispered, then ran for the bathroom and slammed the door closed. Victor sighed and gently bit his lip. As Laura poured her guts out, Victor looked at the blood pool on the floor. I wish Laura did not have to see this. Quickly he searched the body; a door access card was his only reward. Victor had no idea that this man was the fourth hitman Peterson had hired, and that he was in the restroom when the others were killed. Victor took a deep breath, then snapped a picture of the man with his cell phone, and emailed it to his contacts.

“Victor.” Laura called faintly from the bathroom.

“Yes?” Victor quickly hid the phone, and then turned to Laura. Pale faced Laura peeked out of the bathroom.

“Can you please hand me my clothes from the bed?” Victor nodded, and then took the clothes to her. Gently, he touched Laura’s hand as she took the clothes. Laura’s eyes found his, and she managed a weak smile.
“Thank you for saving my life.” Her eyes found comfort in his, and their hands burned in each other’s for a few seconds, until she slowly pulled hers away and gently closed the door. Victor walked to the room phone and frowned. *Josh is going to throw a fit.* Annoyed Victor gritted his teeth when the line connected. *I hate answering machines.* He complied and left a message after the irritating beep, and then deep in thought walked over to the bed. *What Laura saw me do will raise questions. I cannot deny that this man may have been here for me, not her. But why attack her? And who knows about me?*

“Sorry for getting sick.” Laura’s sweet voice pulled Victor out of his thoughts. She shuddered as she glanced at the body. Laura took a deep breath, and walked to Victor.

Tring tring.

“Shit.” Laura uttered as she jumped from shock, then immediately covered her mouth with her hands.

“All good.” Victor laughed. He winked at Laura and drew a smile from her. Slowly Victor walked over and answered the phone.

“Mr. Adalhard, what kind of message is call me back?” Josh barked.

“Got your attention, right? I got a present for you in my room.”

“What is...”

Click.

With satisfaction, Victor replaced the receiver.

“Did you just hang up on Special Agent Williams?” Laura giggled.

“I seem to have accidentally dropped the phone.” Victor smirked, then walked over to Laura and sat down next to her.

“Were you in the military?” Laura stared at the body while her words begged for an answer.

“Yes.” Concern filled Victor’s face. *Here we go. Wish she would have waited.*

“Special forces?”
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

“Not exactly.”
“Covert operation?”
“You could say that.”
“Okay.”

Huh. That’s it? Women.
Silently, 10 minutes dragged by, each not sure what to say. Doef Doef.

“Victor, it’s Special Agent Williams, open the door.” Lazily Victor walked to the door. This is going to be interesting. He took a deep breath, and then opened the door.

“So you found the...” Josh excitedly blurted out as he barged into the room. His jaw fell open as he stopped dead in his tracks. White faced, he stared at the body.

“Close your mouth Josh.” Victor commented dryly, evoking a giggle from Laura. Wide-eyed Josh looked from the body to Laura, then to Victor and back to the body.

“Okay, what happened here?”

“Take the seat at the desk, Josh” Victor calmly sat down next to Laura while Josh obeyed him, too shocked to argue. Victor quickly gave Josh the highlights of the attack. Ten minutes later, Josh reluctantly put his notebook away. Victor is just evading every question, turning it around. It’s like he is interrogating me.

“So you never saw this man before?” Josh tried one last time.

“Nooo.” Victor’s voice hinted of agitation.

“And, he said nothing, no threats, or what he wanted?” Victor shook his head. Josh’s eyebrows slowly dipped down while he tapped on his teeth with a red fountain pen.

“Maybe he was looking for the data the other men mentioned?” Josh noted their expressions as he made the comment. Laura just shrugged her shoulders, while Victor remained motionless.

“Tell me, who booked this trip for you, Mr. Adalhard?” Josh followed Victor’s gaze to the recorder in his left hand.
“Whether I record it or not, it is still going into the report,” Reluctantly Josh switched the recorder off.

“Booked the trip through a travel agency, did it all online, and received my tickets by Fedex, why?” Agent Josh slowly placed his pen into his jacket pocket.

“I did some investigating on you and her. Miss Valencia’s records turned out to be just fine. Yours I have a small problem with, in addition to the fact that the man who made your booking was found dead in his apartment this morning. Shot twice in the chest.” Victor raised an eyebrow.

“Crime is getting out of hand these days, but what’s that got to do with my records?” Emotionless Victor held Josh’s stare until Josh looked down at his notebook.

“The problem is that there are no records of you. Nothing, just a ghost in the system. You have no bank records, parking tickets, school records, nothing. And you know what is even more interesting?”

Josh stood up, yet Victor made no comment nor movement. “Within one hour of making inquiries about you, I had a personal phone call from my superior.”

“It is nice of him to check up on you, you two must be good friends, Josh.”

“It’s Special Agent Williams. And No, we are not friends. He was contacted by high-ranking officials from both the South African and American government, and told to back off the heat on you and offer you every courtesy. You must have powerful friends to cause that to happen.” A smile broke on Victor’s face.

“How interesting, Josh.” Victor slowly stood up. Josh gave Victor a cold look as he realized that Victor was not going to address him correctly. A knot formed in Josh’s throat.

“Who are you, Mr. Adalhard?”
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

“A backpacker hunting hot chicks.” They engaged in a staring war, that Josh reluctantly lost. He clenched his fists and suppressed the urge to strangle Victor as he looked down. Something about Victor told him he would not get far before he found himself on the floor, cuffed with his own cuffs.

“Well, I presume you will have this cleaned up, Josh.”

Josh took a deep breath, and then looked up at Victor.

“This room in now a crime scene. You and Miss Valencia need to leave while I arrange to have the body removed, and the room sealed.”

“My personal stuff?”

“Fine. I will arrange to have your personal belongings transferred to a new room.” Joshed turned to Laura and held out her ship’s ID card. As she took it, he continued, “You are free to use your room again.” Victor took Laura by the elbow when she slid her room card in her pocket.

“Care for some fresh air?” Victor’s inviting voice managed to draw only a nod and distant look from Laura as she slowly stood up. Gently, Victor led her out of the room and closed the door. Outside, Laura depressingly looked at her shaking hands. A few days ago the only dead person I ever saw was my parents. Now, people are dying around me. Laura looked up at Victor and studied him for a moment. I barely know him, yet it is as if I know him all my life. His presence reassures me, and I wish we could just run away together and leave all of this behind.

“Dinner?”

“Sorry.” Laura’s mind was still far away.

“I said dinner, you hungry? We can go down to the main lobby.”

“I would like to.” For a moment, their eyes flirted, and then Laura slowly looked away. Her body angrily screamed at her for looking away, and Laura submitted to her body’s request and looked back at Victor. Excitement surged through her as he smiled at her. Her body glowed as flames of passion burned red hot in her. With difficulty, she suppressed the urge to kiss him.
“I need to change for dinner.” Laura blurted out, she desperately needed to be alone and think.

“Okay, meet you in the Blue Diamond dining room, say in an hour? I’ll make reservations for us.”

“Looking forward to it.” Laura smiled, and then walked away. As she reached the corner of the hallway, she glanced back and found Victor admiring her beautiful legs and firm buttocks. Energy surged through her, and lifted her head to heaven. Butterflies danced in her stomach while warm desire filled her body. Hastily, she made for the safety of her room.

Agent Parker Thompson soon arrived with the ship’s head security, followed by a porter. The porter gave Victor a new room key, and promised to take his bags up as soon as he was allowed. Parker shook his head as he stepped into the room, and then turned as Victor spoke from the doorway.

“Can I get my toiletries and one set of clothes?” Parker looked questioning at Josh, who nodded his reluctant approval. Victor quickly darted into the bathroom. Unnoticed, he retrieved his 9mm Beretta pistol from beneath the bathroom sink and slipped it into his shaving bag. Casually, he walked to the closet, and selected an evening outfit. Josh had already drawn the position of the body and helped Parker to bag the body. Thoughtfully, Victor looked at Josh as he zipped the body bag closed.

“Why did you say you thought she came at you?” Victor’s question froze both agents.

“What?” Josh looked at Victor with a raised eyebrow while embers of anger filled him.

“The girl you shot, you said you thought she came at you, why?” Josh balled his fists and looked down to evade Parker’s eyes while his face turned red.

“You just can’t let it go, can you?” He hissed.

“You can’t remember, can you?” Victor suggested.
“Sir...”
“No, let him be.” Josh cut Parker off. Josh locked eyes with Victor as he stood up. His right eye twITCHED SLIGHTLY while his hands gently shook.
“I drank and passed out in the car. Next thing I know, I am lying next to my car, a dead girl beside me and surrounded by police. You satisfied?” Josh snapped.
“If you shot her standing how come you woke up surrounded by police?” The voice was calm and unemotional.
“AAccording to the witness, I slipped after shooting her and hit my head against the car door.”
“The newspapers said the witness never publicly testified, why?”
“He disappeared after giving his statement the night of the incident. His statement of that night was what the trail was based on.”
“And you walked, how?” Josh stood silent for a minute while he looked at the floor, then turned his gaze a Victor.
“The case against me was thrown out of lack of evidence and her death was ruled an accident.” Josh sighed. He himself did not approve of the ruling.
“How much money was in your wallet when they arrested you?” Victor wondered.
“I don’t know.” Josh snapped.
“$500.” Agent Parker offered. Both Victor and Josh’s eyes questioned him.
“I requested the case files when they told me Special Agent Williams was going to be my mentor.” Parker defended.
“You are an idiot Special Agent Josh Williams.” Victor said. Josh’s face went crimson, and his eyes threw fire at Victor as he clenched his fists. This is it. I had enough. I am going to ram my fist down his throat. Victor’s words stopped his thoughts and actions dead.
“You have been set up. You never shot that girl. No beggar would not clean out an unconscious man, then give a statement, only to disappear, leaving behind the guarantee of free food and fresh clothes. The testimony is fake. I would look into it if I were you. I would start with the last case you investigated. I think you stepped on the toes of someone very powerful without knowing it.” Victor turned and walked away to freshen up in his new room. Both agent’s jaws hung as they watched him leave.
Chapter 4: The Russians Are Here

Angry Caribbean Sea waves kamikaze onto the ocean liner Blue Diamond’s bow and furiously shook her 2,500 gross tonnage bulk to the last rivet. The soft bridge lights failed to hide the concern that clawed at Captain Duncan Steel’s wrinkled face. A veteran of 45 years at sea, this was his 15th season in command of a ship, four years on Blue Diamond. Narrow eyed, he peered through the bridge windows. The wipers refused to retreat even though they fought a losing battle against the relentless rain. Visibility was down to 200 yards, the bow lights barely visible. The empty teacup on the chart table shivered as yet another wave flung itself onto the bow and rolled over the forward deck. Duncan sighed. If the weather does not calm down overnight, we will not be able to dock in Grand Cayman. A smile replaced Duncan’s tightly pressed lips. Good business as it keeps the passengers and their money on board, gambling and drinking. He reached down and pushed the orange illuminated button labeled ‘Call’ next to the microphone.

“George Town Port Security, George Town Port Security, this is ocean liner Blue Diamond, come in, over.” The teacup shivered again as Duncan waited for a reply.

“Blue Diamond, Blue Diamond, this is George Town Port Security, send your message, over.” The voice sounded metallic and distant over the speaker.

“Port Security, Blue Diamond, Captain Duncan Steel here, can you give me a weather forecast, over.”

“Blue Diamond, Port Security, stand by.” Leather complained like old bones as Duncan shifted in his chair.

“Blue Diamond, Port Security, severe weather warning. Winds up to tropical storm strength, swells of 10 to 15 feet. Will last for six hours and calm down to four-foot swells. Partly cloudy skies expected for tomorrow. The port is currently closed, will re-advises tomorrow before your arrival, over.”
“Port Security, Blue Diamond, understood, out.” Duncan breathed deeply, and then turned to Staff Captain, Kevin Young.

“Kevin, continue current heading and speed.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“Take the bridge. I am going to have my cigarette for the day, then some food in the main dining room if you need me.”

“Aye, sir, I have the bridge. Captain leaving the bridge.” Kevin saluted as Duncan made for the stairs leading out of the bridge. Duncan stopped, respectfully returned the salute, and then continued down the stairs. Kevin turned on his heels when Duncan was out of sight. Adrenaline surged through him as his brown eyes admired the bone-crushing waves. His Californian surfer’s blood pleaded to be let loose in these waves. Sparkling eyed Kevin smiled. It must be magnificent surfing these waves, riding the tunnel, the ultimate adrenaline rush, tons of water behind you. One mistake and she will crush you to death, wow. The teacup’s shiver brought him out of his dreams. Quickly, he scanned the digital instrument panel, unaware of the silent Russian gray wolf that stalked the ocean liner.

1000 feet deep in the cold, dark Caribbean water a nuclear powered, Russian attack class submarine cut through the blackness. Sailors scurried inside dimly red illuminated corridors to ready the submarine for action. This was the closest any of them had ever been to American soil, and if the mission was discovered, it would mean life in prison. The submarine was on patrol as close to the Florida coastline as it dared, when an urgent flash traffic diverted her to a set of coordinates in the ocean. Two hours after reaching the coordinates and signaling their arrival, a small airplane that had been on standby for a few days in Cuba, flew over them, and a man parachuted out. The submarine picked him up, and received the order, that put the submarine on its current mission.
“Captain, sonar contact. Bearing 216, speed 10 knots, range 4000 yards. Two screws in the water. Captain, I think it’s her.”

Lock jawed Captain Bladimere Kirsanov gave the radar operator an annoyed look, then snapped. “Make certain. How many damn ocean liners can there be at this time in this location?”

At 65, Bladimere was the fleet’s most senior submarine commander. He now realized why he was sent days before, to make all haste to the Florida coast and stay as close to it as possible. He was specifically selected for this insane mission. Bladimere dropped both eyebrows low. Not as insane as the man behind him. Concerned, he turned to KGB officer, Russtoff Ivashov.

“I hope your intelligence is correct and that this is the ship.” Emotionless brown eyes gave Bladimere an icy reply. Bladimere swallowed hard. His voice treaded on eggs as he asked. “Are you ready Comrade?”

Two tense seconds dragged by, before Russtoff responded with a slow confident nod. Bladimere’s knuckles turned white as he resumed his pacing up and down the bridge. This was pure madness. To pull alongside a US flagged ocean liner near US waters and transfer a KGB officer to it undetected in a raging storm. Pure madness.

“Captain, sonar contact, range 3000 yards. Positive on target.” The radar operator’s eyes stayed glued to the green radar screen as he spoke. A white line turned clockwise around on it. Vessels in range of the radar were marked with a white blob, while numbers next to the blob indicated the range, speed, and bearing of the contact.

“Comrade Russtoff, I suggest you make ready to go on deck.” Russtoff’s uncaring gravelly voice ripped at Bladimere’s heart as he said. “Would have liked to torpedo her, save me a swim, Comrade Captain.”
Russtoff, unknown to all on board, was part of an elite team that dealt with situations too extreme even for special KGB agents. At 35, he was feared even in this ultra-special group. He could maneuver his 6-foot 190lbs frame with the speed of a gazelle, and was unmatched in hand-to-hand combat. However, what made his teammates fear him most was his utter dedication to the mission, inhuman ability to succeed against impossible odds, and total disregard for human life, including his own. Bladimere ignored Russtoff’s comment and turned to his first officer.

“Go to periscope depth, speed 15 knots.” The first officer repeated the order.

Shhh, creee.

The sounds filled the submarine as pressurized air forced sea water out of the ballast tanks. Slowly, the submarine clawed its way through the pitch-black water to the surface. Minutes dragged lazily by.

“Periscope depth, speed 15 knots. Range to target 1500 yards.” Came the navigator’s confident voice. The submarine rolled and pitched as the waves on the surface used the submarine as a boxing bag.

“Up periscope.” Sweat tripped of Bladimere’s face, his voice laced with uncertainty. Dry mouthed, he stumbled to the periscope. Bladimere quickly scanned the bridge. Everyone declined his eye contact challenge. White knuckled he held the two handles on the sides of the periscope tube, and turned the tube methodically around. The submarine’s rolling made it difficult to evaluate the surface conditions. Waves rolled over the periscope’s eyepiece on the surface time after time, submerging it.

Clang.

“Uhhh.” Bladimere uttered as his head slammed into the periscope. Blood from the cut above his right eye mixed with sweat as he secured his footing.

“How is the visibility, Comrade Captain?” Russtoff fearlessly asked.
Bladimere stepped back and angrily barked. “Down periscope. Number One, bring us alongside contact and match speed.”

“Aye aye, sir.” The first officer’s voice hinted of fear. Bladimere turned to Russtoff and sarcastically replied, “Excellent, if you are a fish.”

A sailor stepped up to the captain and saluted. “Captain, we cannot launch the boat; the sea is too rough.” Bladimere slowly turned to Russtoff. “Comrade Russtoff, I suggest we follow the ship and wait for calmer weather.”

Russtoff’s cold voice spoke of utter loyalty. “Negative Comrade Captain, the longer we wait the more risk there is of being spotted and compromising the mission. The success of this mission will give Mother Russia the means to rule the world. Find a way to get me on that ship.”

Bladimere turned away and walked to his first officer. He would have liked to tell Russtoff to piss off and swim to the ship, but his orders were clear. Agent Russtoff is in command of this mission, and Bladimere and his crew had to give full support, a direct personal written command from the President. Russtoff was a backup plan few knew about, that went into action when Peterson’s hired men were killed when they tried to retrieve the data from Laura.

“Number One, any suggestions?”

“Captain, we could bring the sub next to the ship, match her speed, then hook a grappling rope on to the tower and the ship’s railing. Comrade Russtoff could board with the rope.”

“Comrade Russtoff?”

“Do it.”

Bladimere swallowed hard and ignored the empty pit in his gut as he spoke. “Number One, make it so.”

“Aye aye, sir.”
With military precision and ignorance to danger, the crew maneuvered the submarine 30 feet from the ocean liner’s port side, and matched her in speed. Bladimere had the submarine floated as high out of the water as possible to help keep the conning tower out of the waves. Even so, water relentlessly crashed over the tower.

An experienced sailor took aim at the ocean liner’s railing on the lowest deck, and fired a grappling rope at it. The four legged anchor secure itself to the ship’s railing. The sailor secured the submarine’s end of the rope when Russtoff came on deck. He had changed into a wetsuit and mask, with a 30 cubic feet air cylinder strapped to his hip. A waterproof backpack clung to his back while a Spetsnaz combat knife hugged his right thigh. Bladimere admiringly looked at Russtoff as he fitted the scuba mouthpiece that was attached to the cylinder.

A wave smashed into the tower, and sea water showered over the men. Slowly Bladimere wiped the saltwater out of his eyes as he watched Russtoff ready himself.
Russtoff took a deep breath to make sure the regulator work. His heart was in his throat. People thought him unemotional, but they were wrong. He just did not show it and rather bottled it all up. He bit down hard on the mouthpiece, and then expertly threw himself over the side of the tower. Marionette like, he dangled from the rope. A howling wind clawed at Russtoff as hungry waves slapped him around. Defiantly, he wrestled for possession over his soul. The rope went tight, then slack in sequence with the submarine’s roll. Russtoff earned every inch of progress as he repeatedly was dunked, and then ripped out of the water. His body was in agonizing pain from the relentless waves that smashed into him. Each wave threatened to break his hold on the rope and sweep him away. White knuckled Bladimere gripped the edge of the conning tower. Transfixed he followed Russtoff’s progress. Russtoff was now half way, 15 feet from the ship’s railing. You can do it Comrade. Bladimere’s heart stopped as a shudder went through the submarine, and it lost speed.

“Number One, what’s happening?” Bladimere yelled down the shaft to the control room below.

“Captain. The engine is failing.”

The rope instantly tightened and was stretched to its limits. Bladimere gasped as Russtoff was ripped from the water and flung into the air. Russtoff partially lost his grip on the rope and hung by the tip of his fingers of one hand. To Bladimere’s relieve, Russtoff managed to expertly grab the rope with his free hand again.

Russtoff’s heart raced as strands of the rope snapped by the ocean liner’s railing. If the rope broke between him and the ship, the mission was a failure. Not an option. In one swift movement, he drew his knife and cut the rope just behind him. Stretched to its limits, the roped snapped instantly as the knife bit into it.
Transfixed, Bladimere watched as the rope whiplashed and came straight for him. The rope sliced him to the bone on his left cheek. Free from the drag of the submarine, the rope attached to the ocean liner ripped Russtoff forward. He mercilessly was slammed into the side of the ship’s hull. Dazed, Russtoff clung to the lifeline in his hands.

Repeatedly he was used as sandwich filling between the waves and ship’s hull. Dread hugged Russtoff as the mouthpiece was ripped from his mouth. Desperately he fought for air as wave after wave tried to drown him. Russtoff swallowed mouthfuls of water as he defiantly spat in death’s eye and crawled up the rope.

Victoriously Russtoff smiled as he stretched out his left hand and grabbed the railing. His hopes were ripped away with his grip on the railing as death angrily threw a rogue wave over him. Desperately, he clung to the lifeline in his right hand. A black hole formed in his stomach as the rope pulled from his grasp, the weight of the receding water too much for him. The ship’s propellers eagerly waited to chop him up and feed him to the watery grave that hungrily waited for the offering. Frantically Russtoff blindly grabbed around in the hope of finding something to save him. Smooth metal of the ocean liner’s hull was his only reward. Russtoff closed his eyes. This is it. Mother Russia, I failed you. Had the submarine attempted the transfer more to the front of the ocean liner; Russtoff would not have been sucked into the propellers. The submarine would have been able to track his emergency beacon and rescued him. A costly mistake.

Russtoff’s heart raced as something rubbed against his chest, it’s the rope. Frantically he grabbed it with both hands and held on. The rogue wave clawed at him as it receded and beckoned him to let go and embrace the darkness below. When the water passed, Russtoff opened his eyes and looked at the rope in his hands. There were only two inches of rope left below his hands. A split second’s reaction was all that formed the line between life and death.
With new fury, he clawed up the rope as waves punched him in the back and slammed his body into the ship’s hull. Russtoff’s love for his country kept him going. He laughed in death’s face as he grabbed the railing with both hands and pulled himself over. Exhausted and breathless, he lay in a helpless heap as he fought to stay conscious. His head started to spin, and his mouth watered as nausea crept up from his salt water filled stomach. A bitter cold filled his shaking body as he rolled onto his side and weakly gripped the railing, then hung his head down. His body rocked as he involuntarily, wave after wave, gave the ocean back its waters he had swallowed.

Ten minutes passed before Russtoff slowly got up. He ignored the pain that pulsed through his bruised body as he slowly unzipped his wetsuit and withdrew a waterproof map of the ship from an inside pocket. Russtoff had studied the ship’s layout before, but wanted to refresh his memory; it also kept his mind off the pain. Slowly, he unslung the backpack from his bruised shoulders and dropped it on the floor. Russtoff took out dry clothes from the bag, and changed into them. Done, he took out a pistol and spare rounds plus a smaller backpack. The bag contained ID documentation, a stack of cards that showed a more detailed blueprint for each deck of the ship, money, and explosives.

With the documentation was a photo and details of a passenger who closely resembled him, plus of Laura. Russtoff stuffed the wetsuit into the larger backpack, zipped it closed, and then threw it overboard. Waves eagerly lapped it up and swallowed it into the cold darkness below. Russtoff unhooked the grappling hook from the railing, and fed it to the ocean, then turned around and wearily walked to the nearest door as he threw the smaller backpack over his shoulder. A strong drink and a warm meal were high on his agenda. As soon as he found and executed the passenger who was unfortunate enough to resemble him.
Chapter 5: Dinner Date

Morocco orchid and Pink Amber body wash caressed Laura’s soft, smooth skin as the warm shower water massaged her shoulders and back. Slowly, as her muscles relaxed, her nerves calmed down. She barely watched action movies, and now she was the lead character. A lead character that from all evidence, forgot her lines and role. Laura dropped her head and let the water massage her neck, as her mind scanned the hundreds of books she’d read for a possible plot where she might fit in. Laura ripped her head up. Her eyes brightened while a smile teased her lips. That’s it. It must be a case of mistaken identity. Laura’s heart rejoiced for a moment, and then she sighed as her heart dropped and followed the soapy water down the dark drain. How do you convince killers that shoot first that they made a mistake?

“Yes.” Laura yelled as warmth filled her and pulled her heart out of the drain. Victor. He has powerful friends in the government. He must be a government secret agent. He can help. Laura’s heart raced and butterflies joyfully danced in her stomach. It’s majestic, my very own 007, licensed to kiss. Laura’s heart bled a little for the people that died, but Special Agent Williams did say that they were dangerous men who had done bad things. Maybe the world was better off without them in it. Laura jumped with joy and started singing. Shy, she graced few people with her silvery voice. Laura danced out of the shower and daringly grabbed a revealing outfit Suzy gave her. Oh yes, this will knock Victor’s socks off. Aroused, Laura dropped the outfit on the bed. Wow, when last did I go on a date? A hint of light appeared in her dark circumstances.
Laura looked at the time and gasped. She had only 10 minutes left to get dressed and get to the dining room. She was running late, not her style. *Victor, please don’t be mad.* Faster than light Laura dried her hair, slipped into the dress, and moistened her neck with Obsession perfume by Calvin Klein. Her heart joyfully bounced in her chest as she, shoes in hand, sprinted out of the room. The Blue Diamond dining room was in the main lobby, three decks below her, and she feverishly pressed the elevator button repeatedly.

“Aahh.” Laura yelled agitated as she dashed for the stairs. She feared elevators in any case. Barefoot Laura jump skipped down the stairs, and took them two and three at a time. Ecstatic and charged she giggled. “I’m on a date. I’m on a date.” Caught in the moment she flew into the main lobby, just as a lady in the winter of her years, cane in hand, crossed Laura’s path. Laura’s haste sealed their fate. Her momentum lifted the elderly lady, wide-eyed into the air, while her right leg kicked the lady’s cane out of her hand. The cane flew across the room where it tripped a server carrying a birthday cake.

The server crashed into several guests who stood talking nearby. One of the guests, a snobbish upper-class lady, had just bragged to her friends about her expensive new dress she had on and her newly styled hair. The cake caught her full in the face, broke apart, and splattered her friends. The piece left on her face slid down over her fake bosom and new dress. Laura and the elderly lady tangoed on their way to the floor, with Laura winning top spot. Immediately Laura jumped up.

“I am sorry I am so sor…” Laura apologized then stopped. For a second, she was speechless, and then burst out laughing. The elderly lady’s false teeth were lying at her feet. Laura placed her hands over her mouth and desperately tried to smother her laughter.

Prune lipped the elderly lady mumbled. “What do you think you are doing child, running around like a little school girl?”
“My apologies, I’m late for a dinner date,” Laura blurted out, still giggling. The elderly lady tried to stand up, but was struggling without her cane. Eagerly Laura jumped forward to help her, but slipped on the false teeth and landed on top of the lady, again.

“Oh dear,” was all Laura managed when she got up for the second time. Painstakingly the elderly lady cleaned and replaced her false teeth, then said. “Child, do me a favor and please go get laid, it will be safer for all of us.” Laura glowed from embarrassment. How could she? She only met Victor.

“How...”
“What do you think you are doing?” The server spat out and cut Laura off. Glaring at Laura, he continued. “You will pay for...”

“Shut up.” The elderly lady snapped as she cut him short. Slowly, she got up with Laura’s help, and then faced Laura as she commented. “How? Honey with that dress, if you are not in bed by 10 tonight, go home because you are wasting your time.” Flames of embarrassment engulfed Laura’s body and heated her face crimson red.

“Who do you think you are telling me to shut up?” The server threw the words in the elderly lady’s face while he balled his fists. His body jerked and the blood drained from his wide-eyed face, when a firm hand gripped his shoulder while a familiar deep voice came from behind him.

“Is there a problem Mother?” Captain Duncan Steel pushed the server aside to greet his mother with a customary family hug.

“Just an accident, dear. This lovely lady is late for a dinner date. We should not hold her up any more.” The lady winked at Laura, then turned to face her son.

“I’m sure you have enough people working for you on this ship to clean things up here, now escort your mother to the billiard tables will you?”
Captain Steel nodded and took his mother by the arm, then helped her retrieve her cane. As he readied to escort his mother to the tables, he turned to the server and ordered. “Make sure you have this cleaned up immediately, and then join my mother by the billiard table so that she can teach you some manners towards guests.” Duncan smiled as he walked his mother to the tables. He knew from experience that two hours with his mother would be far more severe and effective than anything he could think of.

Laura had already fitted her shoes and made her way to the Blue Diamond dining room. The room had several small doors that allowed one to enter from various outside balconies and a pool deck, or from the main lobby. In awe, Laura gasped as she looked at the main entrance. Two massive scarlet blue glass doors, with dark oak and cherry frames, each with a royal blue, diamond shaped glass at the center, stood in front of her.

Two door attendants in their early 20s stood outside, each to a door. They were dressed in black pressed suits, crisp white shirts, and blue ties that resembled the doors. Laura took a deep breath, and gracefully stepped forward. Politely, the men each opened his door for her and queen like Laura elegantly glided past. Their jaws hung, and their eyes were glued to her body as she passed them.

“Wow, she’s hot.” Drooled the first door attendant as he closed his door behind Laura.

“Huh.” Responded the second, too distracted to close his door. Laura giggled as she heard the remarks. She stopped a few steps into the room.

“Wow.” She whispered wide eyed, mesmerized by the room’s beauty. The room was massive according to her, easily able to seat 200 people. There were two small teak reception desks, one at each door. The main area had several rows of round teak tables, each able to seat four people. In the far left corner was a large mahogany bar with matching bar stools for several people. A live jazz band softly graced the room with their performance.
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

“Can I help you, madam?” A maître d’hôtel in the same dress code as the door attendants outside politely inquired.

“Yes. You should have a reservation for two under the name Victor…” Laura’s throat tightened and her mouth went dry. Oh no, I forgot his last name. Where is he? I thought he would be waiting for me by the door. Laura quickly looked at her watch. Dismay covered her heart. Crap, I am 15 minutes late. Victor left thinking I am a no-show? Nice going Laura.

“Yes, Victor Adalhard, I have a table. The gentleman is not here yet. Would you like to wait for him at the bar?”

“I’ll wait.” Laura eagerly blurted out as her heart clapped hands, then violet-red faced quickly hurried to the bar. The bar counter was empty and Laura sat down at the end of the bar. Immediately a slender French bartender in his mid-20’s charismatically glided over to her. He wove his French magic over her. His heart shattered when he failed miserably to impress Laura. The best his compliments achieved was a faint smile. His pride as a lady’s man dragged in the gutter as he realized her heart and mind was not his to take. Defeated by an unseen adversary, he asked her for her choice of poison.

Laura decided to start the evening with sparkling water on the rocks, and a touch of lemon. She thoughtfully took a sip of her drink, and then smiled, rubbing her palms together she thought about the evening to come. Suzy would be so proud of me. Their bond had grown stronger each day after six-year-old little Laura jumped into a river to save her drowning classmate on a field trip. Suzy slipped and fell from the hang bridge they were crossing. It was a difficult task, saving Suzy, but Laura’s mother, a swim coach, had trained her well. Laura sighed. Where is that brave, confident and adventuress Laura now? Dead with mom and dad.
“You look stunning.” Laura jumped from the voice behind her, and glowed when she realized it was Victor. Quickly she straightened her dress. It was a tight fitting, low cut, backless red dress, which revealed her cleavage. The dress was so short that it barely covered her buttocks. Two spaghetti straps held up the top by crossing over at the back. Matching red high-heel shoes and a small black purse complimented the outfit. Laura was not used to wearing such daring outfits, but it was a gift from Suzy, and she wanted to impress Victor. She hoped Victor would like the Laura hiding inside her, and that he was not a demon in disguise. Her eyes sparkled as she removed imaginary dust from his shoulder.

Victor had arrived 20 minutes early, and waited outside the dining room by the in-house pool. Undecided whether Laura was an excellent actress, or honest about her lack of knowledge of the data the men wanted, he observed her enter through a glass door. His heart joyfully sang when Laura did not use a hidden microphone when she entered and found him absent. Victor helped her from the high bar stool, then sensually linked arms with her as he led her back to one of the reception desks at the main doorway. The bartender shook his head as he watched Victor walk victoriously away with Laura.

“Good evening sir, madam, welcome to the Blue Diamond dining room, do you have a reservation?” A maître d’hôtel slightly bowed to them. Laura looked for the man who had helped her earlier, but he was busy seating other customers.

“Yes, a table for two under Victor Adalhard.”

The man scanned a list with his finger and stopped as he reached Victor’s reservation.

“Ah. Yes, table for two. Please follow me.” The man took two black leather folded menus from his desk and led them to a table with a reserved notice on. Exquisite China and scarlet blue napkins for two decorated the table. Politely, he pulled Laura’s chair out and waited for her to sit, then did the same for Victor. He placed a menu in front of each of them, then took the napkins off the table and placed it on their laps.
“Your server will be with you shortly.” Another customary bow, before he walked away.

Laura’s eyes widened and sparkled while her jaw slightly hung as she admired Victor’s outfit. He had a light pink slim fit satin dress shirt and black pressed pants on. She was sure his outfit cost more than her whole wardrobe. Her eyes searched for his timepiece, however, his shirt’s sleeve kept it top secret. I wonder what timepiece he is wearing. Suzy said you can tell a lot about a man from his timepiece. Laura reached over and touched Victor’s wrist as she said. “Oh, is that real silk?” Shocked, she pulled her hand back. Oh no, Suzy never said anything about men not wearing a timepiece. Well, he must then set his own rules and time. That is so sexy. Laura slowly licked her lips. Oh yes, 007, he is soo licensed to kiss me.

“I have a present for you.”

Laura gasped, and her heart fluttered as Victor placed a small white paper box, wrapped with a charm pink ribbon, on the table.

“Thank you. But why a gift?” Her hands gently shook as she nervously took the gift, and slowly pulled the ribbon off.

“For all you have been through.”

Laura quickly brought her hands to her mouth as she stared wide-eyed at the contents. A silver breastpin in the shape of a butterfly, the size of a quarter, teased her to pick it up. Laura gave in and admiringly picked the breastpin up. A small red crystal decorated the end of each antenna. Laura turned the pin around in her hands a few times. It was the first time a man had given her jewelry. Bright eyed, she looked up at Victor.

“Will you please put it on for me?”
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

Laura turned in her chair to face Victor as he stood up and walked to stand next to her. With palms open, as if it was a real butterfly, Laura held the pin out to Victor. Her pulse quickened as Victor softly placed his left hand under hers, and then ran his right hand lightly over her wrist and fingers as he scooped the pin up. Victor kept his left hand under hers, until she looked up at him. A bolt of excitement surged through her, which heated her body as he gave her hand a slight squeeze the moment their eyes met. Laura swallowed softly, and licked her lips as her face glowed. She shivered from excitement as Victor delicately glided his hand over her shoulder and neck to brush her hair out of the way. Laura’s mouth watered as butterflies danced in her stomach and her nipples hardened. She took a deep breath and swallowed. *Oh dear, I am on fire.*

Victor acted as if he was oblivious to her reactions to his touch. With care, he slightly pulled the top of her dress away, pushed the pin through, and then curled the rim over to secure the clip of the breastpin. Victor struggled to push the clip on and his arm twice rubbed her right breast and erect nipple. Laura closed her eyes. Her heart raced, and her head floated in heaven as her body was dunked inside an active volcano. *I am burning up. What am I going to do?* Laura pressed her lips together and grabbed the bottom part of her dress, then dug her nails into it as she desperately resisted her body’s pleas to jump up and kiss Victor.

“There you go. Absolutely stunning.” Victor’s voice was as soft as his gentle touch when he brushed his hand over her bare back and nape of her neck. Laura kept her eyes closed while Victor slowly walked back to his chair. It took a number of deep breaths to get her heart rate down to only the speed of light. Slowly, she opened her eyes just to find Victor with a blank expression, as if he had no idea what he did to her.

“Evening sir, madam, I am Sam. I will be your server for the evening, would you care for some w...”
“Yes,” Laura blurted out and cut Sam off as she grabbed the water pitcher from him. Quickly she poured a glass for herself, and then gulped it down. Taking a breath, she poured herself another glass that she also gulped down. Sam, lips parted stared in amazement, while a sly smile broke on Victor’s face.

“Evening Sam. She’s dehydrated, too much heat.” Victor commented and took Sam’s attention off Laura. Slowly, Laura’s head came back to earth, and her heart rate dropped below the speed of light.

“Are you ready to order?” Sam waited with his hands folded behind his back for a reply.

“Can you please give us a few minutes?”

“Certainly, Sir.” Sam bowed slightly, and then walked away.

Laura’s eyes darted over the options on the menu. She had no idea what to order. Everything on the menu sounded so delicious. She gave in and decided on her old favorite, tuna salad, light on the dressing. Slowly, she peeked over her menu and watched Victor decide. The special of the day and chef’s choice of the day were listed at the top of the menu, neither of which interested Victor as they contained crab and lobster respectively. He ever so slightly nodded to himself as he made his selection, roasted duck salad. Slowly he placed the menu on the table, and Laura quickly mimicked him.

“You made your choice Laura?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Victor signaled to Sam that they were ready to order, who mentally took their food orders then asked. “Anything to drink?”

Laura never really went out or drank alcohol and was undecided. She had already tried red wine, and not just the taste of it, but the events that followed on the deck would never see her try it again. She decided to try white wine.

“White wine, please.”
Sam dutifully waited for the brand and year Laura desired, and a moment of uncomfortable silence descended on the table.

“House choice, by the glass will be fine. And apple juice for me please.” Victor saved Laura. Sam again mentally took their orders. After he made sure they needed nothing else, he removed the unnecessary cutlery from the table and walked away with another bow.

“I take it this is your first cruise?” Victor broke the ice.

Laura’s face lit up and excitedly she smiled.

“Yes, actually my first real holiday as well, never had been out of the country before.” She unknowingly wrapped and unwrapped a strand of hair around her finger, then asked.

“And you?”

“I have been on a few cruises. All business related.”

“Is this one business…”

“Your drinks.” Sam cut her off as he placed their drinks on the table, then took the water jug and refilled Laura’s glass. He turned Victor’s glass over and filled it up for him, then bowed before he left.

“First cruise. A spur of the moment thing?” Victor gracefully sidestepped Laura’s question.

“Kinda.” Laura offered, not wanting to go into her sad life on the first date. When Victor made no comment for a few seconds, she took a deep breath and partially gave in. “I received a surprise daring request from Nick, an online friend to meet him in Spain after this cruise. I would not have accepted if it was not that he paid for this cruise and my roommate Suzy that twisted my arm to go.”

Laura sat back in her chair, she had divulged as much as she cared for the moment. Depressed, she folded her hands and looked at the floor. Great. Now I just told him I am taken. I’m not even sure I want to go to Spain anymore. Fate however, would soon decide for Laura.
“Well, cheers to your first trip.” Victor held up his glass and Laura slowly leaned forward and clinked her glass to his. She took a big sip, and pressed her lips together as she pulled a face. She had only swallowed a bit, but was unwilling to swallow the rest, and her face reddened.

“Spit it back out into the glass.” Victor laughed. Relieved, Laura as gracefully as possible spat the wine into the glass. A few drops managed to escape and ran over her lips. Her heart jumped as Victor leaned forward and softly held her chin with his left hand. *Is he going to kiss me after that?* With a wink, Victor wiped the drops off her lips with his napkin then said. “Grape vinegar gets stuck in my throat as well.” Laughter graced the table and a warm happy feeling filled Laura. Victor seized the moment and continued the conversation by asking about Laura’s likes and dislikes, and dreams of the future.

Slowly, he started to learn about her, while he surrendered a few details of his life to her in exchange. They learned that they both loved to read books, with Laura ancient mythical history and Victor fantasy. They both loved speed, Laura cars, and Victor motorcycles. All the while, Victor periodically glanced around the room. He just could not shake the nagging feeling that they were being watched. As the night went, he now and again accidentally reached over and touched Laura’s hand. Soon, they were holding hands on the table, happily in conversation.

Their dinner long forgotten, they order one bowl of chocolate ice cream for dessert, which they shared. Laura spoon-fed Victor a few bites, and he returned the favor. They enjoyed each other’s company so much they did not even realize it was 10 pm when they were finally ready to leave.

“Can you dance, Laura?” Their eyes sparkled and flirted for a moment.

“Not really, never had the opportunity to learn.”

“Then I will have to teach you.”
Before Laura could react, Victor was next to her and held her chair, ready for her to stand up. Laura’s heart pounded against her chest from excitement, both from being with Victor and from the thought of learning to dance.

“My apology sir.” Sam interrupted them. When Victor turned to face him, he continued. “Can you please sign for the bill, and we will add it to your room?” Sam held out a brown leather holder with a blue diamond etched on the front. Victor took the holder from Sam just as another guest called for service.

“Please excuse me sir, just leave the bill on the table,” Sam quickly moved to help the other customer.

“Must be a busy night for him, he forgot a pen,” Victor commented.

“Oh, I have a pen, hold on.”

Victor slightly raised an eyebrow while Laura searched around in her purse. Is that safe? From what I have seen women carry, she could pull her hand out with anything from a nail file to a fork stuck in it.

“Here you go,” Laura triumphantly said as she handed a metallic green pen to Victor.

“Impressive, where did you get such a beautiful pen Laura?” Victor started to sign the bill.

“Oh, Nick mailed it to me with a necklace and some CDs to listen to while on the trip.” Victor stopped mid signing, and dropped an eyebrow. Could it be that the data everyone wants is actually one of the CD’s?

“That’s very nice of Nick; did you listen to the CDs?”

“Yes. Very nice relaxing instrumental music. It helped me relax in my cabin. I mailed the necklace back to him, though.”
Unfortunately for Nick, the Russians managed to intercept and follow the package to him. After five days of interrogation, Nick died, missing multiple toes, fingers, both ears, and was shot in both kneecaps and elbows. The format the data were saved on died with him. Victor bit his lower lip in thought as he completed signing the bill. If Laura listened to the CDs, then the data is probably not on them. So where is it? A light went on in Victor’s head just as Sam passed him with a table’s order. Unseen, Victor tripped Sam, who went down on a table full of guests. Food and cutlery scattered in all directions as Sam’s weight toppled the table.

“Sam.” Laura yelled as she hurried over to help him up. Victor quickly unscrewed the rear cap of the pen and hit it against the palm of his hand – nothing. *Shit.* Victor stole a glance in Sam’s direction. Laura and a number of other servers tried to clean the mess up with napkins. Victor was about to recap the pen, when he turned the cap up and looked inside. *Gotcha.* A small Micro SD-card was stuck inside the cap. Victor’s heart raced. *Quick, they have almost cleaned up the mess.* *Think, think. A toothpick.* Victor grabbed a toothpick and dug the card out. His breathing was fast and short and adrenaline rushed through him. *Keep it. No. Copy it. Hurry, hurry.*

Victor’s hands shook as he fumbled to get the Micro SD-card in his phone. He almost dropped the phone as he tried to start the copy from the card to the phone’s internal memory. *Laura? Still busy, go go go.* Victor was almost hyperventilating. His heart pounded in his throat, and sweat ran down his face. *20%, come on, faster, faster. 40% done. Come on.*

“What are you doing with your phone?” Victor jumped and almost threw the phone in the air as Laura talked next to him.

“Uuuhhh it’s a file.” He blurted out.

“What?” Laura’s eyes narrowed while she pressed her lips together.
"Oh, I got an urgent call from work, and they are sending me some documents to look at. I am just busy downloading it now," Victor composed himself and glanced at the phone. 80%, *come on stupid phone*. Laura balled her fists and put them on her hips as she took a deep breath. Her eyes spat fire at Victor as she asked through her teeth. "How can you think of work while leaving me alone to help poor Sam?"

"Uuuuh Sorry, it was urgent."

Laura’s face went crimson.

"I think I will return to my room now." She spat out and spun around. Victor glanced at the phone. 90%, *shit, come on, hurry.*

"My pen." Victor almost had a heart attack when Laura hissed the words next to him.

"Oh, yes...I. I think I left it on the table," Victor said, thinking quickly. *Transfer complete.* While Laura looked for her pen on the table, he quickly replaced the Micro SD-card and the pen cap.

"It's not on the table." Laura snarled at him.

"My apologies, I accidentally put it in my pocket Laura." Victor held out the pen with puppy eyes.

"Aaahhhh, men." Laura said louder than she actually intended and grabbed the pen. She gave Victor a death look that killed his puppy eyes, and then stormed away. Open-mouthed, he watched her, and then swallowed as he tried to get his heart rate down. *Shit that was something.* For a moment, he stood dumbfounded, and then decided he needed to sit down. A man two tables away, who had watched them the entire evening, slowly stood up and followed Laura.
Unaware that Laura’s life was in grave danger, Victor decided to let her cool off a bit and headed to the bar. He was also curious to inspect the fruits of his daring copy. A 6-foot man in a brown pinstripe suit, on his way to the exit, crossed Victor’s path. Victor gave him a quick glance. *His suit is way too small for him. Like the family crest on the breast pocket, though.* Victor stopped and scratched his chin as the man left the room. *Another Russian?* For a second, Victor stood undecided. *Nah, a spy would try to blend in and would have a tailored suit.* Victor was unaware of just how desperate Russia was in obtaining the data.

Victor shrugged his shoulders and walked to the bar, where a middle-aged Italian bartender greeted him with a warm smile as he sat down. Distracted by Laura leaving, it took Victor a few seconds to realize it was a different bartender than before. With the bar void of other customers, Victor chose to sit at the end by the wall.

“Evening Sir. I am Thibault. What would you like?” The bartender placed a bowl of salted peanuts and a coaster in front of Victor.

“A screwdriver, but keep the vodka.”

“Never heard someone order an orange juice like that before.” Thibault laughed.

“I was going for Virgin screwdriver at first.” Victor sighed. Thibault looked in the direction of the door; Laura just disappeared from, and then teasingly replied. “Seeing your luck with the ladies, it would be a fittingly named drink to order tonight.” Victor could not help but join Thibault in laughter, who slapped him supportively on the shoulder.
“Cheer up. Tomorrow is a new day, better luck then. Besides, where is she going to go on this ship? One virgin screwdriver coming up.” Victor nodded, and then took out his phone as Thibault turned and prepared his drink. Every second Victor spent at the bar, was a second Laura had less to live. Victor frowned, and then shifted uneasily in his chair as he looked at the files he copied from the Micro SD-card in Laura’s pen. Distracted, he missed that the glass had a small amount of liquid in it, before Thibault poured in the orange juice.

With fury in her step, Laura made her way back to her cabin. Although it was a good 10-minute walk, she was so preoccupied with her own thoughts that she did not notice the man trailing her. Always only a few steps behind her, he waited for the right moment. Laura stopped outside her cabin door and started to fumble in her purse. The man stepped closer and opened a small bottle. Quickly her poured chloroform onto a handkerchief.

“Aaahhhh.” Laura yelled as she stomped her feet and shook her fists, then kicked the door. For a moment, she held her fists balled, then took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Calm yourself. Laura sighed. The evening was going so great. And I screwed it up. I always chase them away on the first date. Laura took another deep breath and wiped a tear from her eye. He is nothing like your old boyfriend. He will not use you as a punching bag. Laura dropped her head and swallowed. I know Suzy. I have to take a chance sometime. Why not him? I am crazy about him. With zest, Laura spun around to run back and apologize to Victor. The blood drained from her as Russtoff stood right in front of her. Her heart stopped as he rammed her into the door with his body and covered her mouth and nose with a cloth. A strange smell filled her lungs as she desperately clawed and kicked at him. Quickly her strength left her, and her mind started to spin. Victor... Laura’s body slumped in Russtoff’s arms.
Russtoff got Laura’s room access card from her purse, and glanced around to see that he was not watched, then picked Laura up and threw her over his left shoulder. He stepped into the room and dropped Laura onto the bed. Wasting no time, he picked up Laura’s purse in the hallway, and closed the door behind him.

Russtoff stood motionless for a second as he admired Laura. It would be hours before she would awake from being chloroformed. He still could not believe his luck. He thought he would have to torture her to get the data, but that stranger gave her secret away. Russtoff took the pen out, and pulled the cap off. This time the Micro SD-card easily dropped out. Russtoff thought for a moment. Is this the right card? Or is this a dud? Maybe that is why that other guy only copied it, he was not sure either.

Russtoff looked around the room. I need to test this. Ah, yes, that will do. He picked Laura’s netbook up from the dresser table and slid the Micro SD-card into a slot on the side. The netbook proudly stopped him as it asked for Laura’s password. Russtoff grinned as he switched to the Administrator login and typed ‘Admin’ in. As the netbook bowed to him, he smiled. Almost no one ever changes that login. He quickly accessed the Micro SD-card, and his eyes widened as he went through the files.
Meanwhile, in the dining room, Victor swallowed uncomfortably. His pulse quickened as he looked at the data from the Micro SD-card. It contained pictures of different people, taken all around the world. Each picture was named only by a number, 500 in total. He scrolled through the index and passed all the pictures. Two documents and an application file followed the pictures. One document was named ‘List’ and the other ‘Unknown’. Victor decided to open the first file. His smart phone struggled with the large file. Impatiently Victor reached out for his drink that stood abandoned on the counter until now. The rim of the drink touched his lips. Finally, slow phone. Victor’s eyes widened and the glass hovered by his lips. Quickly he closed the document and lowered the glass while he nervously looked around him. Governments will bomb countries for this. He decided to open the second file. Being smaller, it opened quickly. A few lines of text graced the screen as Victor brought the glass to his lips and tilted it.

“This is ridiculous. Bartender, a beer, Heineken.” Victor jumped and almost spilled the contents of his glass on his phone. He had been so involved in the documents, that he had not noticed the man arrive. Quickly Victor closed the document and hid his phone as he turned away from the man. Victor ignored the man next to him and again paired his lips and his drink up.

“Shit.” Victor growled as the man bumped him and caused him to spill some of his drink on his shirt.

“I tell you, it’s nonsense,” the man repeated. Reluctantly Victor gave in and decided to amuse the guy.

“What’s non...” Victor swallowed the rest of his words as he turned and saw the man’s face. A cold chill ran through Victor. The man could have been the twin brother, of Mr. too small, brown pinstripe suit, just shorter.
“My room was broken into when I played pool. My dinner suit was stolen. But the ship’s security claims no one but me, and the cleaning personnel were in the room. And Noooo the cleaning personnel did not take it.” Alcohol sweat dripped down his red face as he slammed his fist on the bar counter.

“What kind of suit was taken?” Victor’s pulse raced while he waited for the reply. *Come on spit it out.*

“What you say?”

“The damn suit. What does it look like? *Come on you drunk. Spit it out.*" Victor went ash white as the man replied. “Brow, pinstriped, got my family crest on the breast... hey where you’re going?” Victor ran for the exit; his heart went mad in his chest and his breathing almost out of control. *Laura’s room. What number, think man think.*

“Shit.” Victor cursed as he drew a blank. He stopped outside the main entrance. Sweat dripped down his forehead. *Calm yourself. This is not you. Think, you had her room ID.... 503... run, run hurry Victor, save her.*

In Laura’s room, Russtoff smiled as he pulled the Micro SD-card from Laura’s netbook. He had exactly what he came for. He was going to be a hero of Mother Russia. Russtoff hid the Micro SD-card in the pen, and slipped the pen in his jacket pocket. Slowly, he took a 9mm Beretta 92 A1 pistol from an underarm holster, and then removed a silencer from his jacket pocket.

The soft sound of metal turning on metal, filled the hollow spaces of the room as he walked over to Laura, while fitting the silencer.

“No loose ends.” Slowly, he placed the pistol to Laura’s head and pulled the trigger.

Click.
Russtoff froze, the trigger halfway pulled. His heart rate quickened. *Someone is opening the room door. Quick, hide hide.* Russtoff dashed into the bathroom and managed to slip into the shower just as the door opened. He peered past the shower curtain as three men entered the room. *Are they the team that was originally sent? I cannot see their faces. Best not to take chances. For Mother Russia, they will die.* Confused the men stopped when they saw Laura on the bed. They gave each other a questioning look, and waited for the next man to decide.

“She is not supposed to be here,” Chris whispered.

“Does not matter, we will take her with us.” Zack replied as he tiptoed towards her.

“Is she asleep?” Chris asked.

“Maybe, or drunk passed out, I will check.” Zack slowly reached over Laura and smelled her breath. His eyes widened and roughly he grabbed Laura and threw her over his shoulder.

“Grab her computer and those CDs, we have to leave now.” Zack ordered as he made for the door with Laura. Bob had already started to enter the bathroom and stopped next to the shower when Zack called him.

“What are you doing? We need to leave now.”

“I need to use the bathroom, just give me a minute.”

Russtoff pressed himself as far as he could against the wall. His heart thrashed around in his chest as he swallowed hard, while his knuckles turned white as he gripped his pistol. *One foot more and he will see me.* Russtoff leveled his pistol chest high.

“You can go when we are back in our room, we are leaving now. She was drugged, it could be the sniper.” Zack’s voice expressed the urgency of them leaving.

“Shit, coming.” Bob quickly made for the exit to follow Zack. Laura’s cabin was fifth from the corner in the hallway, and Zack carried Laura in front while Bob and Chris nervously covered the rear.
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

“Ummfff.” Zack uttered as Victor rushed around the corner and crashed into him. Both hugged the wall hard. Victor’s heart ran amok as he looked at Laura hanging over Zack’s shoulder. \textit{Shit, three to one}. Chris and Bob quickly sandwiched Victor in.

“My apologies, I just heard my wife is having our baby. You okay?” Victor blurted out as his hand slid inside his pants pocket.

“All okay, congratulations.” Zack replied with dipped eyebrows and eyes that darted over Victor in search of a weapon. He readjusted Laura’s weight on his shoulder and commented, “She drank too much, taking her back to her room.”

“Oh, poor thing.” Victor’s hand gripped his pocketknife while his eyes narrowed as adrenaline flushed into his bloodstream. \textit{First the two goons, then bozo with Laura, each a stab in the heart. Now}. Victor froze as the door to Laura’s room opened and a man stepped out. \textit{Shit, four, too much}.

“Got to go.” Victor quickly wormed his way past the men and in the process planted a tiny tracker on Laura. Zack took a half step back when he saw Russtoff for the first time. Russtoff casually walked away from the group, when Victor ran past him. For a moment, Zack watched Russtoff walk away then shook his head and turned.

“Let’s go.” Zack barked.
Chapter 6: Death Is Coming For You

Victor clenched his jaw and balled his fists. “Stupid.” He shouted as he slammed his fist into the wall. *I should have known they would find her room.* He took a deep breath, and then took his smart phone from his pocket. His heart calmed as he looked at the screen, the tracking device on Laura was working. *I had my doubts with that tiny thing.* Victor had taken the first side passage in the hallway as he passed Russtoff. He allowed the man to pass; it was not the time for a dust-up. Already the tracker was at the edge of its range. Besides, something about the man’s posture hinted that it would be very hard to take him down with a pocketknife. 9mm led slugs were a far better choice. Victor sprinted away and caught up with the group, unaware that he himself was followed. For 15 minutes, he followed the men, always just a corner behind, until the dot on his phone stopped around the next corner. Victor waited until he heard the door close, then quickly made his way to the door and pressed his ear to it. He could just barely hear the voices inside.

“What did you do to her?” Peterson demanded angrily.

“Nothing, we found her drugged on the bed. Her computer was lying on the floor.” Zack explained.

“We also found this,” Chris broke in, and held up the music CDs they found.

“Check them, and the computer,” Peterson barked as he walked over to the couch where Zack had dumped Laura.

“Pretty little thing,” he commented in a softer voice as he bends over her and brought his lips an inch from hers.

“Chloroform.” Peterson snapped his head up.

“Yes, I think it was the sniper.” Zack offered.

“Dammit, did you see anyone, did you search the room?” Arteries bulged on Peterson’s arms as he gripped the backrest of the couch.
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

“No Boss, we saw nothing. The room was clean,” Zack’s voice wavered. Fear stopped him from admitting that they did not search the room. In any case, there was no one in the room, or was there?

“Boss, there are recently accessed files from an external Micro SD-card that is missing. I think he got the data.” Chris’s fingers dashed over the keyboard while his eyes soaked the words in, which flashed on the screen.

“So, who accessed the files? And did she see his face?” Peterson wondered out aloud.

“Maybe she made a backup?” Zack suggested.

“Maybe. We will see when she wakes up in an hour or so.” Peterson gently ran his fingers over Laura’s leg.

Outside, Victor slowly got up and tiptoed away. Rescuing Laura was going to require more than just a 9mm pistol and a pocketknife. Maybe he should ask Special Agent Josh for help. Victor’s phone vibrated in his pocket as a silent message came in. He stopped and read the email, then opened the attachment. It was from his contacts, a report on who the men were that he sent pictures of, and Laura’s involvement with the data everyone seeks.

As Victor read about Laura, Russtoff made his way to the main deck. In a few hours, they would dock in Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands. Russtoff would make sure that he was one of the first passengers to disembark the ship on arrival. He planned on waiting until the next day after the ship had departed, then claim that he partied too hard and missed the ship. The ship would be too far away to turn around, and he would then just fly out of the country. It happened all the time.

Russtoff however, was unaware that his cover lay dead in the ship’s morgue. The man at the bar, downed Victor’s drink, and died of a heart attack 10 minutes later. The Devil’s Breath from Bogota, Columbia, left in the glass, that the French bartender used to get girls in the mood and do as he said, had been too much for the man’s weak heart.

Anton Swanepoel
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

Two hours later, a masked assassin dressed in black, sneaked through the deserted hallways to a cabin. A bulletproof jacket, lined with ten pockets, that contained spare magazines, decorated his chest. Balanced in his hands were two silenced and highly modified Heckler & Koch MP5K sub machine guns, while a thermal imaging sensor device clung to his head. The gear was smuggled on board for him in Miami, inside an emergency supply box inside a lifeboat, as contingency.

As he came to the last corner on his route, he dropped a small glass vile behind him, and then quickly made off. The overpowering fetid smell of Hydrogen Sulfide, mixed with Butanethiol, filled the air. No one would come this way. The assassin quickly glanced around as he slowly crouched down at the door of his destination. Silently, he activated the thermal imaging device. The device allowed him to see the body heat patterns of the people in the room, though the thin walls and doors of the ocean liner. Six targets. Two walked around, one sat at a table to the left, two sat at a table to the right, and one lay down on a couch in the middle of the room. They were all sitting ducks to him.

His heart slightly raced as he placed both barrels gently against the door and took aim. 90 rounds of deadly 9mm armor piercing messengers of death, eagerly waited to deliver their message.

Inside, Peterson slowly got up, his bladder full. Annoyed, he glanced at Zack and Chris as they paced the room.
“Stop your…” Peterson’s heart stopped as Chris and Zack’s bodies shook as bullets tore into them. For a split second, Peterson wide-eyed stared at the splinters that flew from the door into the room as angry hornets buzzed through the door. His heart raced and adrenaline rushed through him. Contact, contact. As Chris and Zack’s mangled corpses dropped to the floor, Peterson pulled his pistol and aimed at the door. Shoot, shoot, now. His body rocked as a hornet stung him in the shoulder and tore right through him. The force of the impact slammed Peterson against the wall. Lifeless his right arm slumped by his side.

Clang.

Dazed Peterson looked at his pistol on the floor. Pain ripped through him as a bullet tore into his side. Get down get down. Peterson dropped to the ground. Rage filled him as he looked across the room at Steven and Bob, who were playing cards at the table. Bob managed to spin around before he was hit. His body shook as if an electrical current was passed through it. Bullets tore through him and took chucks of flesh with as they exited. Steven dove to the floor just as he was targeted. Bullets tore up the wall where his head was a split second ago. As he hit the floor, he drew his pistol. A concentrated second folly slammed into him just as he squeezed off a round at the door. He screamed in pain as his arm was torn off. Peterson grabbed his pistol with his left and squeezed off three rounds at the door before bullets tore the place up around him. Desperately he crawled to the safety of the bathroom, and then dove into the bathtub. Ash faced, he stared in horror as Steven dragged his bloodied body to his severed right arm. Steven pried the pistol from his dead fingers just as another burst of fire tore into him. He screamed in agony as his left arm was torn off as well. Helplessly he lay on the floor as his life essence pumped out of him.
For a second, silence descended onto the room, and then three bullets slammed into Steven’s head and exited in a red cloud at the back. Peterson tried to get his racing heart under control as he stared at the horrific scene in front of him. *Fuck, my entire team. Think, think, stay alive.* An eerie silence crept into the room as Peterson’s wild pulse echoed in his ears. His pistol rattled in his left hand as he aimed it at the door. *He cannot get me from there. When he enters, he’s mine.*

Outside, the assassin placed small directional bombs to the door hinges and lock.

“Uuuhhh, my head.” Peterson jerked as Laura slowly woke up on the couch. Dazed, she stood up. Laura froze as she looked around her. Her hands shook as she brought them to her ghostly white face. She covered her mouth too late to stop the ear-piercing scream that clawed at the walls. The room was littered with door splinters, pieces of furniture, blood, and flesh. Four mangled bloodied corpses lay on the floor.

“Die.” Peterson hoarsely yelled and aimed at Laura.

Boom.

The room shook slightly as the door exploded into the room. The shockwave blasted Laura against the wall as a bullet passed inches from her head. Dazed, she stumbled forward and dropped to the floor in the middle of the room.

“You’re a spy.” Peterson yelled and pulled Laura’s attention to him.
“No, please.” Laura whispered as Peterson’s pistol leveled at her head. Slowly, he squeezed the trigger. Laura’s body rocked as the bullet slammed inches from her head into the floor. Peterson repositioned himself and took careful aim. Pain tore through his side and chest as two bullets ripped into him. The assassin spayed the bathroom with deadly led, shooting midair as he jumped into the room. Laura gasped as the assassin landed hard on her and almost drove the air from her. Icy fingers ran up Laura’s back and choked her as she looked up. Bullets from the bathroom, slammed into the man on top of her as he reloaded. Laura shut her eyes as the man undeterred used her chest as platform and emptied both guns into the bathroom. Hot casings bounced off her chest as 90 armor-piercing bullets tore Peterson and the bathroom up. As Peterson’s pistol clattered on the tiled floor, the man painfully got up. Laura’s body shook, and her lips trembled as she looked up at the masked figure over her. Blood from a superficial wound in his left upper thigh dripped onto her. She cringed as he slowly bent down, gun in hand, and brought his right hand to her head. Please don’t kill me. Gently he brushed her hair out of her face with his little finger.

Beeep, beep, beep.

Laura jerked as the smoke detector’s alarm activated. The assassin snapped upright, gave Laura a last look, and then limped out of the room. Laura rolled onto her side and covered her face with her hands while her body trembled as emotions poured out of her. Two minutes felt like an eternity as Laura laid there before the ship’s fire crew arrived. A commotion erupted when they entered the room and took the scene in.
Laura was immediately taken to sickbay, where a doctor attended her for shock and minor cuts on her right arm and shoulder. A nurse carefully removed a few splinters from Laura’s forearms, while she listened as the doctor explained that she had suffered a slight concussion from the explosion. Leaning back, Laura dizzily lay in her bed with ears ringing as she stared at the white ceiling. Special Agent Josh informed her that he would be around later to question her. He left two, armed ship’s security guards with her as he went to help Agent Parker gather evidence.
Chapter 7: We Are Sinking

Special Agent Josh opened his mouth, and then slowly closed it. He had no words for what he looked at. Five dead men, four decorated the living room from floor to wall, and one had been turned into Swiss cheese in the bathroom. Josh shivered and swallowed as he looked at the body that had both arms shot off. It was the most gruesome killing he had ever seen. Although, the guy in the bathroom was a strong contender for first place, the armless body was a mess.

Slowly Josh took his pen and pushed it through a hole in the bathroom wall. The walls were made from ALUSTONE, a composite of a 3mm thin slice of real stone combined with ultra-light aluminum foam. This combination formed a thin, lightweight, but soundproof wall that even a standard 9mm bullet would penetrate. So why use armor piercing rounds? Did the killer expect them to wear body armor? Josh sighed and bent down to take a closer look at one of the pistols on the floor. Heckler & Koch .45 caliber.

“What a mess.” Agent Parker observed while he took photographs. He paused for a moment, and then took a picture of the armless body as he continued. “Do you think they are connected to the killings of the three men on the deck?”

“That would be my guess.” Josh answered.

“So, how many did Laura say did this? Four or five?”

“One.”

“What?”

“That’s what she said.” Josh slowly stood up from where he examined one of the dead men’s pistol.

“Do you think it is the sniper?” Parker asked wide-eyed.
“I believe it was.” Josh walked to the room door and gently shook his head. For some reason, this sniper will go to great lengths to keep Laura alive, but why? Josh stopped at the door and glanced over the room. He shook his head, then turned and entered the hallway as he called Captain Duncan Steel over who was waiting outside for him. Duncan’s stomach turned as he stole a glimpse inside the room. He had seen many things in his 45 years at sea, but in all his 64 years of life, he had never witnessed such destruction first hand. Nor had he ever expected it on a luxury ocean liner; it was a nightmare to him.

“Captain Steel, due to the current happenings, I am ordering you to turn the ship around immediately and return to US waters where the Coast Guard will take control of the ship. All crew and passengers are to be detained and questioned until cleared, is that understood?” Josh’s voice was stern and commanding.

Duncan opened his mouth to argue, but Josh’s eyes stopped him. They were close to Grand Cayman, and he would have liked to dock there and have the local police remove the bodies. That was more acceptable, but they were still in international waters, and the ship was registered in Florida, thus he had to comply.

“Understood Special Agent Williams. I will inform the crew and passengers.” He turned and walked away, but got as far as the corner before he grabbed a passing crewmember and snapped. “Do something about this damn smell.”

Josh turned around and went to help Parker bag the bodies. The ship had space for only two bodies in its mortuary, and space was cleared in one of the kitchen freezers. As Josh and Parker placed the last body in the freezer with Duncan looking on, Josh commented, “Free ice cream for everyone then?”
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

Russtoff stood on the main deck and glanced at the sun as it lazily started its daily trek across the sky. A few clouds in the distance covered away from the sun’s heat. The morning ocean breeze was fresh and filled Russtoff’s lungs. Russtoff glowed inside; it was going to be a glorious day for him. He glanced at his watch. 6:15 am. It was just under two hours until the island would smile at him from the distance. Russtoff’s heart stopped as the ship’s public address system body slammed his high spirit into the gutter.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is your Captain speaking. Due to unforeseen technical problems, we will not be docking in the Cayman Islands. We will also not be able to continue our cruise and are now turning around and heading back to Florida. I apologize for any inconvenience caused. Have a nice day.”

Russtoff’s eyes spat fire as he white knuckled gripped the guardrail and shook it. Shit, no, no. He clenched his jaw and took a deep breath.

“I am going to sue them.” A man screamed a short distance from Russtoff.

“This is bullshit. How can they do this?” Another yelled.

Disgusted Russtoff looked around him. People threw drinks and food platters on the ground and started to push the crew around. They demanded answers from the dumbfounded crew. Russtoff shook his head. The captain needs to do something before he has chaos on his hands. Russtoff froze and looked up. Maybe that is just what is needed. Chaos.

Russtoff shouldered people out of his way as he ran to a lifeboat numbered 20. Quickly he made sure he was not watched, and then removed the small backpack he brought on board. He pulled the detailed ship’s layout sheets from the backpack, and flipped through them until he found the engineering deck plan. His trained eyes needed only a few seconds to take in the layout. Russtoff stashed the cards in the backpack, slung it over his shoulder and made off.
A few minutes later, Russtoff, slightly out of breath, wiped the sweat from his brow as he stopped in front of a watertight door marked ‘EB5 Employees Only.’ Unseen, he entered into the engineering deck and descended below the waterline. Inside, he quickly moved towards the main control panel for the engines. His heart thumped loudly in his chest as he stopped in front of the control panel. His hands shook lightly as he removed a block of HMX plastic explosives and a detonator from his backpack. Carefully, he inserted the detonator into the explosives, and then set the timer for five minutes. Russtoff placed the bomb on the controls, and then picked it up again. *What if someone sees it? I need to hide it better.* Russtoff quickly looked around for something to hide the bomb in. *Yes, that will do.* A large old metal lunchbox stood on the ground by the panel, and he quickly swapped the sandwiches and coffee flash inside for the bomb, then replaced the lunchbox on the ground.

Russtoff nodded as he looked at his handy work. *That will take care of the engine and backup generators controls. No power, no electricity.* Russtoff quickly glanced at the hull of the ship. *Yep, the charge is far enough away not to breach the hull.* He bent down and activated the timer, closed the lid of the lunchbox, and then walked away with a smile. *I wonder how much it costs to tow a ship like this.* Dutifully the timer ticked away behind him as he snacked on the sandwiches on his way back out. *Mmm, peanut butter and jelly, not bad.* Four minutes later, Russtoff slipped out of the same door he came in. He quickly made his way to stairs close by that led to a higher deck. As he reached the deck, he glanced at his watch. *40 seconds to go.* Russtoff walked over to the guard railing and inhaled the crisp ocean morning air deeply. His heart joyfully danced around in his chest. He had the data, and soon he would be on his way to Mother Russia. *30 seconds to go.*
On the engineering deck, Nigel, a ship engineer of 12 years, stopped at the engine control panel on his way to the storeroom. His trained eyes darted across the monitors for a few seconds, and then stopped. *Samuel left his lunchbox lying around again.* Nigel sighed as he picked the lunchbox up and made his way to the storeroom. 15 seconds. His path took him around water cooling pipes and along a narrow pathway close to the ship’s hull. Five seconds.

On deck, Russtoff casually took a packet of Marlboro cigarettes from his front jacket pocket and removed one. He smiled as he placed a cigarette in his mouth. *Any seco…*

*Duuum, shooos.*

The muffled sound of an explosion, followed by a wave of blue ocean water cut his thoughts short. As the guard railing lightly shook in his hands, water rained down on him and drenched him. Russtoff’s eyes widened, and his face went white. *Oh shit.* The wet cigarette dropped from his open mouth as he stared at the ship’s hull below. A hole, partly below the waterline, gave him a crooked toothed ten-foot smile as it eagerly drank the ocean water. Russtoff swallowed hard. *The ship is sinking.*
Chapter 8: Warm Embrace

Beep beep beep.
“Put out those alarms.” Captain Duncan Steel breathlessly said as he stormed into Blue Diamond’s dimly lit bridge. His eyes widened the more he took in the information on the digital monitors. Crew members were manually sealing bulkheads and operating bilge pumps.
“What the hell happened?”
“Sir, there was an explosion in the engine room.” Staff Captain, Kevin Young’s voiced hinted of fear.
“Damage report.”
“Engines and backup generators lost. Emergency battery power partially operational. Sir. Hull breach on the engineering deck.”

Duncan clenched his jaw as his eyes narrowed. Sabotage on my ship.
“Can we contain the water at the hull breach?”
“Negative Sir. Seawater is flooding the ship through damaged water and sewage pipes. The shutoff valves on the engineering level were blown to pieces. A shockwave traveled through the water in the pipes, and cracked shutoff valves on multiple decks. There is nothing to be done. She is lost, Sir.”
The dim light cast an eerie shadow on Kevin’s face that darkened the sadness in his voice.
“How long?”
“Sir. About four hours.”

Duncan bent forward and leaned against the display panel with both hands as he bowed his head. My career is sinking with the ship. For a moment, he remained silent, and then asked. “You send a Mayday to George Town?” He knew it was an unnecessary question, but needed to be asked.
“Yes Sir.” Kevin proudly replied, not at all offended. Duncan raised his head, then straightened himself and turned to face Kevin.
“Very well, sound the evacuation alarm.” Kevin saluted, then flipped the safety cover off a large red button titled ‘Evacuation’, and firmly pressed it. Whooop, whooop, whooop.

The emergency signal echoed through the ship as Duncan brought a microphone to his lips.

“This is your Captain speaking. Due to unforeseen technical problems, we will be evacuating the ship. This is not a drill. I repeat, this is not a drill, evacuate the ship. All passengers, please calmly move to your designated evacuation points. Please refrain from taking luggage -- wallets and passports only.”

The ship had run an evacuation drill just as they left Florida, which enhanced the speed and order of the evacuation. The Blue Diamond had 20 newly designed CRW55 mega lifeboats. Their 55-foot-long, double decked catamaran hulls, had four color-coded doors that allowed fast boarding for its 370 capacity. Two 170hp diesel engines provided a maximum speed of six knots, while twin rudders increased maneuverability. Passenger embarked directly into the lifeboats, in their stowed positions, to color-coded seating areas. Once full, the lifeboats were lowered with a specially designed davit system directly into the water.
Victor jumped out of bed when dim emergency lights replaced the room lights. Open mouthed, he listened to the evacuation order as he stared at the tiny green lights that eliminated the room’s exit. *Laura, I have to find Laura.* His heart raced as he grabbed a partially packed waterproof backpack and stuffed his smart phone, wallet, and passport in it. As he raced to the exit, his eyes glimpsed the fresh change of clothes at the end of the bed. *May need that.* Quickly he stuffed the clothes into the backpack and left the room. The hallway floor was illuminated with small green arrow-shaped lights that pointed to the nearest evacuation point. Victor ignored them as he shouldered and pressed his way through a mob of angry and confused passengers. His plan was methodical and simple. *Find Laura. Her room first. If not there, grab her passport and head to sick bay.*

“Laura.” Victor yelled as he ran into her room. An eerie dimly lit empty room greeted him. Quickly Victor grabbed Laura’s purse on the nightstand, and confirmed it had her passport in. As he made for the exit, his hand skimmed over the bed and grabbed a T-shirt and denim shorts from a pile on her bed. The zombie mob in the hallways had increased in intensity and it took Victor 20 minutes of elbowing, tripping, and pushing to reach the sick bay. Victor’s heart sank, and his mouth dried up as he looked at the sick bay. Already evacuated, only Laura’s perfume hinted that she was there. Noise down the hall snapped him to action. *Quick, locate the sick bay evacuation point.*

“Where is the evacuation point for sick bay?” Victor snapped at a female crewmember leading zombies down the hallway. The girl jerked at Victor’s sudden voice, then composed herself and replied with a well-trained calm voice. “Don’t worry sir; you will be reunited with your loved ones again. Please follow me to a designated evacuation point.”
“Dammit, which way.” Victor shouted as he slammed his fist into the wall, and his eyes tore the girl up. She jumped and white faced pointed with a shaky hand down the hall as she replied. “Downnn, the hall, tturn right and follow the signs.”

“Thank you.” Victor gave her a kiss on the forehead, and then left her dumbfounded as he made for the evacuation point. His heart jumped as a sign greeted him when he turned right as instructed. ‘SICKBAY EMERGENCY EVACUATION ASSEMBLY, POINT B15.’ A small map decorated the wall below the sign. Victor rushed to the point and soon found himself in the midst of zombie land. Victor stared at the people entering the lifeboat just ahead as he inched forward. His eyes brightened and his heart leaped with joy as he saw her.

“Laura.” Victor shouted just as she stepped into the lifeboat. Laura spun around and searched for the voice, now lost in angry moans and complains.

“Hey, wait your turn,” a man shouted and ripped Victor backwards as he forced his way to Laura. Blood stained the man’s shirt as Victor’s elbow broke his nose and dropped him to the ground. People immediately gave him space and Victor quickly reached the end of the line.

“Laura,” Victor shouted as he made for the Perspex doors of the lifeboat. Laura’s face brightened as she saw Victor, then went ash white as the doors closed between them.

“Noo,” Victor shouted as he slammed his palms against the doors. A firm hand grabbed his shoulder and pulled him away as a voice echoed in his ears. “Please step away from the lifeboat, there will be another one in a few minutes.” Victor spun around and expressionlessly looked at the man in front of him, then at the second crewmember a short distance away that operated the controls.

“Open the doors.” Victor’s voice was firm as he made his way to the controls. A hand on his chest stopped him. Quickly the first crewmember slipped in front of Victor and blocked his path.

Creee.
Victor snapped his head around as the pulleys complained while they dutifully lowered the lifeboat. Laura’s pleading face as she stood palms against the Perspex doors burned into Victor’s mind. Slowly she disappeared from view as the lifeboat sank below deck level while a hand pushed Victor back to the line.

“Sir, ple…” The man’s words were lost as Victor’s punch into his solar plexus dropped him to the floor.

“Stop right t…” The second crewmember joined his shipmate as Victor dropped him with a powerful front kick to the gut. As the two men groaned in pain, Victor quickly reversed the lifeboat’s direction, and then walked to await the lifeboat. Laura’s eyes brightened as the lifeboat slowly obeyed its return to bay command. She smiled at Victor for a moment, then her jaw dropped and her heart stopped. Victor’s head whiplashed as a powerful punch to the jaw sent him crashing into the door. Laura’s eyes widened as blood from a cut to Victor’s lip smeared the glass in front of her. Defiantly Victor spun around and planted a devastating blow into the man’s gut. Victor swallowed hard as the six foot seven; 250 pounds of solid muscle in front of him chuckled and grabbed his wrist.

“Why, you little dweeb,” the man bellowed. Laura jumped as Victor’s body was slammed against the door from two powerful punches. Tears rolled down her cheeks as Victor crumbled to the floor clutching his stomach.

For a moment, Victor listened to the laughter in front of him. Laura. His face turned red and his eyes black as his muscles exploded and launched him up. The brick house’s eyes watered as Victor’s knee crushed his groin. An elbow to the temple made him see stars, and the side of an open palm to the throat dropped him gagging to the ground.

Click.

Victor froze as a pistol was cocked and pressed against his temple.

“That is quite enough.”
Victor reacted on instinct. In the blink of an eye, he knocked the pistol from the man’s hand and spun him through the air by his arm. With a thud, the man slammed into the floor head first, and then passed out.

“Oops,” Victor said as he looked down at Special Agent Josh Williams. Pain rippled through Victor’s body as he limped over to Josh’s pistol and picked it up. Pistol in hand, he returned to the lifeboat. Victor tapped on the Plexiglas door with the barrel of the pistol as he breathlessly said. “Open up.”

The skipper of the lifeboat reluctantly opened the door just as the two crew members on deck stood up. Victor slowly stepped inside the lifeboat, and then partially turned to the two crew members outside. Painfully, he forced the words past his teeth. “You, lower this lifeboat and proceed with the evacuation.”

The doors closed behind him as he turned around to face Laura. Victor’s face dropped, and his shoulders hung as he looked at her. Laura stood feet apart, with her fists at her sides and threw flames at him though her eyes.

“Are you insane?” Laura spat at him, louder than she intended. Victor was still partially in her red book about the email at dinner. Exhausted, Victor looked up at her, and managed a weak smile as he replied. “You are cute when you are angry.” Victor’s comment blew her mind empty. Open mouthed she watched as Victor painfully lowered himself into a nearby seat.

“Laura.” Victor’s breathless voice snapped her to attention. As Laura came over, Victor pointed to an emergency medical box against the far wall and said. “Will you please bring the med kit over for the bleeding?” Laura looked at the blood on Victor’s chin and mouth and rolled her eyes. *It’s only a small cut, baby.* Victor took out his pocketknife as Laura went to fetch the kit.

“Here you…” Laura’s heart jumped and her body shivered as she looked at Victor. Delicately he cut his pants at his left upper thigh to reveal blood soaked bandages beneath.
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

“Thank you.” Victor’s voice was soft as he took the kit from Laura’s shaking hands. Carefully he placed the kit on his right leg, flipped the lid open, and pulled out a bottle of painkillers. Victor ripped the top of the bottle off with his teeth, and knocked back a few pills. Laura brought her hands to her mouth and wide-eyed whispered. “Who are you really?”

Victor gave a slight moan as he shifted position in his seat and stretched his left leg out. Slowly he unrolled the bloody bandages on his leg.

“Long story.” He took a deep breath, and then continued. “Will tell you all when we get on land, it is time you know who I had to kill to save your sexy ass.” Victor froze as Laura softly placed her hands over his, then leaned over and kisses him gently on the cheek.

“Thank you for saving my life, twice.” She whispered, and then continued softly but firmly. “Let me do that, you are making a mess of it.” Victor leaned back in the seat and watched as Laura bandaged his leg. His emotions were torn between his feelings for her, and his orders. You have no idea how hard it was not to shoot you that night.

“Done.” Laura proudly said as she sat down next to Victor, who looked down at his freshly bandaged leg.

“Not bad, where did you learn to do that?”

“Suzy, my roommate. She is studying to be a nurse, and I had to play dummy for her a few times, so she taught me a few things.”

“Did she teach you mouth to mouth as well?” Victor winked. Laura gasped, and then giggled as she gave him a light slap on the shoulder.

“You are beaten up; shot, bleeding, and you still hit on me.”

“You bring out the best in me.” Victor laughed as he closed his eyes.

“That was strangely, sexy.” Laura whispered as she hugged Victor and rested her head on his shoulder. How weird that I would feel safe in the hands of a man that kills for a living, after I was beaten up by a drunk boyfriend flipping burgers for a living.
The lifeboat pitched and rolled as it circled the ocean liner for three hours until the evacuation was complete. Now and again, the skipper stopped to pick up passengers who had jumped off the listing ocean liner’s balconies. Faces in mirror image, open-mouthed and wide-eyed, watched in awe as Blue Diamond was swallowed whole over the next hour and twenty minutes. Noses were squished against windows, wetted by tears, while oooh’s and aahh’s escaped from trembling lips. With creeks and burps, Blue Diamond complained as she was dragged into the deep sinister abyss. 5000 feet of pitch black, cold water eagerly prepared her new home.

Heavyhearted Captain Duncan Steel stood at the helm of one of the lifeboats and scanned the waters where his beloved ship was just moments ago. As his trained eyes failed to find any survivors in the water, he picked up the microphone and ordered, “All lifeboats, this is your Captain. Follow my lead, engines ¾ full.” Duncan looked at the skipper of the lifeboat, and then continued, “Heading Grand Cayman Island port, ¾ engine if you please.”
“Yes Captain.” The skipper proudly replied. He had the honor of taking the captain to shore, and his boat was the only one that displayed the small captain’s personal flag, on its radio mast. Duncan looked at a small digital display on the console that displayed text messages between the lifeboats. Each boat reported its passenger count silently, and its report on witnessed losses. Duncan sighed -- 20 souls lost: six crew members and 14 passengers. Four crew drowned in engineering when the bomb exploded. Two crew died with an elderly lady they were helping, when their walkway collapsed, and eight other women and five men could not be found before their floors were flooded. Duncan bowed his head in sadness. He loved coming to this island, Grand Cayman’s smile as he approached her always brightened his mood. She was the largest of the Cayman Islands, with her two sister islands, Cayman Brac and Little Cayman around 80 miles from her. Sadness filled Duncan’s eyes and his shoulders hung as he looked around him when the lifeboat pulled away, and started the three-hour journey to port. This will be the last boat ride of my career, and life.

Inside the lifeboat, Victor shifted uneasily in his chair. The ride was getting more and more choppy, and every bruise on his body made themselves heard. The dull hum of the two engines did nothing to smooth the somber mood of the passengers they pushed to land. Endless white striped blue ocean drifted past. Victor glanced at his watch and sighed; only two hours had passed.

“All lifeboat skippers, this is the Cayman Islands marine police. Please stay in formation. We will escort you to port.” A metallic voice crackled over the radio, and Victor quickly peered out of the window just as four large marine police pontoon boats joined them.
“About time.” Victor said under his breath, then took out his smart phone and scrolled through his contacts. He took a deep breath and swallowed the nausea down that sat in his throat, before he made the call.

“Hey Screw, it’s Victor. I’m currently in lifeboat number 10, can you make some arrangements for me? Thanks mate, see you later.” Laura raised an eyebrow at him when he replaced his cell phone, then questioned him with her eyes.

“I am not in the mood to receive Special Agent William’s warm welcome when we dock. Let’s just hope we make it undetected to the dock before he sends a welcome party for us,” Victor stated, and then leaned back in his seat. Laura shook her head, and then watched the waves roll by; she loved the ocean, even when it was upset. Ten minutes lazily ticked by.

“Blue Diamond Lifeboat number 10, Blue Diamond Lifeboat number 10, this is Marine Police Tornado.” Victor sat upright and quickly glanced out of the window. A large police pontoon boat with an enclosed cabin approached their lifeboat on its port side. Four 300 horsepower outboard motors proudly pushed the police boat around, while they boldly stated that running was futile. The boat was the Cayman Island’s answer to the fast drug boats that operated in its waters.

“Tornado, Lifeboat 10, send, over.” The skipper’s voice wavered a little.

“Lifeboat 10, Tornado, stop all engines and prepare to be boarded,” the voice was stern and commanding.

“Tornado, Lifeboat 10, stopping all engines and preparing to be boarded.” The skipper answered as he shut the engines down.
“Help them raft up.” The skipper commanded two crew members, as he remotely opened a side door, swallowing uneasily and looking at the police boat. Four police personnel stood ready inside the protected cabin, its door open. When the boats were a few feet apart, two police officers, armed with machine guns slung over their shoulders and side arms on the hip, came out of the cabin to help raft the boats up. A high-ranking officer stood in the doorway of the police boat and oversaw the rafting up. As soon as the boats were securely tied together, the two police officers quickly entered the lifeboat.

“Everyone, please remain seated.” One of the officers ordered.

“What’s going on?” “I don’t know.” “Maybe they are looking for a criminal.” “I wish they would arrest that guy in the back that attacked those people.” “Me too.” Were whispered among the people. The high-ranking officer made his way into the lifeboat and scanned the confused passengers in front of him.

“Ladies and gentleman, I apologize for this intrusion after your ordeal. Please remain seated, this will not take long.”


Chief Inspector Reginald Bodden walked over to Victor and stopped a foot in front of him.

“I hear you had a disagreement with the ocean liner’s crew, punched a passenger, and knocked out a United States Special Agent, in addition to being wanted for questioning regarding some involvement in multiple murders?” Reginald’s face was expressionless.

“Was a busy day.” Victor commented dryly. Reginald spun around and said, “Follow me.” A few of the passengers applauded on hearing the conversation. Laura’s face went white when Victor took her by the hand and pulled her up.
“She is coming with, Sir.” Reginald stopped, turned around and slowly walked back to Victor. With a furrowed brow, he thoughtfully looked Laura up and down, and then turned his attention to Victor.

“You are a mess. You have been running around creating mayhem, and you still had time to pick up a girl? Damn Victor, you never seize to amaze me.” A smile broke on his face and he hugged Victor.

“Defiant to the end.” Victor laughed as he returned the hug.

“Damn good to see you my friend, been a long time, and if you call me Sir again, you are not getting any rum cake.” Reginald let go of Victor, who laughed about the rum cake, while Laura stared at the two with a blank face. They are friends?

“Come young lady, there will be plenty of time for introductions later.” Reginald gently hooked his elbow in with Laura’s and led her to the police boat. Blank faces with open mouths stared as Victor left the lifeboat. When Laura climbed into the police boat’s cabin, Reginald turned and addressed the passengers.

“This never happened. Anyone even thinking otherwise will be arrested and jailed for life.” He then spun around, winked at the two police officers at the door and climbed onto the police boat. The passengers stared in silence as the boats were quickly untied.

“That was so James Bond like.” One passenger said in awe as the police boat sped off into the distance. Inside the Police boat, Reginald turned to Laura and said.

“I am Chief Inspector Reginald Bodden, but you can call me Screw. And what may I call a pretty lady as yourself?” Reginald slightly bowed towards Laura and kissed her hand.

“Laura.”

“Laura, of course. A name fit for an Angel. Your parents chose wisely, seeing as you have an angel’s face already.” Laura’s face slightly reddened, and her eyes sparkled.Yep, the two definitely are friends.
Reginald turned to Victor, then took a deep breath and shook his head.

“You ruffled that Agent Williams’s feathers really well.”

“He will get over it. By the way, here is his pistol.” Victor laughed, and then handed over Josh’s pistol. Reginald took the pistol, then pulled Victor to the side and whispered. “You have plenty of contacts who can straighten or even pluck that agent’s feathers, why this charade, did you miss your mark?”

“Yes.”

Slowly Reginald glanced in Laura’s direction, and his eyes widened slightly.

“Her?”

“Afraid so.”

“Shiiit.”

“Yup.” Victor sighed.

“Is she dangerous?”

“You have no idea.”

“Are you going to finish the job?”

“What are you two whispering about?” Laura’s eyes sparkled with intrigue.

“I was just telling Victor that Rum Point is full, so I got you a room at the Reef Resort. I’ll drop you off at the dock by the bar.” Reginald quickly commented.

“I owe you Screw.”

“Why is it called Rum Point?” Laura tilted her head when both men turned towards each other with a, oh no, look on their faces at her question.

“Because of the buried rum bottles.” The skipper quickly offered, then looked at Reginald with eyes that pleaded to let him continue.

“Fine.” Reginald agreed as he pushed Victor gently, who softly snorted as he laughed.

“Shut up, you.” Reginald playfully snapped at Victor. Laura raised an eyebrow at the two while her eyes searched for answers.
“They both love to tell stories and the skip here beat Screw to the draw.” Victor laughingly offered an explanation. Laura pulled a sad face at Reginald as she stroked his shoulder, which made Victor almost cry with laughter. As Victor wiped a tear from his eyes, Laura moved over to stand next to the skipper, who took the cue.

“Many years back, there were no fixed roads linking the east end of the island with the rest of the island. You had to either go through the bush using what was and still is called the Mastic Trail, which took a long time, or you could go by boat. The area now known as North Sound was actually called Great Sound in the early 1900s and the point that reached into the ocean was called the Great Point. In October 1913, a three masted schooner with building supplies and a large cargo of red rum in barrels called hogsheads, ran aground. The Captain thought of his wife first and loaded her and her belongings into one of the ship’s lifeboats to take them to safety.

“I like this Captain.” Laura chipped in, and drew a smile from the men.

“Unfortunately the lifeboat got stuck on a shallow ledge on the reef and in the process of trying to free the boat, the Captain’s wife died. Local fishermen took the body and put it on a local Cat boat to George Town,” the skipper continued.

“How sad, but what is a Cat boat?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Victor offered and nodded to the skipper to continue the story.

“While the body was being transferred to George Town, local young lads rescued the rum, where they proceeded to pour the rum out of the barrels and into glass bottles. In order to hide their find from the owner and the police, they buried the bottles all over the beach. For years, they would walk the beach, finding and enjoying the hidden rum. From then on the area was known as Rum Point.”

“Thank you kindly.” Laura said.

“My pleasure. Do you want to hear about Sting Ray City?” The skipper chanced.
“Yes please.” Laura took a seat next to the skipper and Victor seized the opportunity and pulled Reginald away.

“Screw, there is a man who was on the ocean liner that has something of mine. He fits the description of a man who made a complaint on the ship that his room was broken into. Check with the Captain, he’ll give you the name of the man. Use his facial description, but with a little taller and leaner body to get the man I’m looking for.”

“The man who made the complaint is Paul Wood. He died in the bar from a suspected heart attack. Your agent buddy informed me about it, and he is of the thought that you had something to do with it. Witnesses saw you two together just before he died. The bartender said you ordered a drink but didn’t drink it and gave it to Paul, who then died just after you left the room. Unfortunately, Paul’s body is still in the freezer, now at the bottom of the ocean.”

“Crap.”

Reginald placed his hand on Victor’s shoulder and laughed, “No worry, I know it’s not your style. You would have slit his throat.”

Laura had finished talking to the skipper and only caught the last bit of the conversation. She froze at the remark and started to open her mouth when Reginald cut her question off. “We’re here, get ready to jump off. I need to leave to help with questioning the passengers and cleaning up your mess Victor.” Victor just smiled back at his old friend.

Laura turned her attention to the beach and looked in awe at the magnificent scene. A 300-foot Brazilian Teak dock, that made a lazy curve to the left and ended in soft white beach sand, accepted the police boat. Caribbean music from an open bar next to the dock filled the air, while warm Caribbean water lapped at the beach, calmed to mere ripples by a natural coral barrier 500 feet from shore.
“You coming?” Victor held his hand out to Laura as he spoke, who took it and followed him. The soft sand caressed her feet as they passed deck chairs under large thatched umbrellas and a few wave runners.

“What are we going, Victor?”

“Over there.” Victor stopped and pointed to an ocean facing three-story building. The sun’s soft orange fingers glided over people on their balconies, as it began its retreat for the day.

“This is beautiful.” Laura kicked some sand up with her foot that made Victor look down at her feet. Her heart jumped and quickly she buried her left foot in the sand to try to hide her slightly crooked small toe that she broke when she was nine.

“And so are you.” Victor let his words hang in the air for a moment, and then slowly walked away. For a second, Laura stood speechless on the beach. Her mind was in chaos while her heart was drunk with emotions. She looked at Victor as he walked away. How much does he know about me? Growl.

Laura’s face went red as her stomach complained of not being fed for so long. She sprinted and quickly caught up with Victor where she happily danced and twisted a few times, then took his hand while they walked to the entrance.

“It is a pity they are closed.” Laura commented as they stood in the hallway that led from the beach to the main lobby of the resort. At 40 feet wide and 300 feet long, it housed four, island styled beach shops on the left, with the elevator, stairs and lobby of the resort on the right.

“Plenty of time to shop for souvenirs tomorrow.” Victor laughed as he made for the reception at the end of the hallway.

“Would not matter, I have no money.” Laura pulled a sad face and shrugged her shoulders.
“I have. I will lend you some.” Victor neglected to inform her about her purse; it was not the time to tell her that he had it. Laura window-shopped as she slowly passed the stores. Her head snapped back as something caught her attention. She stopped, stepped back, and then burst out laughing.

“What are you laughing about?” Victor stood a few steps away and came over when Laura giggling pointed to an object in the store. His eyes eagerly followed Laura’s pointing finger.

“Cute.” Victor laughed.

A six-inch Santa Clause Christmas ornament, stood on a shelve. He was bent over, as he surfed a stingray naked, and showed them his buttocks.

“I have to get that tomorrow.” Laura giggled as she followed Victor to the reception. Victor opened the glass door and let Laura enter the reception first. He quickly glanced at the two glass doors across from him that led to the parking area, no movement.

“Aahhh, that feels great.” Laura let the cool air-conditioned breeze hug her. A water cooler by the door attracted her attention, and she helped herself. While Victor walked to the reception, she fumbled through some brochures on a stand by the door.

“Hi, you have a reservation for Reginald?”

An early 20s girl with short brunette hair looked up at Victor, and her hazel eyes lit up as they flowed over his body.

“Let me...” Her words were lost as her eyes met Victor’s and her hands aimlessly fumbled with the schedule book’s pages. She swallowed, closed her eyes for a moment, and then composed herself as her face warmed.

“Yes, a one-bedroom suite for two,” she replied when her finger stopped at the entry in the book. She looked up from the book, and was helpless in not swooning over Victor. Softer than she meant, she asked. “Would that be two single beds or a double bed?”
Laura glanced over his shoulder just as Laura dropped the brochure she was reading and spun around. Laura’s face had the expression of someone who just realized the fart they let out, was not actually a fart.

“Two singles.” Victor sighed as he looked back at the girl.

“My name is Betty. Would you please sign here?” Betty’s voice was even softer and friendlier as she held out the register book to Victor. Laura’s heart jumped as Betty accidentally brushed her hand over Victor’s when he took the book.

“One double bed, room key please.” Betty jumped at Laura’s voice and turned scarlet. Laura gracefully hooked in with Victor at the counter.

“Yyes, ssorry.” Betty stuttered as she fumbled with some keys, and then held out one to Laura.

“Thank you.” Laura took the key and pulled Victor along with her to the exit.

“Your room is on the top floor. You can use the elevator in the hallway or the stairs right next to it. Have a ni....” Betty blurted out, and then stopped as her eyes fixated on Victor’s firm buttocks. She gasped as Laura glanced over her shoulder at her and slid her hand over Victor’s buttocks, then gave it a squeeze. Victor acted as if he was oblivious to all, and followed Laura’s lead. As Laura and Victor disappear down the hallway, Betty buried her head in her hands from embarrassment.

Laura pressed her lips together to stop her from giggling as she waited while Victor slowly pressed the elevator button. Her heart launched to the moon when Victor grabbed her by the small of her back and pulled her tightly against his hard body, then kissed her. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach while her head floated to heaven. She eagerly embraced Victor, then froze as confusion stepped in and tore her in two. Her body said yes, but her mind said no. What must I do? I like him, but am I ready, or will I run as always?

Ping.
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

Victor immediate let go of Laura when the elevator announced its arrival. Laura gently licked her lips while she glassy eyed, stared down the hallway at the ocean, that promised to cool her off.

“If you’re scared of elevators, we can take the stairs, but I am not carrying you up.” Victor winked at her from where he held the door open for her. Victor’s voice snapped Laura to action, and she half stumbled into the elevator. Quickly she folded her arms over her erect nipples as she gently leaned against Victor while the elevator took them to the third floor. When the elevator door opened, Victor placed the palm of his hand in the small of her back, and gently guided her out of the elevator to their room door.

Laura admired the room’s door as she unlocked it. The lightly stained Alpine door was decorated with palm trees around the sides, and gentle waves in the center that almost touched two sets of footprints, that disappeared into the distance on a beach. The sun, low over the horizon, completed the theme. Laura smiled as she pulled the banana shaped door handle down and with Victor’s help opened the door. A cool vanilla breeze welcomed them when they stepped into the kitchen. Laura placed the door key down next to a fruit bowl on the glass table situated in the center of the kitchen. Tired, she sat down on one of the four pine chairs, and helped herself to a banana. Victor removed his backpack and placed it on the white tile floor, then took a seat at the table. Laura looked at him through narrowed eyes for a moment, and then said. “You owe me an explanation.”

“True.” Victor helped himself to an apple while he waited for her question.

“What is a Cat boat?” Victor almost dropped the apple from laughter. It took him a good few seconds before he could reply.

“Of all the things you can ask, that’s the first thing you want to know?”

“It is a start to more difficult questions.”
“The living room is more comfortable.” Victor slowly stood up, took another apple, and then waited for Laura to stand up. Laura followed Victor through the archway in the drywall, to the living room. A three seat, leather couch stood against the far wall, and Victor and Laura made themselves comfortable in it. Laura brought her knees up to her chest, then placed them down on the couch in Victor’s direction, while she leaned sideways to rest her head on his shoulder. Gently Victor glided his hand over her knee and rested it on her thigh. Laura looked at his hand for a moment, then reached over, took a bite of Victor’s apple, and said. “Ready.” Victor playfully narrowed his eyes and curled his lips at Laura for stealing a bite of his apple.

“Fishing has always been part of the Cayman tradition, with the locals building their own schooners. Years back, a local fisherman designed a new type of schooner and while he worked on it, he covered the boat with a sail to keep the design secret. After completing the boat, he invited his neighbors to come and see his new boat.

“With everyone around, he removed the cover from the boat and to their surprise, they found that a cat had made a home out of the boat and had given birth to a litter of kittens. From then on, the style of boat was known as a Cat boat. Apparently, it was a brilliant design and for the people to ride in a Cat boat was like riding in a Rolls Royce.”

Laura placed her hand on his shoulder and pressed herself up to look at Victor.

“That’s beautiful, and I am glad that the boat did not get its name from someone dying as with the story of Rum Point.”

“I have something for you Laura.” Victor got up and walked to the kitchen.

“What? Another present?” Laura laughed as he returned.

“Not really.”

“Where did you get that?” Laura asked wide-eyed, while she stared at a T-shirt and denim shorts Victor held out to her.
“From your room, when we evacuated the ship, I started my search for you in your room. I got your wallet and passport as well.”

“Why?...I mean, why the clothes?”

“Tomorrow is Sunday and all the main shops in town will be closed.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I lived on the island for a year, a long time ago.”

“Thank you. Do you mind if I take a bath?” Laura slowly got up and started to make her way to the bathroom.

“Take your time; I have a few calls to make.”

Victor turned and pulled the sea life decorated curtains next to the couch open. Laura stopped and watched as Victor slid the large glass door open, and stepped onto the balcony that ran the length of the unit. As he pulled his phone out, she walked through the archway in the drywall that led to the bedroom and stopped. For a moment, she admired the king-size bed with its white linen where it stood in the left corner. Slowly she licked her lips. Maybe. Laura took a deep breath as a warm feeling started deep down inside her, then passed the bed and entered the bathroom. Her heart jumped from joy when a bath with a showerhead greeted her, she loved to soak. While Laura drew a bath, Victor made a secure phone call.

“Line secure, report.” A metallic voice said when the call connected.

“Data located, but compromised. Courier innocent.”

“Can data compromise be eliminated?”

“Possibly.”

“New mission. Primary, upload data to server then destroy data recording device. First Secondary, eliminate courier. Second secondary, find and eliminate data compromise.” Victor’s heart stopped, and his face went white. For a moment, he stood frozen.

“I repeat, courier innocent.”
Understood. Mission reminder. Primary, upload data to server then destroy data recording device. First Secondary, eliminate courier. Second secondary, find and eliminate data compromise. You have one hour to comply with first two objectives.”

Click. Victor swallowed hard as he looked at the phone that gently shook in his hand. One hour to comply. His stomach announced its emptiness and focused his confused mind.

“No use deciding on an empty stomach.” Victor commented to himself as he walked to the room phone and dialed the reception.

“Reception, Betty speaking, how may I help you?” Betty’s voice was cheerful, yet made no dent in Victor’s somber mood.

“This is room 303. Can you send some tuna sandwiches, salad, and orange juice up to our room please?” On hearing Victor’s voice Betty’s face lit up, and she whispered. “Would that be for one or two people?”

“Two… one… sorry, make it two.”

“I will have the chef prepare it right away.”

“Oh, and have them leave it outside the door, we wish not to be disturbed. I will pick it up when ready.”

“Okay.” Disappointment filled Betty’s voice.

With shoulders hanging, Victor walked to the couch and slumped down in it. He dragged his backpack closer, then took out his 9mm Beretta and checked that the magazine was full, and a round chambered. Slowly, he placed the pistol on his lap, then reached over and grabbed a small couch cushion and placed it over the pistol. A cushion makes a good silencer. For a moment, Victor stared at the TV cabinet and wall clock against the wall across from him, then closed his eyes and leaned back. One hour to comply.
Inside the bathroom, Black Orchid and Juniper oil fragrance filled the air and gently teased Laura’s nose. The soap bubbles tickled her buttocks as she slowly lowered herself into the warm bath. The water worked the kinks out in her neck and shoulders while the fragrance calmed her senses. Laura took a deep breath, and then scooped water into her hands and splashed her face. She kept her hands to her face for a moment, and then eyes closed slid back into the neck deep water, while her mind watched reruns of her life.

For five years, she had worked at a public library, and then it was gone in a day. Laura loved the library far more than the job her dad found her at Wendy’s when she graduated high school. Flipping burgers was fun for a while, but two years, that was too much. That’s where she met Randydawn. For years, he tried to date her, but failed. Then a week after her parent’s burial, she gave in to a dinner invitation. How it progressed to dating, Laura would never know. He was an ex-high school football player who became a washout, drunk, and woman beater. Six months of hell she had with him. Laura’s body shivered and quickly she pulled her thoughts back to the library. The library job was perfect for her, and she spent most of her time there quenching her thirst for ancient legends of lost treasures and mythological heroes.

That was until two weeks ago. She knew something was wrong that rainy Friday morning when she walked into the library. The look her manager gave her when he called her to his office. Budged cuts he explained, then gave her a check for two months and the door. She grabbed the check and stormed out. She was not mad about the money. $50,000 of her savings made her bank manager smile, no, she was mad because she was the only one fired while she worked the hardest. She raced home to tell Suzy her roommate whom Laura shared an apartment with since her parents’ brutal death.
That dreadful day her parents died, Laura was waiting at work for her parents to pick her up. They were going to celebrate her mother’s birthday, but fate intervened. A municipal garbage truck sped down the road at full speed, skipped a traffic light and slammed into her parent’s car, and crushed them to death.

It was later discovered that an 18-year-old kid stole the truck after he had robbed a local convenience store, while he was high on a mixture of cocaine and crystal meth. He thought that he was being chased by the police, and tried to outrun them when he skipped the traffic light. The flashing lights he saw were in fact the truck’s warning lights he had accidentally activated when he stole the truck and struggled to get it started. Suzy suggested Laura move in with her, on the day of Laura’s parents’ burial, and Laura immediately accepted. Suzy was her only family now.

Sadness had filled Laura’s heart when she found the apartment void of Suzy’s energetic spirit the day she got home from being fired. Suzy always laughed and giggled and was never angry, except that day Laura had told her that Randydawn was using her rib cage as a punch bag. The hate that dripped from Suzy’s eyes when Laura showed Suzy her bruised body, would be edged into Laura’s memory for ever. Suzy took care of it, as she often did since Laura moved in. But the day Laura got fired, Suzy was not at hand. A wine stained, quickly scribbled note on the kitchen table hinted at Suzy’s whereabouts. She was spending the weekend in Florida, on her new boyfriend’s yacht.
Laura was in desperate need of consoling and turned to her only other option. Nick, a software engineer who lived in Spain, and Laura’s only online pen pal. She had met Nick three months ago online when Suzy suggested that online chat with men would help her get over Randydawn abusing her. Nick was always available for a chat, and their messages went from exciting daily news, to just the routine hello, much to Suzy’s dismay. Laura was just not ready to trust a man again, no matter how funny and sincere he sounded.

Laura had wasted no time telling Nick about being fired, who to Laura’s shock, was delighted about the news.

“Now you can get your nose out of those dusty books.” He had said. Then he dropped a bomb on Laura. “Come visit me in Spain.” Laura quickly replied with a single, NO. However, Nick shifted gears smoothly and suggested a weeklong Caribbean ocean liner vacation to clear her head, then to visit him. To sweeten the deal, he quickly offered to pay all her expenses. Laura was still typing her 'Maybe' reply when Nick cut the chat short. A minute later, an email proudly announced itself with a chime. It was her ocean liner booking confirmation that Nick had just made.

The shock was too great and Laura rushed to the phone. She only ever called Suzy when Suzy was on a date, when a crisis loomed, and this was a catastrophe. Through tears, Laura brought Suzy up to speed, and then Suzy dropped the second bomb of the day on Laura.
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

“You’re going, end of story. We’ll pack when I return. I’ll pick you up some proper man hunting clothes, see you Monday, bye, love you lots, got to go.” The weekend dragged by as Laura measured every room with her feet. Since her teens, she had always wanted to see the exotic Cayman Islands, but not alone. Monday evening Suzy stumbled into the flat under the weight of multiple shopping bags, she had a complete new wardrobe for Laura to take with. Laura drove herself crazy by constantly packing and unpacking, until Suzy stepped in and packed Laura’s bags, then locked them. Three days later FedEx dropped the package off that was the catalyst for the events that brought her sitting in a bath in the Cayman Islands.

Laura sighed and skimmed a few soap bubbles onto her hands, then playfully blew it into the air. A smile graced her lips as she took a bar of apricot scented soap on the side of the bath and gave herself a quick wash, then stood up and rinsed herself off under the shower as the bath water disappeared down the drain. A soft and fluffy towel glided over her body as she dried herself off. Quickly Laura got dressed. The blue denim shorts molded themselves around her buttocks, while the tight fitting soft pink T-shirt with a pink glitter heart around each of her breasts, announced her assets, Suzy style. Laura pressed her lips together, and her face reddened slightly when she looked down. Her nipples hinted their presence through her T-shirt. For a moment, Laura stood undecided about what to do. Her heart slightly raced as she took a breath, smiled, and stepped out of the bathroom.

Victor did not move when Laura opened the bathroom door.
"All yours," Came Laura’s soft voice from the bedroom while she dried her hair with a towel. Victor’s nose picked up Laura’s fresh smell, and he closed his eyes as he took a deep breath. His heart was torn in two as Laura came to stand next to him. Slowly, he looked up at her. Her red hair was hanging loosely over her shoulders while an unpainted radiant face smiled down on him. The tight shorts and T-shirt showed her slender figure perfectly. Barefoot, she was the perfect girl next door. No, no, she is just another girl, orders are orders, and there are more at stake than one girl.

Laura’s heart skipped a beat when Victor slowly stood up and faced her. She moistened her lips while he secretly pulled the hammer back on the pistol and slowly brought the cushion up to stomach height. The barrel of the pistol lightly pressed into the cushion while their eyes met. Laura’s eyes sparkled, and for a moment neither moved. One hour to comply. The pistol rocked three times in his hand. The smell of burned gunpowder filled the air as Laura stumbled backwards while clutching her stomach. Her eyes widened and her lips trembled when she took her shaking hands away. Crimson blood dripped off them, her blood. Death’s cold fingers closed around her spine and turned her legs to jelly. Blood ran over Laura’s lips from her open mouth as she dropped to her knees. Tears filled her pleading eyes as she searched for a hint of love in his. Soulless eyes stared at her as he slowly leveled the pistol at her head. Laura desperately called his name.

"Victor, please, Victor VICTOR." Victor jumped from shock.

"What who what?" Victor’s chests heaved while sweat ran down his white face where he sat shaking, and sweat drenched, on the couch

"You were dreaming." Laura explained softly from where she stood in front of him. Victor swallowed, then slowly reached up with his left hand and wiped the sweat from his brow. The pistol was cold and damp in his right hand, still under the cushion.
“What is, one hour to comply?” Laura slightly tilted her head.

Victor glanced at the clock on the wall. 10 minutes left. His eyes flowed over her and followed the tight shorts that hugged her firm buttocks, and then continued up the tight T-shirt, past her erect nipples to her smiling and inviting lips. Laura shook her head, and her red hair flowed through the air. A few leftover droplets of water landed on Victor’s face as he slowly stood up. Her heart fluttered when Victor leaned forward until his lips gently touched her right ear. His breathing tickled her neck and sparked warmth deep in her as he took two deep breaths that filled his lungs of her scent. Laura pressed her lips together in eager anticipation when he slowly brought the pistol up. The choice was clear.

“You smell wonderful.” Victor whispered in her ear as he tucked the pistol in the back of his pants. Slowly, Laura turned her head and kissed him. For a few seconds their lips revealed their eagerness for each other’s body, and then slowly Laura pulled her head back and looked at Victor. His soul cried inside him at what was in front of him. A pure soul, and love, love for him. Victor placed his left hand behind Laura’s back and pulled her tightly against him, then kissed her passionately while he ran his right hand through her hair. Laura’s head started to spin, and a waterfall raged in her ears while her heart was beating its way through her chest. When Laura swallowed and moaned softly, Victor pulled away and looked into her lust-filled eyes while he softly said, “There is food outside by the door. I’ll not be long, and then I’ll tell you all.”
Laura stood frozen as Victor released her and walked to the bathroom. Slowly she brought her left hand to her lips and touches them softly. Her legs were soft, licorice sticks as she walked to the kitchen, and she found herself sitting on her buttocks giggling, when the TV cabinet jumped in front of her. Laura quickly placed her hands over her mouth to smother her giggles. *I am like a little school girl before a first date. What if Victor sees me?* With a quickened pulse she floated on cloud nine to the kitchen table and sat down. Laura waited until she could hear shower water running in the bathroom before she opened the door and brought in the welcome food.

Inside the bathroom, the warm shower water rippled over Victor’s bulging muscles as he balled his fists. Lock jawed, he heaved through flared nostrils as his eyes threw death. This whole mission was a setup and a lie. Everything he now knew came from outside sources, and all pointed to something far larger than what he was told. In fact, even what he now knew, was only the tip of a massive conspiracy. He took a deep breath, held it, and then slowly let it out as he looked up into the bathroom mirror. *They will come for you, and her. I know. What then? Kill them all.* They made a mistake by trying to force him to kill her. In one hour, he went from their top asset, to their top target and deadliest threat. For a minute, Victor let the water calm him down, and then quickly he showered and dressed. Black jeans and a black tight fitting under armor sweatshirt showed every muscle as he stepped out of the bathroom.

Laura looked up and smiled at him when he entered the kitchen. Slowly he scanned the table. Laura had already neatly decorated the table with the food he ordered. Deep in thought, he watched her take another bite of her sandwich as he sat down. *Why me? She is so innocent, and I have so much blood on my hands.* Victor picked up a glass from the table, and took a big gulp of orange juice Laura had already poured for him.

“Why did you not kill me that first night? You killed everyone else.” Victor froze, and then took another gulp of juice before he answered.
“Because of your passenger ID card.”
“My ID card? I don’t understand.”
“My target was not given to me before the mission. I had to wait until I was given a location of my target, then eliminate the target and retrieve the data or destroy it.”
“But I had nothing to do with anything.” Laura said defensively.
“Correct. When I looked at you and saw the ID card on the table, I stopped. I knew someone either screwed up or lied to me. And then those goons showed up.”
“But why were you ordered to kill me if I did not know about the data?”
“Because you mailed the necklace back to Nick. I only found that out later. The necklace was a signal to a freelance rogue spy Nick hired, who would follow you and steal the pen.”
“Nick asked me to wear the necklace when I boarded the ship.” Laura thought aloud.
“And when you did not, only the Russians knew what you looked like. They got your details from his computer, and knew you were not the spy, but thought you knew about the data, and what it was stored on. They reasoned that they could just scare you with thugs to give the data to them. Those were the guys who approached you on the deck. We knew not of them.”
“That explains them coming for me, but why were you told to kill me?”
“I was on standby, while a second contractor looked for you and the spy. He was to give the location of the spy to me when the spy obtained the data. When you did not emerge by wearing the necklace, he followed the Russians in hope of locating the spy. When he later saw the Russian follow you; he assumed he missed the girl with the necklace and that you where the spy.”
“Then why target me on the deck?”
“My contact had to make sure you had the data and thus kept on following the Russians to learn when the exchange would occur. Most of them were at a bar when one came in and reported that you were alone on the top deck. My contact then overheard an order to get the data from you.”

“That’s when you were given the order?”

“Yes, I was immediately sent your location and told the spy had the data. From there, things just went sideways.”

“Who was Nick then?”

“Long story, let’s move to the living room.” Victor said, then got up and led Laura to the couch. As they sat down, Victor continued.

“Nick was a world-class freelance Internet hacker that managed to hack just about every government’s secret files, and found a file with a list of 500 names and pictures of various government agents, with a full dossier on each of them, including who were double agents.”

“So that is what this is all about, double agents?”

“That is only part of it.” Victor replied, and then waited a few seconds before he continued.

“What he also managed to do was, when the US government hired him to help secure their nuclear missile launch programs, he implanted hidden code that would allow someone to remotely access and override the governments’ control over the missiles by using a specific program he wrote. That program is also on the Micro SD-card. If the Russians or any other nation for that matter, got hold of the program, it would allow them to fire any US nuclear missile from any Internet access point at any target of their choice.” Victor took a deep breath, and then waited a moment for the information to sink in.
“Nick contacted the Russian government with the information and tried to sell it to them. They agreed to meet, but Nick got scared. That’s when he set you up. He bought you a ticket for a cruise and sent you a parcel containing some items. He then hired the spy to do the exchange, and informed the Russians that he would have a contact on the ship with the data. As soon as the Russians transferred the money to his account, he would inform the spy to give them the disc.”

Laura’s eyes widened as Victor spoke, and she started to turn white while fear choked her. Laura thought about all she had heard, and then replied, “So what government do you work for?”

Victor laughed, and then replied. “I am freelance, and it is a bit more complicated than you think, the Micro SD-card contains more than just the list of names and a program.” Laura gave Victor a puzzled look, but waited for him to continue.

“My orders were two-part. The first part was the elimination of the spy, believed to be an international freelance terrorist.”

“And the second part was retrieving the data?”

“Yes, I was hired by the Vatican. The Vatican found out about the data, and wanted me to retrieve, or destroy it. As long as no one got it.”

“Why would the Vatican be interested in the identities of secret agents and spies and nuclear missile codes?” Laura asked in surprise.

“They are not, except to maybe sell it to the US government, but what they are actually after is this file.” Victor had retrieved a file on his phone while he talked, and opened the word document. Laura looked at the file, then at Victor, then at the file again.
“It’s clues to a lost city and treasure.” Laura gasped, and then continued. “These directions suggest Vilcabamba, the last Inca stronghold. The legends say that a vast treasure was buried by the king Manco Inca before the Spanish overrun his defenses.” Laura slowly folded her arms across her chest, and then thought for a moment before she spoke.

“So the Vatican is after treasure then?” Disgust spread over Laura’s face.

“Not actually.”

Victor smiled when she gave him a confused look.

“There is more, right?” Laura was now intrigued.

“Yup, it is said that hidden with the treasure are ancient scrolls from the lost city of Atlantis.” Laura was overcome by laughter and it took her a good minute before she could ask. “So what exactly are these scrolls supposed to contain, another lost treasure?”

“Death,” Victor’s stern look and his answer drained the blood from Laura’s face.

“The Atlantians apparently had technology far beyond what we even have today. They found a way to harness the power of the God particle and use it to create devices of immense power, for war and to power their ships.” Laura’s mouth fell open, and for a moment, she was speechless.

“God particle?” Laura finally managed.

“It’s actually currently called the Higgs like particle by scientists, but the media have dubbed it the God particle since its announcement on 4 July 2012.”

“Still lost.”
“Scientists have known that the original formulas for the standard model for elementary particles are not complete for a long time. They know there must be a twelfth particle, but they can only find eleven. The scrolls describe the twelfth particle, and how to harness its power. For years, scientists have been looking for this missing particle in order to harness its power. The discovery of the atom bomb was actually a result of this research. Not until now, have scientists been able to find the missing particle. Even so, finding the missing particle is nothing if you don’t know how to harness its power. The method of harnessing this power is contained in the scrolls, and everyone wants it at all cost.” Laura thought for a moment about Victor’s explanation.

“Okay, so who are these scientists that found the particle, and if the scrolls are lost in some treasure in a lost city in Peru, how do they know what is on the scrolls and how did it get in Peru in the first place?”

“Want something to drink?” Victor stood up and walked to the kitchen.

“What? You don’t know do you?”

“I do, but I like the suspense,” Victor laughed, then winked over his shoulder at Laura.

“Orange juice please,” Laura replied, then softly said. “This is like Indiana Jones and Lara Croft working together.” I would so love to go looking for this lost city, a dream come true.

“Here you go.” Victor sat down and handed her a glass, then continued. “The scientists who discovered the particle are from CERN.”

“European Organization for Nuclear Research in Geneva, Switzerland, it houses a large Hadron Collider to study particle physics.” Laura proudly cut in.

“Correct.”

“Okay, and what about the scrolls?” Laura was intrigued and moved closer to Victor.
“In April 1532, Francisco Pizarro arrived at the edge of the City Tumbez, ready to conquer Peru in the name of the Spanish King. He had 168 men with him, 106 on foot, and 62 on horseback. On 16 November 1532, Francisco managed to capture the then current Inca lord, Atahualpa, and killed many of his nobles and troops.

“Atahualpa promised a roomful of gold for his release, and he made good on his promise. More than forty thousand pounds of gold and silver were melted down from plates and goblets and other Inca ornaments by the Spanish. However, as all generals know, you never give all you have in the first bargain, and the Spanish wanted more.

“They eventually killed Atahualpa on the eve of Saturday, 26 July 1533 due to the fear of him being rescued by his men, brought on by false rumors. A full out war erupted between the Spanish and Incas and the Spanish placed a puppet king named Manco Inca, to try and stop an uprising.

“However, Manco Inca turned against the Spaniards and started a rebellion in November 1535. He led successful guerrilla attacks against Spanish troops on the roads and retreated deep into the jungle, building Vilcabamba El Viejo, the last Inca city.

“While at the heights of the war a badly damaged Spanish ship beached on the Peru coastline. The crew of the ship had come across ruins from an ancient city on their search, but suffered damage to their ship in storms.”

“Where did the ship come from?” Laura hung on Victor’s lips.

“Records were lost as to who they were and where they came from, but what is known is that they had treasure and many scrolls with them from a lost world. Packing all the important items they had with them on horses, they made their way to the Spanish encampment and port to ask for help on returning to Spain. One of the Spanish was a scribe, and he made partial copies in a notebook from the scrolls in their possession.
“While on route to Cusco, they were ambushed by Manco Inca’s warriors and all were killed, and their treasure and the scrolls were taken. The Inca warriors left the bodies in the road as a message to the Spanish about what lot would befall all the Spanish that opposed the Inca King Manco. A later scout group from the Spanish found the bodies and the notebook on the scribe.

“The book was sent to Rome, where over the years the drawings and signs he copied from the scrolls were deciphered, and the existence of the twelfth particle was learned. His notes showed partial drawings that would enable one to harness the new particle and create a device that could generate an immense power from a very small device. This would allow one to power massive ships or to build shockingly powerful bombs.

“What is more worrisome is that this bomb will not leave a radioactive signature as a nuclear bomb, thus whoever uses it can bomb another country today, and simply move in tomorrow to claim what is left.”

Laura moved her knees over Victor’s legs, and then wide-eyed asked, “So how does the Vatican know about this and how do they know the scrolls are not destroyed, or that it is even in the lost city?”

“A young, ambitious captain named Villiadiego tried to attack Vilcabamba with 30 men. He failed miserably and was killed along with 28 of his men. Only two men escaped by running away and swimming across a river to safety. They reported that amidst the fighting, they saw massive amounts of gold being brought into the city by hand couriers and one of them reported seeing a casket being carried.
“During the fighting a Spanish horse ran wild after its rider was killed and crashed into the Incas carrying the casket, causing them to drop the casket. The casket broke open, and the man recalled scrolls seemingly very old falling out, one of which rolled open, and the men recalled drawings and writings that matched those in the dead scribe’s notebook.” Laura’s eyebrows dipped for a moment while she gently bit her lip.

“Yes, but the Spanish conquered Vilcabamba and no treasure were ever found, nor any scrolls, and it does not explain why the Vatican is involved.” Victor nodded his agreement, and then took a sip of juice.

“No, they did not find any treasure when they conquered the city, however from torturing some of the survivors, they learned that the Inca king buried it underground outside the city, but after the work was done, he had all the men killed that did the work by placing them on the front lines of defending the city when it came under attack, thus no one knew where it was buried.

“The Spanish force that conquered the city had limited food supplies and also needed to return to Cusco. Thus, they left the lost city. The notebook interestingly, was given to the Vatican to decipher as they were thought to have the best knowledge of ancient languages at that time.

“Over the years, knowledge that they have this information was kept from the government, and the location of the hidden city was kept secret, so that no other country could find it until technology allowed them to do a more thorough search.

“In the years that they translated the notebook, they worked secretly with scientists in trying to invent the device, hoping that they could use it to crush other religions by sending agents into the heart of other churches and wiping them out. Imagine the repercussions for the Jewish belief if a bomb exploded on their yearly pilgrimage, taking out the whole of Jerusalem?” Laura’s eyes widened and her face turned white. For a moment, she was deep in thought.
“That sounds like the crusades, nothing really changed, save the tactics.” Victor nodded his agreement.

“Do you think the Vatican would do something like that?” Laura asked softly.

“In the 1500s when the existence of the scrolls were first discovered, maybe. However, now all they wish to do is hide it from others that are not as tolerant with different religious believes, that would use it for harm.”

“So how do you know all of this, and where did you get the files?”

“When I saw you sitting carefree on the deck, I knew something was up. I took pictures of the men I killed, and sent them with a picture of you to outside contacts of mine. I also started to dig around to try and find out what was actually going on. The reason I was hired by the Vatican is that they want to keep all of this secret.”

“Okay, and?”

“The Vatican was afraid that the information in the scribe’s notebook may be leaked by book restorers if they kept the notebook. They decided to make digital scans of the book and then destroyed it. Nick hacked into the Vatican servers for fun, and stole a number of data files, one of which was this one, containing the partial translation of the scrolls and what it can do, including the location of the hidden city.

“He tried to sell it to the Russians with the other files. The Vatican wanted to search for the lost treasure long ago, but government changes over the years in Peru before they managed to translate the information and discover its importance, stopped them from doing any large-scale search without raising suspicion.

“When Vilcabamba was discovered by Harim Binga, they sent people to look for any sign of the underground passages, but have not been able to find any. All was secret until Nick stole the files.
“An agent in the KGB, secretly loyal to the Vatican, heard that Nick was trying to sell the information to the Russians, and informed the Vatican. The Vatican was afraid that the Russians would enter the lost city, find the scrolls, and build the device. Thus, I was hired to retrieve the data or destroy it. An unknown party requested the elimination of the spy, not the Vatican, but I believe they do not mind seeing a spy turned international terrorist, take the road to hell. When I went to the radio tower of the ocean liner, my aim was just to eliminate my target, before the Russians got to ask any questions.”

“The data is on a Micro SD-card inside the pen Nick sent you, and not on a CD as everyone thought it was. I copied the data the evening you gave me the pen to sign for dinner. I tripped Sam to create a distraction to allow me to copy the data.”

“What?” Laura pressed her lips together while her eyes narrowed.

“You tripped poor Sam?” Victor swallowed uneasily under Laura’s demanding eyes.

“Well, uh..” Victor sighed when Laura smiled and leaned over and warmed his cheek with her lips.

“I was so mad at you; sorry I overreacted and left you in the dining room.”

“And I am sorry I did not come after you when you walked out.”

Laura’s heart fluttered while their eyes flirted. Gently she licked her lips and wetted them, then brought them towards Victor’s.

“Pick me up pick me up.” Laura jumped and held her hands over her pounding heart.

“That is your ringtone?” She giggled. Victor just shrugged his shoulders and answered his phone. Respecting people’s privacy, Laura stood up and made her way to the balcony while Victor talked.
Laura took a deep breath and let the cool sea breeze fill her lungs as she admired the scene in front of her. The full moon danced over the calm ocean while soft Jamaican music from the bar smoothed the night air. Her pulse quickened, and she smiled as Victor’s left hand softly glided over her stomach and his hard body pressed against her back.

“And?” Laura’s voice was honey.

“Your sandman from the ocean liner is a KGB agent. Two police officers tried to arrest him at the harbor when he stepped off his lifeboat. He killed them, and then stole a police boat moored nearby. A fishing boat later reported that he raced westwards past them towards Cozumel, Mexico.”

“Why is he going to Mexico?”

“I think he is making his way to Peru in search of the scrolls. The data files of the 500 spies and the program to control the US missiles, are too large to have been sent electronically in the time he had. Cuba would have been a better option if he was going to exchange the data. I think he managed to send the riddle of the location of the scrolls to his handlers, and was ordered to find it.”

“What happens if he finds the scrolls Victor?”

“If he manages to find it, the Russian government would smuggle the scrolls, and the treasure out, and kill anyone that gets in the way. With the funds from selling the treasure on the black market, they could decipher the scrolls and build powerful weapons, and then the world will be no more.”

“You think he can find the scrolls?”

“He would not have been sent if his superiors were not confident in him finding it.”

“Are you going after him?” A hint of sadness curled around Laura’s words.
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

“He is heading into a storm with a boat not build for it that will slow his progress considerably. I can be in Cancun before him if I take an early flight tomorrow, then locate him and retrieve the data before he can pass it on. From there I will make my way to Peru to try and find the scrolls.” Laura slowly closed her eyes, and then took a deep breath.

“What does one hour to comply, mean?” Victor’s body jerked against hers, and his unease crawled over her shoulders.

“It means I was given one hour to kill you tonight, or become a target myself.” Laura swallowed hard.

“How long do I have?”

“That time passed when we kissed earlier.”

Laura’s heart leaped, and a tear of joy rolled down her cheek. Her head tingled as Victor gently ran his right hand through her hair. Slowly, Laura closed her eyes and leaned her head forwards, exposing her neck to Victor’s soft lips. He caressed her neck from the ear down to the base of her neck, where her heart fluttered. Electricity rippled gently through her with each soft kiss. Laura’s mouth watered and she swallowed as Victor’s left hand glided over her breasts, massaging them gently.

Slowly, she turned her head and their lips eagerly embraced. Laura moaned softly as Victor played with her nipples, pinching them lightly that send shockwaves down to her core. Laura’s breathing hastened as Victor gently skimmed his hand over her ribs, down and around to her buttocks, and squeezed it. He slid his right hand around to her apex and started to massage her gently through her pants as he increased the pressure ever so slightly. Laura’s body burned with desire, and she quivered in delight while her entire body focused on what Victor was doing to her. She gave a moan and swallowed.
Her heart was beating wildly as her hips started to move and pressed against Victor’s hand. Slowly, he unbuttoned her pants and smoothly glided his hand over her womanly folds while he increased the pressure of his hand at the point. Pleasure rippled through her body as Victor continued his onslaught on her senses. Laura tensed her muscles at the anticipation of what was to come.

Victor’s stimulation became too much for her, and she gasped as she exploded. With Victor’s name on her lips, she drifted up into the clouds. Her knees buckled slightly under her and Victor held her up until she came down from her high, before he started to undress her. The moonlight reflected off her smooth skin, and the night breeze caresses her breasts as Victor pulled her T-shirt over her head. Laura turned to Victor and ripped his shirt off, then ran her fingers eagerly over every rippling muscle and eagerly unbuttoned his pants. As their clothes dropped, he pulled her tightly against him and passionately kissed her.

His warm manhood pressed hard against her while her nipples poked him. Victor slid his hand down her throat towards the soft globes of her breasts. Laura responded with a moan and arched backwards as she gave Victor full access to her breasts. He slowly took a nipple into his mouth and swirled his tongue around it, before sucking harder. Laura cradled his head to her and held him in place. She moaned as Victor released her nipple and moved over to suckle on the other nipple.

Victor slowly dropped down and left a trail of kisses over her stomach, then slowly spread her legs. Laura closed her eyes as Victor’s hot searing tongue touched her swollen womanhood. Laura involuntarily bucked against Victor as he pressed against her stomach while he gently licked and sucked her, driving her over the edge. Laura gasped and clenched her teeth while she grabbed onto the railing for support as her body exploded.
Slowly Victor stood up and turned Laura around to face the ocean, then embraced her. He bent her slightly over and pushed against her soft womanly folds with his hard manhood. A moan escaped her lips as his hard long manhood slowly entered her to her fullest. Victor started to move slowly as he massaged her left breast with his one hand while he stimulated the tip of her womanhood with his other. Rhythmically they moved together and increased the pace. Laura’s heart raced. Her breathing was fast as she raced towards her climax. She let out a cry of pleasure as they let go together. Intense heat rippled from deep inside her, up into her body. For a moment, they stood motionless as pleasure washed over them. Then, as Laura’s legs finally gave in, Victor gently picked her up and carried her to the bed.

Victor cradled Laura against him while their breathing slowed down as he rubbed his hand up and down her back. They rolled playfully on the bed, with Laura ending on top. Laura smiled when she noticed Victor was ready for another round. She lifted herself on top of him and moaned as his hard manhood slid once more all the way into her. She licked her soft lips and wetted them, then arched her back. Victor’s hands quickly found her breasts and massaged them gently. Slowly, Laura leaned forward and their lips met. Victor embraced her and as she started to ride him, he moved his hand down to her buttocks, squeezing harder now as she rocked her body rhythmically backwards and forwards. Her breasts slightly swayed, and her nipples still tingled from the earlier onslaught as they brushed against his chest with each rocking motion.
Laura closed her eyes and pressed her lips tightly together while she grabbed the sheets as intense pleasure rippled through her body, exploding from deep inside her as she went over the edge. Victor followed her shortly as she clenched around his manhood and send him over the edge. Their muscles stiffened as pleasure hit them wave after wave. Gasping and exhausted, Laura slumped down on Victor’s chest. For a while, Laura lay motionless as her heart raced and occasional tremors rippled through her body. Slowly, she rolled off and softly moaned as Victor slid out of her, feeling the intense loss. They lay facing each other for a while, and listened to each other’s breathing as it slowed.

“Join me when I go to Peru to track down the treasure and scrolls.” Laura’s eyes filled with joy, and a smile graced her lips. She felt unbelievably good, clean, loved, and unviolated. So this is how it feels to make love to a sober man. Laura reached over and hugged Victor tightly.

“Oh yes.” She whispered, then rested her head on Victor’s chest and let fairyland slowly fill her dreams with knights in shining armor and white horses. Victor took a deep breath, and then gently glided his fingers over Laura’s naked body. He graced her lips with a light kiss, and then closed his eyes. If I can stop the KGB agent from passing on the data, and find the scrolls, I can bargain it for Laura’s life.
Chapter 9: Death Has Come For You

The open curtains rhythmically danced with the playful Caribbean early-morning breeze, while the full moon gently smiled over the two naked bodies in embrace.

Nnneaoowww.

Victor’s eyes shot open as the low-altitude deployment airplane flew over the building. His heart beat wildly in his chest as his ears waited for the dreadful sound.

Splash, vrooom.

Victor swallowed hard. They are here already? Gently he pulled his arm out from under Laura, who rolled over, grabbed his pillow, and pulled it tightly against her naked body. Victor softly glided his fingers over her, and slowly Laura woke up with a smile and placed her hand lovingly on Victor’s.

“We have to go. They’re here.” Laura’s face went white and she jumped out of the bed. Quickly they got dressed as a hit squad, dropped out of the airplane, made their way in a small pontoon boat to the beach. The men in the boat emotionlessly looked at each other; they were ready. Each wore a black bulletproof jacket, an assortment of hand grenades, night-vision goggles, and was armed with two silenced Heckler & Koch MP5K sub machine guns and a silenced 9mm Beretta sidearm.

“Laura, go hide in the bathroom.” Victor whispered as he removed a seven inch, double edged titanium knife from his backpack. His pulse slightly raced as he clipped the knife to the top of his T-shirt at his back.

Click click.
The sound ripped through the air as Victor pulled the slide of his 9mm Beretta halfway back, noted the round in the chamber, and then released the slide again. Laura’s heart ran wild circles in her chest, while her body shook lightly as she peeked out of the bathroom door. Laura gasped as Victor picked up the cushion in the living room and held it in front of his pistol. He really had a pistol under the cushion when he kissed me. Laura’s heart stopped each time the wind tugged at the curtains.

Tik, tik, creeee.

Laura softly gasped as the kitchen door’s lock was picked and the door slowly opened. Victor took a deep breath, and pressed himself against the television cabinet. Laura bit her thumb to stop a scream from escaping. Two men, illuminated by moonlight, inched their way through the kitchen to the living room, night vision activated. The first man stopped in the archway as he saw Laura peeking out the bathroom. Laura jumped as Victor spun into the man’s path and leveled the cushion just below stomach level. Victor’s pistol rocked four times while he pushed the man backwards into his teammate. The bullets passed below the armor and tore the man’s inside open, who let out an ear-piercing scream that ripped through the night.

Thud thud thud.

Bullets flew through the air as his teammate, off balanced, fired into the roof. Victor quickly brought his pistol up and offloaded three rounds into the man’s head through the night-vision goggles.

“Behind you.” Laura shouted as a man entered the living room from the balcony. Laura’s voice stopped the man and he immediately spun to face the bathroom. Laura choked as his gun locked onto her chest.

“Aaahhh.” The man uttered as the living room lights blinded him while strong hands gripped his arms and jerked up.

Thud thud thud.
Laura ducked with a scream as bullets tore the bathroom up above her head. Victor locked the trigger with his index finger and jerked the gun’s barrel to face up.

Shuh shuh shuh.

The sickening sound filled the room as bullets tore through the man’s chin and exited in a pink cloud at the top. Lifelessly his mangled corpse dropped to the floor as Victor quickly slid his silenced 9mm Beretta and spare magazines from his hip pocket. Victor flipped the room lights off again, and then made his way to Laura. He dropped his pistol into his backpack and used the silenced pistol he took of the dead man. The pistol followed his eyes as he searched the room while he had his back against Laura. Soft fingers tickled his face, and then quickly pulled away crimson tipped.

“Not mine.” Victor’s voice barely drifted two feet. Five minutes agonizingly dragged by in silence.

“Strange, normally there are four.” His voice made three feet, and Laura leaned in and touched his ear with her lips.

“You sound offended.” Victor bit his teeth to stop him from bursting out into laughter, and then scanned the room with narrowed eyes for a few minutes more. He jerked as a damp cloth covered his face. Laura gently wiped the blood off his face and neck, and then dropped the cloth in the basin.

“Stay behind me.” Slowly, Victor inched his way to the kitchen door, with Laura almost on top of him.

“Where are we going?”
“To get a car. We have to leave the island tonight.”
“How?”
“By boat.”
“Can’t we fly?”
“Too risky.”

Victor scanned the walkway, before they tiptoed out of the apartment. They took the stairs, and with hearts racing, they made their way down. Victor’s eyes narrowed as he peered around the corner into the empty hallway. His pistol followed his eyes, ready to send a message of death at command.
“Clear.” Victor whispered and stepped to the right, into the hallway.

Ping.

Victor spun around, pistol ready as the elevator announced its arrival. His heart raced as the elevator doors slowly opened, and light flooded the hallway. Victor squinted as his finger tightened on the trigger. Who is in the elevator?

“Drop the pistol or I kill the girl.” Victor swallowed as he spun to face the voice that came from the stairs. A hitman stood one-step above Laura, his pistol against her temple. Laura’s body shook and her eyes pleaded at Victor to save her.

“Pistol, on the ground, now.” The man gave Laura’s head a slight push with his pistol. Victor clenched his jaw as he reluctantly dropped to his knees and placed the pistol on the ground. He took a deep breath and slowly stood up, then placed his hands behind his head.

“You should have killed her.” A grin spread on the hitman’s face as he changed his aim from Laura to Victor. The man’s eyes widened as Victor’s knife flew through the air and cut deep into his throat. Pain filled him as Laura dropped her fist into his groin before she dropped to her knees. The man choked as blood ran down his windpipe. His pistol rocked twice in his hand as he aimlessly shot into the hallway. His head jerked as Victor’s palm drove the knife through his neck, severing his spine. His pistol clattered next to him and he dropped to his knees. Horror filled his eyes as Victor spun around and kicked the knife handle with a roundhouse kick that partially severed his neck. As his lifeless body hit the floor, the shock tore the flesh still attaching his head. It rolled forward and stopped against the wall, where dead eyes stared in surprise at the ceiling.

“Stupid, should have expected that.” Victor shook his head, and then cleaned his knife on the dead body, before he picked up the pistol he had placed on the ground.
“Laura.” Victor’s voice was soft, and he held out his hand to her where she stared white faced at the severed head. She took Victor’s hand, and silently they made their way to the parking area. Victor moved to the driver’s door of a white four-door Avis rental car, and broke the lock with his knife. As he jumped in, he reached over and unlocked the door for Laura. Immediately he searched under the steering for the ignition wires.

“Will this help?”
“Where did you get that?”

Laura smiled as she proudly dangled a set of keys in front of Victor.

“My seat, it poked me in the buttocks.” Laughter filled the car and released some of the tension. Victor took the keys and started the car, then turned the car right as he pulled out of the car park onto the main road.

“Where are we going?”

“To the bank.” Victor ignored Laura’s surprised look and stared for a moment out of the window at the dark clouds that started to hold a meeting. Laura placed her head on his shoulder, and Victor responded by sliding his hand over her thigh. Questioning, Laura looked at the road as it passed by.

_The bank?_

“We’re here, I won’t be long.” Victor brought the car to a stop next to a signpost that read ‘Duppies Turn’, then jumped out. Laura’s eyebrows bowed, while she looked around the car. A deserted road with bush on either side greeted her, but no bank. Laura sat upright when her eyes fell on a board that proudly told the story of how the place got its name.

“A young man used the small path that linked up with the main road to visit his girlfriend due to no main roads being available to her house. He came back late one evening just as a storm was starting to move in, with the wind picking up.”

Crack Kabooom.

Laura jerked as thunder close by, shook the windows. She gulped, and continued reading.
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

“A ghost appeared in front of the man on the path. Ghosts were reported widely in the area in those times, and the man was so scared by the ghost that he ran back towards his girlfriend’s house where a friend lived nearby.”

Laura tightly gripped her seat as the wind outside shook the trees. Her heart beat wildly and she swallowed again, bit her lip, and then continued reading.

“He begged his friend to walk with him to the turn. At the exact same spot this board is, they saw a black figure swaying in the road.”

Laura’s heart leaped as she looked around. The car was two feet from the signpost. Icy cold fingers dragged its nails across Laura’s back and she shivered. The hair at the back of her neck stood up as her eyes searched for Victor. Black figures swayed with the wind behind every tree. Laura’s throat closed off as her eyes failed to find Victor. Quickly she reached over and locked Victor’s door, then swallowed as the lock refused to lock. Victor broke it well. Laura’s mind screamed at her to know the lot that befell the two men, and reluctantly she continued reading the story.

“The man and his friend, taking courage by being together, slowly approached the black swaying figure, edging forward foot by foot until they were only 15 feet away. The figure jumped at them, and together they charged it. The silver thatch palm tree that twisted in the breeze, gave in under the men’s weight. Relieved, they discover that the swaying black figure was the leaves that twisted in the wind and went from dark green to silver.

Shoosh.

Laura’s heart stopped as a black thing swooped past her head. Her scream woke the dead when Victor ripped the car door open and threw a bag on the back seat.

“What is it Laura?” Victor’s eyes darted as he quickly scanned the area pistol in hand.
“Shit. You ass.” Laura breathlessly clutched her heart and glared at him. Victor stood dumbfounded frozen by the door. Slowly, he looked at the signpost, and then burst out laughing.

“Get in here.” Laura giggled. As Victor got in, she hugged and kissed him. As she pulled back, Victor started the car, then pointed it in the opposite direction and nailed it.

“What’s inside the bag?”
“Just over a million dollars.”
“Wow.”

Another flash of lighting and roll of thunder pulled Laura’s eyes up at the black clouds that laid siege to the moon.

“Is there a storm coming?”
“Sort of, actually a hurricane.”
“And we’re going by boat?” Laura gasped.

“No worry, this boat can handle it.” Victor’s calm voice failed to reassure Laura. The trees and shrubs on the side of the road made way to houses and shops, that later bowed to three, double story wooden villas as Victor stopped the car under a security light. A water canal in the back, smiled at Laura through a lit pathway next to the villa in front of them. In the dark, a boat on the canal hinted its presence.

“Let’s go meet my friend.” Victor got out, and then opened the door for Laura, who followed him up the stairs to a glass door on the balcony. An open-plan kitchen and living room were dimly illuminated. The glass rattled in complaint as Victor knocked on the door. 30 seconds crawled by, then the glass complained again. A light illuminated the living room from an open door to the right, and slowly an annoyed man in his forties wearing only shorts, sleepily stumbled to the door.

“Wow, have not seen you in a long time. Come in.” Nathaniel smiled as he opened the door.

“Thanks, meet Laura. Laura, this is Nathaniel.” Before Laura could react, Nathaniel gave her a welcome hug.

“Welcome Laura, please call met Nat.” Victor took a seat in the living room with Laura beside him, while Nat leaned on the kitchen counter and stared at them for a moment.
“This is not a social visit, right?”
“We need a boat.”
Nat cracked up and it took him a moment to catch his breath.
“This time of night? You’re crazy, there’s a storm coming, do you know that? Wait until tomorrow.” Laura’s eyes narrowed as she looked at Victor, who ignored her look.
“We have to leave tonight.”
Nat scratched his chin for a moment while he stared at the floor.
“Has this something to do with the ocean liner that sank?”
“Yes.”
Nat glanced at the ominous clouds through the living room windows, then ran his hand through his hair.
“Where to?”
“Cancun.”
“Now I know you’re crazy.” Nat turned and walked to a kitchen cupboard and took out a cup.
“Coffee?” An eager Yes from both made him smile, and he took two more cups out and started a fresh pot of filtered coffee. When the machine started brewing, Nat turned to Victor again.
“You serious?” Victor stood up and placed a stack of money on the table.
“$100,000 dollars cash serious.” Nat’s jaw dropped and a coffee mug almost slipped from his grasp.
“You know it’s going to be a wet and uncomfortable ride?” Victor nodded.
“We need more coffee.” Both smiled, they were always keen for an adventure.
Laura’s silvery voice softly graced the air as she made sandwiches in Nat’s kitchen, while Victor and Nat were getting the boat ready. Nat’s boat was an ex-navy seal attack rib, converted into a 15-seat dive boat. Twin inboard 450 horsepower turbo diesel motors, ran a unique jet drive system each, which rocketed the boat to over 40 knots. With no screws, the boat could run in very shallow water and turn on the spot by placing one jet system in forward and the other in reverse.

“That should do it.” Nat said as they loaded the last of the spare diesel cans on board. He then pressed a button on the control panel, and the sound of hydraulic pumps came from below two steel engine hatch doors, which were situated in the floor directly in front of the boat’s controls. Access to the doors was by a passage cut between the captain and crew’s seat in the console. Slowly the doors opened up and outwards to reveal the engine bay. Laura came down just as Nat finished his inspection of the engines, and stared as the doors closed again.

“You’re going to need these.” Nat opened a door in the console in front of the crew seat, and pulled out foul-weather gear. He gave Laura and Victor each a set and took one for himself.

“You two ready.”

“Ready.” The boat shuddered as the powerful engines came to life. While Victor freed the ropes holding the boat to the dock, Laura took the crew seat and stared at the complicated digital displays across from her. From engine oil pressure and temperature to fuel level were all displayed on two massive LCD displays next to the steering.

Nat activated the radar and digital map to avoid running over boat moorings or small fishing boats in the dark, as he opened the boat up to full speed. Intrigued, Laura stood up and came to stand next to Nat.

“Do you often take people out at night?”
“Yes.” Nat concentrated on the displays as he steered the boat out of the Sound through a reef channel, and into the open ocean.

“Are you a smuggler?” Nat shook as he laughed and it took him a moment before he could reply.

“No, I just like night scuba diving.”

Victor came to stand by them and Laura sat down in the crew seat. The waves increased in size the further they went from land. Rain started to come down softly, and then five minutes later a cloud opened above them. Laura was glad that the canopy fitted to the boat gave them some protection from the downpour as the miles drifted past. Two hours and 70 miles into the trip, Nat backed off the throttle as the waves reached eight feet in height. He activated all his lights to help him see as the rain had turned into a white wall. They still had just over 300 miles to go. Victor’s face became paler each time a wave crashed over the front of the boat and splashed them.

“Are you okay?” Concern filled Laura’s face when Victor stumbled towards one of the pontoons and hung half over the side.

“He doesn’t have sea legs.” Nat laughed as Victor threw his guts into the ocean.

“Just shoot me now.” Victor dropped pale faced down onto the engine bay doors and enjoyed the heat that seeped through. Laura joined him as he pulled a life jacket under his head, and the two huddled up and fell asleep. Nat looked at them sleeping and shook his head. This is not like you Victor. Did she change you? Four hours and 120 miles of hard-earned travel later, they were doing 30 knots with the seas calmer, yet near zero visibility from the relentless downpour.

Beep beep beep.

Immediately Nat slowed the boat down to five knots as a blip appeared on the radar screen. Victor slowly got up as the boat gently rocked in the waves.

“You feeling sorry for me now?”
“No.” Nat laughed, and then continued more seriously. 
“There is a boat up ahead.”
“How far?”
“10 miles.”
“A fishing boat?”
Nat shook his head.
“Not likely, there is nothing out here and the boat is too small for a fishing boat this far out.”
“Where is it heading?”
“Not running, just drifting.”
Victor thought for a moment while he stared into the waves.
“It could be Tornado, the stolen police boat. Open her up and let’s go and have a look.” Victor gently woke Laura, who stretched her sore muscles and yawned.
“Are we there?”
“Not by a long shot.” Victor weakly laughed as his stomach turned, then continued. “You may have a chance to say ‘thank you’ to the man who put you to sleep.”
Laura shivered as she sat down in the crew seat, the engine’s heat was so nice, yet she had to have a front-row seat. Wide-eyed, she stared into the rain as she bit her nails, then stopped, and folded her arms. Sorry mom. Her glance fell on Victor as he made ready to board the boat. Wow, he looks like a pirate with his one leg up on the side of the boat and a pistol in his hand. 17 minutes of agony slowly dragged by, and Laura had to clench her fists to stop from biting her nails. Laura gasped as the boat’s lights fell on a boat bobbing in the waves. That is the boat that Screw picked us up in. The cabin was torn and busted as it sat askew on the boat. All the windows were shattered, and the sliding door was ripped half-open. Of the four outboard engines, only one was still attached to the boat.
“What happened?” Laura asked to no one in particular.
“Pushed the boat too hard and caught a wave wrong, which flip and rolled it.” Nat explained.
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

“The boat has been adrift for hours, let’s see if he survived.” Victor said as Nat brought the two boats alongside each other. Laura brought her hands to her mouth as Victor jumped over to the police boat, and then swallowed hard as Victor inched towards the cabin door. Unnoticed, a shadow moved in the water, and headed to the stern of Nat’s boat. Victor pulled on the torn cabin door, and then gave it a kick. Crap, it is stuck. He changed his grip on his pistol, and then peeked through a window. The cabin was a mess. Papers, emergency gear and other equipment floated in the half-full cabin. Is he under there? Victor returned to the door and strained against it, just as Russtoff silently climbed onto Nat’s boat, and crept up to behind Nat.

Crack.

Laura bit her finger as Victor broke the door open and entered the cabin. Her heart raced as she waited for him to exit.

Splash.

Laura jumped as Russtoff grabbed Nat from behind and threw him overboard. Inside the police boat Victor swallowed, then slowly lifted a life jacket up.

“VICTOR.” Laura’s scream ripped through him and with heart racing, he fought against the hip high water that tried to hold him from her. ‘Hurry, hurry Victor.’

“Shit.” Victor uttered as he landed face first into the door, his foot entangled in life jackets. Get it off, quick, Laura needs you. Adrenaline rushed through his blood as he struggled with the life jackets around his leg.

Ching, VroooommMM.

Victor’s heart stopped when Nat’s boat engines started up. NO Laura. Freed, Victor trashed his way through the water to the door while Russtoff frantically looked for the reverse. Two red and two black levers laughed at Russtoff, and red faced, he ripped the two black levers down just as Victor burst out of the cabin. The boat launched forward just as Victor readied to jump into Nat’s boat.
“Nooo.” Laura screamed as Victor lost his footing and landed on his back on the police boat’s pontoon.

“Piece of shit.” Russtoff growled as he realized pulling backward on the levers was forward. His eyes laughed at Victor as he grabbed the levers and pushed forward.

Dong.

Stars filled Russtoff’s vision as Laura hit him in the face with a small fire extinguisher. Dazed, he stumbled and grabbed onto the seat just as Laura lifted the red bottle again.

“Ummff,” Laura uttered as Russtoff’s fist drove the air from her lungs. The fire extinguisher clattered on the floor and rolled away as Laura dropped to her knees and breathlessly clutched her stomach. Nat’s boat was still slightly inching forward and had started to flip the police boat when Russtoff stumbled back to the controls. An evil smile filled his face as Victor crawled up the pontoon. Russtoff pulled the levers fully back again, and flipped the police boat over.

“Laur… gulp La… gulp.” Victor yelled as he fell back into the cabin, and water drowned him when the boat flipped. Victor swallowed mouthfuls of seawater as he fought his way out of the upturned cabin. Russtoff, in full control of Nat’s boat, reversed it a few feet, then gunned the boat as he steered it to go around the police boat.

“Damn.” Russtoff uttered as a rogue wave slammed into Nat’s boat and caused it to collide against the police boat.

The pontoons complained as the two boats scraped against each other as Russtoff forced Nat’s boats past the police boat. The quick launch caused Laura to tumble and roll to the stern of the boat. Her heart joyfully sang as Victor emerged from the upturned boat just as Nat’s boat passed by.
Quickly she threw him the diving tag line at the back of the boat. Laura’s face turned white as Victor immediately was pulled under and gulped mouth full after mouth full of seawater. Laura’s eyes narrowed as she glanced at Russtoff at the controls, and rage filled her as she jumped up and ran full speed with her shoulder into his back. The steering slammed into Russtoff and drove the air from him as Laura rammed into his back. Breathless, he lay over the controls and Laura quickly hit the large red button labelled. ‘Kill Switch’ in yellow. Russtoff’s eyes went black and his face red as he clenched his fists then shouted. “You annoying bitch.” Then continued as he spun around. “I will k…” Victor’s fist snapped his head back and made him swallow his words. Russtoff fell backwards against the controls, and accidentally activated the engine hatch doors just as two of Victor’s punches landed in his gut. Driven by instinct, Russtoff kicked Victor hard in the stomach, causing Victor to tumble backwards. Breathless, the men stared each other down, and then stormed. Blow for blow they stood their ground, with Russtoff getting the upper hand. Victor’s head spun as two powerful blows caught him in the jaw. Quickly Russtoff went for his opportunity and aimed an open palm at Victor’s throat.

Dong.

Stars again filled Russtoff’s vision, as the red cylinder kissed his face.
“This is for chloroforming me.” Laura yelled as the cylinder glided through the air again. Blood gushed down Russtoff’s face as the second blow broke his nose. Dazed, he fell backwards and on killer instinct gave a wild swing that knocked Laura down. Slowly Russtoff dropped to his knees as he tried to focus. His head snapped back as Victor’s knee smashed into his face. With a thud, Russtoff landed on the floor, his head hanging into the open engine bay. Immediately, Victor was on top of Russtoff, pummelling him. For Russtoff, it was just another day in the yard at the Spetsnaz training center. Killer instinct took over when Victor started to choke him. Automatically he pulled out a small knife and stabbed at Victor’s side. Victor just managed to block the cut, when a punch took him on the jaw. Victor grabbed both Russtoff’s arms by the wrists, and then head butted him.

“Laura close the engine hatch.” Victor yelled as he head butted Russtoff again. Russtoff dropped his head down just as Victor delivered the blow, causing Victor to almost knock himself out. Russtoff grabbed Victor by the back of his neck and pulled his head down, while he brought the knife up. Victor pushed off the floor with his right hand while he tried to push Russtoff’s knife-hand down with his left. Russtoff kneeed him in the side, and Victor almost collapsed into the knife. Hurry Laura hurry. Blood dripped from a cut where the blade nicked Victor’s throat.

“Laura, the large green button.” Victor gasped out as the knife bit into his throat. Hurry.

“Shit, shit.” Laura uttered as she stared at the console. All the lights were off, and she could not make out the color of the buttons. Which one. This one.

Eeeeh cluck.

The pumps complained as the doors jumped up half an inch then stopped.

“Hurry.” Victor gasped, as another knee was painfully driven in his side.
“Oops, sorry, wrong button.” Laura yelled as she quickly pressed the second button. Russtoff’s eyes widened as the heavy steel doors slowly came down. His heart raced and with all his power he pushed up with his knife hand. Distracted, he closed his eyes as Victor spat in his eyes. Russtoff squinted and shook his head, which cleared the spit from his eyes. His heart stopped as darkness descended on him. *No no no, Mother Russia.*

Uuuuhh, crack.

A sickening sound filled the air as the hydraulics strained when the doors pressed against Russtoff’s neck, and then snapped it, cutting his head off. Russtoff’s body twitched as blood gushed from his torn neck.

“Shit.” Laura covered her mouth with her hands as Victor pushed himself away from the body.

“You’re bleeding. Your throat is bleeding.” Laura yelled, when she saw the blood run down Victor’s throat, which appeared worse by the cold sweat that ran down his face. Exhausted, Victor collapsed against the steering console. Laura quickly opened the medical kit under the steering and started to clean up the wound. Slowly Victor’s face turned white, and he clenched his jaw as his mouth watered and his stomach turned.

“Gonna be sick.” He mumbled as he crawled for the pontoon and threw half his body over the side.

“That’s my line.” Laura laughed, while Victor threw mouthful after mouthful of seawater back into the ocean.

“Is there danger-pay for this mission?” Nat slowly climbed into the boat, and then dropped exhausted from his swim into the captain’s seat.

“Okay, I will take those sea sick pills now.” Victor wiped his mouth with his forearm, and then stumbled over and searched Russtoff’s body. Nat switches the lights on, and then shook his head at the headless body.
Victor pulled a small sealed bag from Russtoff’s pocket, and then slowly sat down in the crew seat. Laura gave him seasick pills from the medical kit, while proceeding to bandage the cut on his throat.

“Pull your pants down.” Laura ordered.


“I am going to the front.” Nat blurted out.

“Your leg is bleeding, either you pull your pants down, or I cut it.” Laura said firmly.

“I am still going to the front.” Nat climbed over the body and went to the bow, while Victor unbuttoned his pants. While Laura bandaged his leg, Victor looked at the contents of the bag. A small phone with no Internet capability, and Laura’s pen. As soon as Laura was finished, Victor dumped the body and head overboard. Nat washed the deck off with the diving shower hose, while Victor inspected Russtoff’s phone message log.

“Just as I thought.” Victor smiled.

“Spit it out.” Nat commented as he activated the bilge pumps to drain the engine bay of the bloody water.

“According to the text messages. This guy did not have the time or means to upload any data. But he did manage to send the riddle, which is the directions to the treasure, and texted that to his contacts.”

“Treasure?” Nat eagerly looked at Victor.

“Long story.” Nat’s shoulders sagged while Victor continued. “They ordered him to go to Mexico and then from there make his way to Peru where a team would meet him. They also gave him coordinates they believe to be very close to where the treasure would be.”

The boat shuddered as Nat started the engines back up.

“Onwards, or do you have more friends you want to say hi to?”

“The data is secure, but the Russians now have the possible location of the treasure and scrolls. That team has to be stopped or the scrolls found before they do. You up for it, Laura?”
“Treasure hunting, you kidding, of course I am in.” Laura’s eyes sparkled.

“Onwards.” Slowly, Victor made his way to the engine hatch doors and crashed down. His stomach turned from the sea water, and his head spun from Russtoff’s blows. Laura looked at Victor on the metal doors, and a cold shiver ran down her back as she sat down in the crew seat. You can sleep there alone. I’m not touching those doors.

Two and a half hours later, they were 200 miles from Grand Cayman. Victor lifted his head as Nat slowed the boat down to idle. The sea had calmed down to only one and two foot swells. Victor got up and scanned the ocean.

“What’s up?”

“Diesel.” Nat replied, then turned to Laura and continued. “Laura, can you please take the wheel for a minute? Just keep this arrow on the display pointed towards this number.” Without waiting for a reply, Nat moved to the spare tanks, and started to refuel the boat. Laura took a deep breath, and proudly took the controls as Victor helped Nat.

“How far still?” Victor inquired.

“Around 180 miles or so, around five hours.”

“Ok, snack time. You take a rest, Laura and I will take the controls.” Nat nodded and opened a waterproof container and removed the sandwiches Laura had made, plus two flasks of coffee. Victor took the wheel and nibbled as he steered. Laura and Nat made themselves comfortable on the two small aluminum benches used by divers at the stern of the boat. As Nat took the last bite of his sandwich, he looked at the engine hatch doors, and then at the small bench he sat on. With a sigh, he made himself comfortable on the bench and tried to sleep. Laura looked at Nat lying down on the bench, then stood up and made her way to Victor.

“Will our passports be safe to use?” Laura whispered, as she came to stand next to Victor.

“No.” Victor slowly increased the boat’s speed.
“What are we going to do?” Confusion slapped Laura in the face.

“Get new ones, from the dead Russian’s contacts.” Victor replied.

Laura sat down in the crew seat and quickly fell asleep, while Victor pushed the boat as hard as was safe to do, averaged 30 knots. His mind drifted as the miles flew by. *Will they accept that the data is safe as payment for freedom for us? And then what?* An uncomfortable feeling crawled up Victor’s back and he shivered. *How do I keep Laura save if they do not accept the offer, or worse, what if Laura wants kids?* Victor frowned. *Why did they want me to upload the data, when all the Vatican was interested in was keeping the location of the scrolls unknown? They themselves have a copy of the directions. This means someone wants the application to control the US nuclear arsenal, and the 500 profiles on the spies.* Victor sighed. Another question plagued his thoughts. Did the contact know what Russtoff looked like and what would he do when asked for two sets of documents? All Victor had, was a name and address. Alex. 15 Tulum. Victor shrugged his shoulders. *There are few things money, or a gun to the head cannot solve.* 10 miles from Cancun, the sun smiled through the clouds as Victor stopped the boat and woke Laura and Nat. As Nat took the controls, Victor located the address on an offline map application on his phone, and then directed Nat to the closest beach near the address. Quickly Laura and Victor dumped the foul-weather gear, and then stood ready to jump off. As soon as the boat beached on the soft white sand, Laura and Victor jumped off, and then pushed the boat back as Nat placed the jet drive system in reverse. Within seconds, Nat had the boat turned around and headed back to Cayman.

“He is a nice man.” Laura said, as they returned Nat’s wave.

“Yes, he is. Come, let’s go find the house.” Victor pulled out his phone and plotted a route to the house. Hand in hand, they left the beach.

“Is this it?” Laura asked as they stopped an hour later.
“According to the map.”
“Does not look like much.” Laura pulled her nose up and glanced over the house. A chest high brown brick wall with an old rusty iron gate surrounded an unkempt yard. In the center, a single-story house made its stand against time. The once white-painted plaster walls, now faded with most of the paint missing or hanging like dead skin, showed the battles lost.

Creee.

The gate testified of little use as Victor opened it. Carefully, he led Laura down a stone pathway that resembled an old sailor’s teeth. An old pine door, that long ago traded its varnish for water stains, halted their progress. A drawn curtain decorated the small window that was placed at eye level in the door. Victor slowly leveled his pistol at chest height against the door.

“Is that needed?” Laura asked softly.
“Maybe.” Victor knocked twice. He waited a minute, and then lifted his hand to knock again, but stopped. The curtain had moved half an inch.

Thumb thumb.

Victor swallowed as the sound from behind the door hinted of a double barrel shotgun being loaded.

“I am here to see Alex. He is expecting me.”

“Password?”

Click click.

Victor shifted uneasily. Two hammers cocked. His finger twitched on the trigger of his pistol. Damn, why does there always have to be a password?

“I do not have time to play games. You have been informed to expect me, and that I am in a hurry.” Victor replied sternly.

“Piss off, no password, no entry. You have 5 seconds or I shoot.” Victor jerked as the man banged his shotgun against the door.

“5, 4, 3, 2...” The man stopped as Victor pressed Russtoff’s cell phone against the window while it showed the text message with the address of the house.
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

“Perhaps I should call them back and inform them you are no longer working for them and have changed sides, maybe you will see tonight, maybe not?” Victor calmly said. A deadly silence fell upon the building, and then the click of a door lock opening filled the air. Victor frowned as four door chains were removed. So much for kicking the door in.

The rusty front door hinges complained as an overweight, bald Mexican at Victor’s shoulder height, forced it open. His long cotton shirt was decorated with food stains that matched his faded and torn at the knees, blue jeans.

“Who is the girl? I was told one person.” His voice was hoarse as he pressed a sawed off double barrel shotgun into Victor's gut, and glared with red whiskey-abused eyes at Victor.

“She is my cover wife. The mission changed.”

“I was paid for one set of documents only.”

“You know where to send the bill,” Victor countered quickly. The man stood undecided for a moment, then turned around and stepped into the house.

“Name’s Steve, Alex is my cover name, follow me.” Steve did not bother to check if they followed. Laura held her nose as she closed the door behind her, and then looked in disgust at the living room. Newspapers and empty liquor bottles laid siege to an old TV chair that faced a television placed on a small table in front of it. Laura gagged at the smell of puke, alcohol and tobacco that was thicker than the paint on the walls.

Quickly she followed as Steve led them down a small corridor, past the bathroom and into a small room. A table stood in the center, where passports, photographs, a computer, and two printers battled it out for space. Seating was provided by a shortened old bar stool for Steve, and a raggedy two-seat couch against the wall for Laura and Victor. Laura could not tell if the color of the couch was brown naturally, or acquired from sweat and filth. Her skin crawled as she sat down and discovered it was the latter.
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

“I need to use the restroom.” Laura jumped up as shivers ran down her spine. Quickly she made her way to the bathroom and ripped off her T-shirt. Horrified, she discovered she was correct. It was a massive cockroach that had crawled down her back, and was now staring up at her from the floor. Five cockroaches against the cracked bathroom wall, glared at Laura as she squished the bug with a sticky playboy magazine that lay on the ground. Laura pressed her lips together as she disgustedly washed her hands, and then threw her T-shirt on.

Steve eyed Victor up and down. He is not Russian. Something is wrong. Laura stepped into the room, and moved to the corner. She hid her breasts under her arms, away from Steve’s peevling eyes. Shivers ran up her spine, as lust dripped from Steve’s eyes. Steve studied her intently for a moment more, while his hand slowly went to the pistol, strapped under the table, and then he stopped. If I am wrong, I will burn. Steve looked at Victor again. I will send a report as soon as they are gone. If I am right, I get a ransom bonus, if wrong, I get paid for two.

“Ok, girl first?” Steve barked and pointed to what may be the only clean spot on the wall, in the entire house. Laura, much to Steve’s dismay, did not drop her arms as Steve took her picture. After he took Victor’s picture, he went to work at his computer.

“US passports, right?”
“Yes.” Victor replied.
“Names?”
“John and Sue Smith.”
“Ok, this will take some time, make yourselves at home.” For five hours, Laura measured the small, clean space by the wall while Victor stood in the doorway.

“There you go. US passports, with Mexico entry stamps from a week ago. Just regular tourists.” Steve said as he held up the passports.

“Not bad.” Victor ran his fingers over the pages, and then continued. “It is best we wait until nightfall.”
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

“As you wish.” Steven reluctantly said. He wished them gone as soon as possible. The hours painfully dragged by as Steve watched TV, and Victor and Laura guarded the same spots as before.

“We are leaving.” Victor announced as he led Laura into the living room.

“About time.” Steve murmured as he eagerly got up, and unlocked the door. Victor frowned at Steve’s eagerness to be rid of them, then turned and made sure the coast was clear, before he let Laura exit first. Laura stepped out of the house, then stopped and asked.

“What to now?” Immediately she realized her mistake. Victor froze behind her, and for a moment listened for any reaction from Steve.

“We need to get transport and get out of this country.” Victor softly replied.

“You can get an airplane at the airport; it is not far from here. There is a taxi rank just up the road.”

“Where did you say that taxi rank is again?” Victor turned on his heels.

“Just up the r...”

The fat on Steve’s body wobbled like jelly, as the silenced 9mm Beretta in Victor’s hand whistled three times. Steve’s eyes widened as he looked at the blood stains that appeared on his shirt. A moan escaped his lips as Victor kicked him in the gut and send him sliding over the floor on old newspapers. As Steve came to a stop against the wall, the pistol whistled twice more, perfect headshots.

“I am sorry. I did not mean to.” Laura said as Victor closed the door.

“It is okay. I know you did not. He knew something was up in any case. It is better this way.”

“How do you know he was onto us?”
“The passports are good for crossing small borders and countries that have no direct link to the US customs system. The passports look real, but are not in the system. The airport he suggested would immediately pick that up, confirm the documents are false and arrest us. He was also very eager to get us out of the house, I guess to report us.”

“So he wanted to set us up?” Laura looked angrily at the door.

“Yes, come, we need to go.” Victor turned, and with Laura by his side walked to the taxi rank. 20 minutes later, they stood in front of a busy taxi rank, where Victor hailed the first one he saw.

“Casa Bonita,” Victor said as he helped Laura in.

“Yes, sir. Good evening, names Enrique.” The driver politely replied, then drove in the direction of the address. Laura gave Victor a questioning look, and he submitted in a whisper.

“Small bed and breakfast I've used from time to time when I've come through here. Secluded, owner knows me, does not ask questions, and we are not likely to be spotted by anyone who may be looking for us.”

“Where are you from?” Enrique politely broke the silence.

“America.” Laura answered quickly.

“Me too. Lived there for 20 years before I came here. What’s your favorite football team Sir?” Victor drew a blank, and an uncomfortable silence filled the cab. Quickly, Laura bumped Victor and with her hand on her lap, pointed out the window.

“Plane.”

“Sorry Sir?” Another bump and a grunt from Laura drew Victor’s attention to her hand that rapidly darted over her leg.

“Jets.” Victor quickly said.

“You okay, sir?”

“I got a splitting headache, mind if I sit this one out and rest?”

“I would too, if I rooted for the Jets.” Enrique mumbled.

“Excuse me?” Laura snapped.
“Just saying it is best if he lies down and rested, that’s all.” Enrique blurted out. Laura gave him an angry look as he watched her in the rear view mirror, and then pulled Victor towards her.

“Oh honey, rest your head on my lap.” Laura pulled Victor’s head to her lap and massaged his scalp. Enrique shook his head and switched the radio on. Soft relaxing music filled the cab for the duration of the trip.

“Casa Bonita.” Enrique proudly said 25 minutes later as he brought the car to a stop. Laura peered curiously out of the window. Hip high, whitewashed walls, decorated with pot plants, surrounded a small garden with palm trees. A walkway, leading from a newly painted black iron gate to the front door, parted the palm trees.

“I don’t have enough change for this.” Enrique looked at the $100 in Victor’s hand.

“Keep the change.” Victor took Laura by the hand and led her to the door in a stream of thanks from Enrique. Inside, an elderly Mexican lady behind a reservation desk that matched her age, gave them a big toothless smile.

“Ooh, Mister Victor, you are back, so welcome you are. How long you stay?” She slowly got up as she talked and came around the desk and gave Victor a warm hug.

“Just for tonight Elisabeth.” Elisabeth slowly walked back around the desk and took a room key from the full rack.

“Your usual room.” Elisabeth proudly handed Victor the room key, then looked at Laura and whispered in his ear. “She is beautiful.” Elisabeth slapped Victor on the shoulder as she laughed, then slowly sat down in her chair.

“For the room, and some food.” Victor placed two $100 bills on the counter.

“No cook, too late.” Elisabeth took the notes with a shaky wrinkled hand and then fumbled with her small moneybox to get change.

“Can you order us some ‘Subway’ sandwiches please? Two of my regular?”
“Chicken and Bacon Ranch, with chocolate milkshake?”
“Yes, thank you, and keep the change.”
“Thank you.” Elisabeth gave another toothless smile as she started to make the call. Victor led Laura past the glass office door and down a narrow beige painted hallway with eight rooms, to the last one. He unlocked the door, and then waited a few seconds before he carefully pushed the door open with his foot while he held his pistol ready. The pistol’s barrel followed his eyes as he methodologically cleared the room, and then motioned for Laura to enter and lock the door. Laura dropped her tired body on the double bed and smelled the new white linen. Vanilla. Victor placed his pistol on the small stand next to the bed, and then dropped down on the bed next to Laura.

“If we cannot use large airports, how are we going to get to Peru?” Laura stared at the Alice blue ceiling while she gently bit her lip.
“We will have to go overland and use buses.”
“That will take a few days.” Laura slowly sat upright in the bed and looked at Victor.
“Correct.”
“Nice.” Laura smiled and lay back on the bed.

Knock… knock.
Laura jumped up, but Victor shook his head and walked to the door. The smell of Subway sandwiches wafted through the door. Elisabeth proudly held out his food with a toothless smile when he opened the door.
“Thank you Elisabeth. Can you please have our clothes washed for us if we leave it outside?”
“Of course, I will be back in half an hour. It will be ready with your breakfast tomorrow morning.”
“Thank you.” Victor closed the door and came to sit down next to Laura.
“How did you know it was her?”
“No one knocks like her, and she knocks differently when she is stressed.” Victor pulled a sandwich from the bag and handed it to Laura, then followed with a milkshake.

“Mmmm, thussssh iss really ggood.” Laura eyes sparkled as she munched away. Victor laughed at her, then leaned over and wiped the sauce off her chin. Finished, Laura pulled off her clothes and handed them to Victor. She walked to the bathroom, while she playfully shook her buttocks and looked seductively over her shoulder at him.

“Come and wash my back after you put the clothes out.” Laura winked.

Victor undressed, and placed the clothes outside before joining Laura in the shower. Laura turned around as he came in, and hugged him, and then looked him in the eye.

“Why me?”

Victor ignored the question for a while as he took a bar of soap and started washing Laura’s back as she stood against him.

“Because you were the only one that could open my heart. I never thought I would love again.”

“Were you married?” Laura eyes searched for his and failed.

“No, was going to.” A lump formed in Victor’s throat.

“What happened?”

Victor took a deep breath, he was glad the water hid the tears in his eyes. For a moment, he remained silent as he continued to wash Laura’s body.

“I never got the opportunity.”

Laura gently took the soap from Victor, then started to wash his back.

“I am sorry I asked.”
“Don’t be. When the time is right, I will tell you about her, just not tonight.” Victor’s heart was ripped open as he stood motionless while Laura washed him. As she finished, he got out without a word and gently dried her off before he dried himself off. Laura took his hand and led him to the bed, where they snuggled up and quickly fell asleep.
Chapter 11: A Long Journey

Knock Knock.

Victor’s eyes snapped open. Immediately he was alert and slid out of bed, while he grabbed his pistol from under his pillow. His pulse quickened as he slowly tiptoed naked to the door. Leaning against the wall, he reached out and leveled the pistol at chest height against the door, then asked. “Who is it?” Victor swallowed as his finger twitched on the trigger, ready to send death.

“Sorry to wake you. It is Elisabeth. Your food and clothes are ready.” Elisabeth placed the items by the door, and then walked away as she shook her head. Such a paranoid kid.

Victor closed his eyes and waited for the squeak of the office door closing. His heart jumped as an arm glided over his chest and around his neck. *Kill. Throw the attacker in the air, two shots, dead before they hit the ground.* Victor stood frozen; his body ignored his mind. He sighed as soft breasts pressed against his back, and a small hand slid around his waist to his manhood, that responded to the gentle touch.

“Come back to bed.” Laura softly whispered in his ear. Laura’s pulse quickened as Victor slowly turned around and kissed her. She giggled as Victor grabbed her firm small buttocks and picked her up. Eagerly she kissed him until he playfully dropped her on the bed. They continued what they started in Cayman, and Laura’s body responded multiple times to his expert touch. An hour later, Laura laughed and pushed her body away from Victor’s. Her breasts swayed rhythmically while she gasped for air as she looked down at Victor. She moaned as he lifted his head and took her erect nipple in his mouth, and then flicked it playfully around with his tongue. Laura tightly clenched the pillow and pressed her lips together as her body quivered in delight. Laura replaced her nipple with her lips against Victor’s then pulled back.

“Please stop, else I’ll never be able to get out of bed.”
Victor ignored her and renewed stimulating her nipple with his tongue. When Laura’s body stiffened again, he gently rolled her to his side. Breathless, Laura watched as Victor quickly opened the door and got their clothes and food. Hungrily they wolfed down the toast, scrambled eggs and fruit salad with yogurt, then washed it down with orange juice. They took a quick shower, and got dressed. Victor stared at Laura in her T-shirt with the two hearts over her breasts, tight denim shorts and barefoot, then smiled.

“As sexy as that is, we need to get new clothes for you.”

“Shoes would be nice.” Laura commented as Victor picked up his backpack and walked to the door. Elisabeth gave them a wide toothless smile as they entered. She had gone back half an hour later, after she had put the food down and saw it still outside the door on the floor. From curiosity, she had placed her ear against the door and heard them making love. Her heart had fluttered as she had walked back to her office and remembered the days when her Tom was still alive.

“Thank you for your hospitality Elisabeth. Can you please call us a taxi to go to the beach?” Elisabeth slowly nodded, then picked up the phone, and dialed her son, who ran his own taxi business.

“Pablo, my son, will be here in fifteen minutes.” Slowly she replaced the receiver, and then picked up the novel she was reading.

“Thank you.” Victor sat down beside Laura on the only bench in the office.

“Okay, clothes, and then what?” Laura whispered. Victor looked at Elisabeth, who gave no indication that she heard Laura.

“We will take a bus and cross the first border and use the crowd as cover. After changing buses we will continue to a small airfield further up towards Peru, where we can hire a small private airplane to fly us to Peru. The bus ride is about two days, depending on how bad the roads are, and if we get stopped by any local gangs.”
“Victor, what happens if we find the group that Russia sent to look for the scrolls, and eliminate them?”

“Russia will never stop, and if one group disappears, they will just get more ruthless in their search. We have to locate the scrolls and hide them for the time being.”

“And the treasure?”

“That belongs to Peru. All I care about is keeping the knowledge on those scrolls, if they exist, from evil hands.”

Beep beep beep.

“Our ride is here.” Victor said, as a car hooted outside.

“Thank you, Elisabeth.” Victor nodded to Elisabeth as he opened the door.

“Bye.” Laura smiled, as Elisabeth gave her a big thumbs up. Laura followed Victor, who scanned the road for danger. She laughed as she saw the taxi. A newly painted, black 1984 Ford Escort, 1.6 liter carburetor stood in the road. White lettering on the side screamed ‘Pablo’s Taxi Service’. Chrome wheels and tinted windows complimented Pablo’s several fake gold chains and black hair. Pablo held a door open for them, and then quickly ran to the driver’s side after he closed the door behind them.

“Beach shops please Pablo.” Victor said as Pablo started the car. Laura gasped as Pablo pulled away with tires chirping. Pablo whistled as he zigzagged through the traffic, oblivious to traffic laws.

“Beach shops.” Pablo Proudly said, as he came to a stop with tires squealing. Laura, thankful that the ride was over, quickly jumped out.

“Go to the second shop, it is my cousin’s. Tell them Pablo send you.” Pablo pointed to a row of six shops.

“Can you wait for us?” Victor asked as he climbed out.

“No parking.” Pablo waved his hands around at the crowd that had already formed to go to the beach.

“If you wait for me, you get another one.” Pablo’s eyes widened when Victor handed him a $100 note.
“Sure, sure, see you later.” Pablo slammed the car in gear and sped off.

“Shall we go shopping, Laura?” Victor hooked in with Laura and headed to the second store. A typical holiday beach shop with beachwear, sunscreen, towels, surfboards, souvenirs, and various items vacationers normally forget like toothbrushes, greeted them as they entered the shop.

“Laura, get yourself a few days’ worth of clothing, but remember to get a hat, warm jacket and toiletries, plus a backpack to put it all in.” Victor let go of Laura and walked to the men’s section. He grabbed four days’ worth of clothing for himself, and then selected a few health bars and six bottles of water.

“This is a nice bikini.” Victor winked as he picked a pink two-piece skimpy bikini up from Laura’s basket when she joined him at the counter.

“Functions as underwear.” Laura winked.

“You got everything you need?” A middle-aged Mexican man with a half-unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt asked from behind the counter.

“Yes. Pablo sent us.”

“Oh good, Pablo is a good kid. I will give you 10% off.” The man started to ring the already overpriced items up.

“Do you have any pre-paid cell phone cards?”

“Yes, $20, do you want airtime as well?”

“Do you have one that can access the Internet through 3 or 4 G?”

“No, only EDGE speed is available here for pre-paid cards. Minimum $50 balance needed to activate it. Interested?”

“Yes, please, give me one and add $100 for Internet connection.”

The man’s eyes narrowed and he looked Victor up and down, and then slowly nodded as he reached behind the counter and pulled out a stack of phone cards.
“Your SIM card.” He said as he handed one card from the stack to Victor, and then pulled a small machine closer. At the touch of a few buttons, the machine printed out a receipt.

“Use the directions with the phone card to activate it, then call the number on the receipt and enter the code displayed on the receipt.”

“Thank you.” Victor looked at the total sum owed on the cash register, then dug in his backpack for cash and frowned. Where did that envelope come from? Ignoring the envelope, he pulled a few bills from the backpack.

“Here you go.” The man checked each $100 bill twice over, then counted Victor’s change.

“Your change.” Victor quickly took the change and stuffed it in his pocket, before he piled some of the shopping in his backpack and some in the one Laura selected.

“Thank you. Good bye.” Victor threw his backpack over his shoulder and handed Laura’s to her, then made for the door.

“Damn, I was hoping he would wait for us.” Victor scanned the parking area but failed to locate Pablo’s car.

“I am not. The man drives recklessly.”

“I thought you liked fast cars and speed?” Victor laughed.

“Yes, when I am driving, or someone who can actually drive.” Laura replied with her hands on her hips.

“Taxi, come come.” A man yelled from across the parking area as he opened the rear door of his taxi. Victor shrugged his shoulders, and started to walk to the taxi.

Screech.

Laura’s heart stopped as a car came tires dragging to a stop, a foot from Victor and the driver’s door was flung open.

“No parking. I here.” Pablo quickly opened the back door for them.

“Hey, you’re stealing my money.” The other taxi operator yelled and made for Pablo, then stopped as Victor waved him off.

“Watch your back.” The man said as he walked back to his taxi again.
“Where to now?” Pablo grinned as he closed his door. $100 for hanging around, wow.
“The bus station, and step on it.”
“Ok, bus station coming up fast.” Pablo eagerly said, but did not move. A moment of silence filled the car, then Victor laughed and handed Pablo his $100.
“Oh dear.” Laura mumbled as her body was slammed into the back seat while Pablo raced away with the back tires smoking. Laura’s pulse quickened as Pablo madly zigzagged his way through the traffic.
Beep beep.
“Out of the way.” Laura closed her eyes as Pablo yelled at pedestrians and nearly ran them over. *This guy is insane.* Laura swallowed as they raced towards an intersection.
“Watch out, bus.” Laura screamed, clenching her jaw as they scraped past the bus. *Stop stop stop.*
“Umfp.” Laura’s wind was almost knocked out as she slammed into the front seat when Pablo locked the tires up to avoid hitting a group of people that crossed the road.
“Look where you’re walking.” Pablo yelled as he sped off. Laura grabbed the panic handle by her door and held on for dear life as Pablo slid the car around a corner. White-faced, Laura stole a glance at Victor, and her jaw dropped. Victor, unfazed rocked with the motions while he focused on texting on his phone. Laura glanced forward and her eye-widened, as ice cold washed over her body. *Truck.* Laura gasped as Pablo and the truck driver swerved at the last moment and narrowly avoided a head on.
“Idiot.” Laura cursed as Pablo slammed on the brakes, causing her to slam into the back of the seat in front of her.
“Bus station,” Pablo proudly announced.
“Maniac.” Laura yelled, as she ripped her door open and jumped out. Breathless, she red faced glared at Pablo through narrowed eyes. Calmly, Victor finished something on his cellphone, and then slowly looked up and around to confirm they were at the correct bus station. A small run down office building, flanked by restrooms, stood under a freestanding corrugated roof that allowed parking for eight buses. Several rows of benches lined the walls around the building and restrooms.

“Excellent driving, Pablo.” Pablo gave Laura a big white smile, who folded her arms as she bit her lip to hold back a comment.

“We would have missed our bus to America if it was not for you, here you go.” Victor said as he handed Pablo $200 then climbed out.

“I can take you.” Pablo quickly countered.

“I don’t think Laura’s heart would take it.” Victor laughed as he slung his backpack over his shoulder and handed Laura’s to her.

“I am gone.” Pablo wasted no time in getting away to find more tourists he could scare.

“Why did you ask him to go so fast?” Laura asked, her pulse still beating double speed.

“Making sure we were not followed. We attracted a lot of attention at the beach shops.” Victor calmly said as he took Laura’s hand.

“He could have crashed and killed us.” Laura countered as they started to head to the bus station’s ticket office.

“Less likely than getting robbed and shot if we were followed, besides, it was fun.”

“Fun wha..mmmm.” Victor silenced Laura with a kiss that made her toes curl up.

“You are something.” She said, as her head spun when Victor let go of her. As they continued their walk, she asked. “What were you doing on your phone the whole time?”
“I booked our bus tickets so that we do not need to stand in line at the ticket office.” Laura looked at Victor, then around her, and gently pinched herself. *Yup, it is not a dream.* Their bus was not due to depart for an hour, and they quickly changed into new clothes in the restrooms.

“Very nice.” Victor smiled as Laura came out of the restroom. She wore tight blue shorts with a pink skimpy two-piece bikini underneath, followed by a blue cotton button shirt that she only knotted at the bottom, and left the buttons undone. Not one for shoes, she went with sandals.

“Just for you.” Laura winked, then came to stand in front of Victor and placed her hand on his chest while she softly looked him up and down. Victor wore striped board shorts with sandals, and a beach shirt that depicted hula girls dancing.

“Victor.”

“Yes.”

“These people you worked for. They had those four men within hours after you spoke to them, at the resort to kill us. How can they do that?”

“They could not. That team must have been deployed when the ship sank.”

“To do what?”

“To kill me after I killed you.” Laura’s jaw dropped and speechless she looked at Victor for a moment then asked. “Why?”

“I do not know why they want me dead. However, ordering me to kill you was nothing more than a distraction to make it easier for them to kill me.”

“If we manage to find the scrolls, are you planning on using it to bargain for our lives?”

“No, the scrolls must never be allowed to fall in the hands of people like them. When we find it, we must protect it until we can find someone who will use it for good.”
“I am glad we feel the same about the scroll.” Laura smiled, and then continued. “You know, the treasure is only a rumor and it’s been lost for hundreds of years. It could take us a while to find it.”

“You got something else to do?” Victor smiled, and then continued. “Besides, it will be fun. Let’s go, the people are lining up already.”

“You should look the word ‘fun’, up in the dictionary when you get a chance.” Laura laughed, as they took a place in line to take their seats on a well-kept and new Greyhound bus. Victor showed the confirmation number on his phone to the conductor, and then produced their fake passports.

“Enjoy the ride.” The conductor said, as he handed their passports and a receipt for their booking back. On the bus, Laura closed her eyes in silent prayer that the air-conditioning on the bus worked. Victor chose the front row, behind the driver.

“Why the front seats?” Laura whispered as they sat down.

“So I can hear everything the driver and co-driver are talking about.” The bus shook as the engine roared to live, and they headed off towards Valladolid, their first stop, and then Jose Maria Morelos, followed by Chetumal before they would arrive in Belize City. Victor hoped to find air transport in Belize to avoid the long bus route from Belize to Peru. Victor secured their backpacks at their feet and clipped one shoulder band to his armrest, while he locked the zippers with small locks he bought at the beach shop.

“That will keep sneaky hands at bay.” Victor said as he covered the bags with a fleece jacket, then leaned back and closed his eyes. The view as the city transitioned to countryside, kept Laura awake.
She watched in amazement at all the new things that flashed by, and how other people lived. Sadness filled her heart, and she wiped a tear away as she saw an elderly woman struggling home with two buckets of water. The sadness quickly made room for amazement, and then joy as children waved at her and happily tried to run alongside the bus as they jumped into the air to see inside. Glowing inside, Laura waved back with a smile. *How can people be so happy with so little, when people with so much complained each day as they picked up books in the library.* Eventually sandman won her over, and Laura fell asleep with her head on Victor’s shoulder. Dreams of her and Victor seeing the world, free from dangerous people seeking their death, filled her dreams.

Victor woke as the bus rocked gently to a stop in Valladoid. After he scanned each new passenger, he pulled a blanket from the rack above them, and covered Laura. He gave Laura a kiss on the cheek, then opened his backpack and retrieved the envelope he saw earlier.

“Aahhh Nat.” Victor said as he pulled out a note folded around a wad of cash and read it. *Took $10 000. You need the rest more than me.* Victor replaced the envelope in his backpack, and then joined Laura in her dreams. Hours went by as they slept.

“Half an hour stop.” The conductor’s voice ripped Victor and Laura from fairyland.

“Where are we?” Laura sleepily asked as she stretched out.

“Jose Maria Morelos. Come, let’s get some food.” Victor said as he unclipped the backpacks and stood up. Laura looked at him with her eyes half closed, and then turned red as her stomach protested her slowness in feeding it. Victor laughed, and pulled a giggle from Laura as she got up.
“Not much.” Victor said as they walked to a small cafeteria, while the bus driver started to refuel the bus. After sitting down, they ordered tacos and water. Victor saved the snacks and water he bought at the beach shop for later. Laura’s green eyes sparkled with love and excitement as she peppered Victor with questions about his life, his upbringing, and his training. She barely gave him a chance to answer before she asked the next question.

“Come on you old hag, pay up, I don’t have all day.” A rude server in his mid-20s, said as an old lady struggled with shaking hands to open her purse.

“What you’re looking at bitch.” The man snarled at the old woman’s daughter, as he grabbed the money from her mother. He spun around and walked to the counter, but stopped halfway and glared at something on his shoulder.

“What the hell is this?” He spat out. Victor smiled at the server as the man brushed a potato crisp from his shoulder. The server’s eye narrowed and his face went red as giggles around him changed to laughter.

“Did you do that?” The server demanded as he shook his fist at Victor.

“There better now?” Victor smiled as he stood up and plucked a hair from the man’s head.

“What the hell?” The man snarled as he rubbed his head.

“Now you can blow some steam off.” The cafeteria was in hysteria. A lady accidentally spilled her drink on the floor and the server’s shoes, who went crimson, and with narrowed eyes spat out. “You asshole with your whore girl…” His head whiplashed and he swallowed his words with blood from his broken nose as Victor head-butted him. The server’s body shook as he held his nose while blood and tears smeared his face.

“I will tell my dad.” The man shouted and spun around. His eyes widened as the ceiling came into view and his head bounced against the floor as he slipped on the soda.
“Everyone back on the bus, we are leaving.” The driver said as he walked into the cafeteria. He stopped dead when he saw the server on the floor.

“Oh shit, his dad is going to be pissed. We need to leave now.” The driver said and wide-eyed hurried the people along.

“He will be fine.” Victor laughed as he slapped the driver on the shoulder.

“He is his father’s baby, and his father is a very dangerous man.” The driver hurried away while the server slowly got up and glared at Victor as he made for the bus.

“Thank you. He is always rude to everyone who comes here.” A little voice said next to Victor. As he looked down, the old lady who the server was rude to, smiled up at him.

“My pleasure.” Victor nodded, and then helped the lady to the bus.

“The back seat is now available, if you want it.” The driver indicated with his hand to the long five-seat bench at the back when Victor climbed into the bus.

“Thank you.” Victor and Laura headed to the rear and as Laura made herself comfortable, she followed Victor’s eyes to outside the bus. Laura shifted uneasily and swallowed. A gorgeous Mexican woman with a short skirt and strong legs, blessed with well-endowed breasts, which were barely held in check by a half unbuttoned white shirt, stood next to Victor’s window. Laura glimpsed down at her own comparatively smaller breasts.

“She interests you?” Laura’s voice hinted of her slight jealousy.

“There is something incredibly unsexy about a woman who acts like a steam train, and uncaringly throws her coffin nail on the sidewalk.” Victor answered flatly, and then leaned back into the seat. Laura’s jaw dropped, and it took her a minute before she could muster a thought.

“Good thing I do not smoke.”

Victor turned to her with a smile, then gently took her chin in his hand as he looked her in the eye.
“You need not be afraid. Girls like that may look cute, but only you found my heart.” His kiss sealed her lips, and slowly she laid her head on his lap. Sleep came fast to her while Victor massaged her neck and head. When Laura was deep in dreamland, Victor closed his eyes and joined her. The miles flew by, and hours later, a hand on Victor’s shoulder gently woke him.

“Sir, sir, you need to get up.”

“What is it?” Victor looked around the bus in search of danger.

“We are at the border crossing of Santa Elena. They want to see your papers.” The driver continued, pointing down the aisle at a customs officer that was busy checking every passenger’s documents. Satisfied that Victor was awake, the driver walked away.

“Do you think the passports will fool him?” Laura whispered.

“Only one way to find out.”

Minutes later the officer came to stop in front of them, and without a word held out his hand for their papers. Laura swallowed and clenched her shaking hands as the officer took their passports, looked through them, smelled them, then stared at Laura and Victor intently. For a moment, he stood undecided, then looked up through the back window as two more busses pulled up. With a sigh, he stamped their passports then gave them back to Victor. Relieved, Victor and Laura lay back in the seat and waited for the bus to pull away. The rest of the trip to Belize City was uneventful, and the time passed slowly by.

“That was the longest bus ride I have ever been on.” Laura stretched as they climbed off the bus.

“Thank you.” Victor said as he tipped the driver $20 at the door.

“Better than the other stations.” Laura commented, as they made their way to a large modern waiting room with seating for 100 passengers.
“You hungry?” Victor looked over his shoulder as he made his way to a small snack shop.
“Oh yes.” Laura hopped skipped after him, grabbed his arm, spun him around and kissed him, before she ran away and yelled. “Race you.”
“Beat you.” Laura breathlessly said, as Victor stopped beside her, before walking over to the snack shop window.
“Tuna sandwich with water please.”
“Victor?” Laura glanced over her shoulder at him.
“Same please.”
“Make that a double order, please.”
“Coming right up.” The cashier punched the order in, and then gave it to the cook.
“Can you please pay? I want to check that out.” Victor gave Laura some money, and then walked a short distance to a flier on the wall. A few minutes later, Laura joined him.
“What’s that?” Laura asked as she came to stand next to Victor.
“A possible flight out of here.” Laura looked at the flier while Victor took his food. PRIVATE TRIPS FROM BELIZE TO BOGOTA CITY, COLUMBIA. CALL NOW. Victor noted the number, and then walked to the snack shop to get coins, before he headed to a payphone and called the number.
“Harry’s Adventure Travels, how can I help?” An out of breath voice answered the phone after a number of rings.
“I saw your ad for trips to Colombia, can you take two people?”
“When do you want to go?”
“Today.”
“No can do, busy giving the old bird a service, maybe next week.”
“Can she fly?”
“Yes, but she really needs a new starter. If it packs up, we are stranded.”
“Triple your normal fee.” A long silence followed, and then finally the pilot responded. “Deal, where are you now?”
“Belize City bus station, can you come and pick us up?” Victor hid his relief well.

“Yes, give me half an hour, I will be in a red Ford pickup truck,” The pilot’s voice dripped with greediness.

“You think he will get us through customs?” Laura asked as Victor replaced the receiver.

“Small private airplane and advertising here. I am sure he smuggles things and people around and has connections at customs.”

“Good, cause my buttocks are getting sore from all the bus riding.” Laura pulled a face while she scratched her behind. Victor just shook his head in laughter, and then walked towards the entrance to await the pilot. 36 minutes later a large red pickup truck with ‘Harry’s Adventure Travels’ painted on the doors, stopped in a dust cloud in front of them. Laura sneezed and waved her hand in front of her, while wiping the tears and dust from her eyes.

“Harry?” Victor asked as a five foot six, thin American with long hair, and a beard jumped out of the truck.

“One and only.”

“Name’s John, this is Sue,” Victor said as he took Harry’s hand.

“Hi John, hi Sue,” Harry shook each one’s hand then continued. “Hop in.” He turned and walked towards the double cab pickup truck. Laura quickly looked at Victor and pressed her lips together while she made her eyes larger. Victor had to bite on his teeth to stop from laughing and placed his arm around her. Giggling, they walked to the truck and got in.

“So what business brings you to Belize, and why go to Colombia? I can take you all over Belize. There are a lot of ruins I can show you guys.” Harry chanced when Victor climbed in the front. Victor looked at Harry for a moment. ‘Nosey.’

“We decided to travel a bit, see some places, no plans, just going at the spur of the moment,” Laura answered. Victor gave her a wink. Well done.
“Okay. Your money.” Harry replied, and then waited for a moment before he continued. “You seem to be in a hurry to leave. You’re in some kind of trouble?”

“Not with the law, family dispute. Can you slip us past customs?” Victor chanced.

“Thought that might be something like that by the looks of you two. Yeah, I can get you through.” Harry replied, and then concentrated on the road. Laura sighed, glad that Victor did not ask Harry to step on it. Twenty minutes later, they stopped at a small hangar next to the airfield.

“Passports.” Harry said as he climbed out. Victor gave him their passports, and harry walked to a building 100 feet away.

“I do not like him.” Laura commented as she watched Harry enter the building.

“Me neither. I think he is more than just your average smuggler.”

Harry returned 10 minutes later.

“All good.” Harry said, as he handed them the stamped passports, before walking to the hanger and pulling the doors open.

“That the airplane?” Laura asked.

“She is nice hey?” Harry said with a smile, and then continued. “1970 Cherokee 235C-F. I upgraded the motor with a turbo, and she now does 200 miles per hour.” Victor came to stand next to Harry as he looked at the airplane.

“What’s her range?”

“Around 710 miles on the standard tank, but I have had additional tanks installed.” Harry motioned for them to get in while he talked. Laura climbed in the back seat while Victor remained at Harry’s side.

“And your flight plan?”

“From here to Costa Rica; just less than 600 miles. Refuel there, then on to Colombia, just less than 800 miles. We will land at Eldorado International airport.”

“Good, I need to use the toilet.”
“Over there in that building.” Harry pointed to a small free standing building about 200 feet away.

“This may take a while, got a very upset stomach.” Victor lied as he threw his backpack on the back seat of the airplane, and then whispered something to Laura. He started for the toilet, and then stopped after a few steps.

“Oh, Harry, she is afraid of flying, so she took a strong sleeping pill when we called you. She will be out in a few minutes, for the duration of the flight -- hope you don’t mind my company.”

Harry looked at Laura as she leaned back in her seat, and closed her eyes. Harry watched Victor as he slowly walk over to the toilet, and then started to prepare the airplane for flight. Just when Harry bent down to check the tires, Victor quickly sprinted to the side of the hanger, jumped up onto a fuel barrel and climbed through a window that was hidden by a storage rack. Harry checked the fuel and oil as fast as he could, and then quickly ran to move his truck out of the way. Victor used the time to sprint to the airplane undetected, and climbed in the back and lay down on the floor behind the front seats. Laura covered him with the backpacks and a fleece jacket, and then lay down again.

“Good, he is not back.” Harry said as he glimpsed in the back of the airplane just before he jumped in. Quickly he started the motor, and then made for the runway.

“Ground Control, Bravo Echo Foxtrot two zero five requesting permission to take off.” Harry said over the radio.

“Bravo Echo Foxtrot two zero five, Ground Control, what is your flight plan?” The voice sounded bored.

“Colombia, Eldorado via Costa Rica.”

“Bravo Echo Foxtrot two zero five, you have permission to take off.”
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

Harry wasted no time in getting the airplane in the air. As the airplane left the runway, Harry looked back at Laura and smiled. That guy John will pay a good price to get her back. Triple my fee, and avoid customs. He has money and is afraid of the cops. Harry kept the throttle open until he was at cruising altitude, and then leveled back. He put the autopilot on and turned in his seat and admired Laura as his hand touched a syringe clipped to his door, just below the armrest. Maybe I will enjoy this little woman before I give her back. Harry rubbed his hands together and checked the instruments and his course. Harry’s greed blinded him to the fact that the airplane had taken off slower than it should with only two people onboard. Again, Harry turned in his seat, and admired Laura’s legs. Slowly, he stretched his hand out to touch her, and then stopped himself. His eyes lit up, and a wide evil grin filled his face. I have a better plan for you than selling you back. Harry turned around and increased the airplane’s speed to the maximum, then concentrated on flying.

Just over three hours later, Harry landed the plane in Costa Rica. As he brought the airplane to a stop by a refueling truck, he quickly glanced back at Laura. Still out, one strong sleeping pill.

Below Laura’s feet, Victor glared at Harry from beneath the jacket. What are you up to? No matter, as long as you smuggle us into Columbia it is fine. Victor bit his teeth. His one leg was numb, and his shoulder ached. However, Harry needed to get them past the airport’s customs before he could make his move. The question, however, remained, how many people will be waiting for Harry in Columbia? Victor looked at Laura’s ankle by his head. Laura’s lips formed a slight smile when Victor gently stoked her ankle.

Tap tap tap.

Laura jerked as someone tapped on the passenger window. Intently, she listened for any indication that Harry saw her move. After a tense few moments, she relaxed as Harry climbed out and addressed a customs official.
“In a hurry, need to refuel and be off.”
“How many do you have this time?”
“Just the one.”
“Can I have her for 10 minutes?” The officer pressed his nose against the window and admired Laura.
“No, putting her on the market.”
“Pity, would have liked to have her, okay, refuel and be out before my boss shows up.”
Quickly harry refueled the airplane with the help of the single ground crew, and then jumped back in. Harry gave Laura one last look, and just could not resist. Slowly, he stroked her leg. Laura’s heart leaped as her leg jerked from his touch, and with effort, she kept still and her eyes closed. Harry grabbed the syringe, and stared at her. Undecided, he hovered with the syringe close to her leg. The syringe contained a mixture of saline, and Devil’s Breath, the same kind the French bartender used. Once given, Laura would be conscious, and do everything he asked of her, without ever remembering anything afterwards. Slowly, he replaced the syringe, then started the airplane and took off. As soon as the airplane was at cruising altitude Harry took out his cell phone and made a call.
“Hi Harry, what’s up?” Someone answered.
“Hold on.” Quickly Harry looked back at Laura, satisfied that she was still asleep; he continued. “Hi Pete, I have a gem here. Red hair, petite and beautiful, I think she will fetch a high price. Arrange for private parking and a customs officer when I land, should be just over four hours from now.” Harry looked back twice at Laura while he spoke.
Below Laura’s feet, Victor clenched his fists while his face went red. The fuck is smuggling backpacking girls and selling them off as sex workers.
Harry looked back at Laura as he cut the call. That sleeping pill will wear off soon, better I drug her before she wakes up.
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

Slowly his left hand slid down from the controls and grabbed the syringe. He quickly turned in his seat, then leaned over and grabbed Laura’s arm. He gave her arm a few taps, and found a vein, a smile spread on his face as he placed the needle against the vein.

Click.

Harry jumped and his face went white as Victor pulled the pistol’s hammer back and pressed the tip of the silencer against his head. Slowly, Victor came up from under the jacket and backpacks.

Smack.

Harry’s head whiplashed as Laura slapped him.

“Honey, please, that’s not how it’s done.” Victor said, and then punched Harry on the nose, breaking it. As Harry screamed in pain, tears filled his eyes and blood gushed from his nose.

“That’s how it’s done.” Victor said to Laura, and then continued.

“So, now we know your real trade. Turn around, use your shirt to stop the bleeding, and fly the airplane. Any false moves and I will kill you and fly the airplane myself.” Fire burned in Victor’s eyes. Harry’s hands shook as he struggled to remove his shirt and stop the bleeding.

“What are you going to do Victor?” Laura balled her fists at Harry.

“Nothing, get to Colombia and find new transport,” Victor lied, then looked at Harry as he sat whimpering in the chair. After I kill you.

“But what about the abducted girls? We have to help them.” Laura pleaded. Victor’s eyes found Laura’s and for a moment, he remained in silent thought.

“Tell me everything you know, who meets you, how many people, and where they take the girls.” Harry jumped as Victor placed the pistol against his head and gave it a nudge.
“I know nothing. I just drop off the girls. They pay me for the previous shipment, and then I leave.” Harry whimpered, while his body shook and a dark spot appeared between his legs.

“Then we will meet your friend. Fly the airplane.”

Harry eagerly nodded, then replaced his shirt when the bleeding stopped. Victor watched him closely as he flew the airplane to their destination. Hours later, Harry turned to Victor.

“We are close. I have to get approval to land.”

“Do so, but know I am a pilot and one wrong word and I shoot you, and then land the plane myself.”

“Okay.”

“As soon as you get clearance, call your friend and tell him she is sedated, and all is in order.” Victor spat out. Dutifully, Harry obeyed Victor’s orders. Just past 7pm, Harry descended the airplane and landed it, then taxied it to an abandoned hangar far from the main building. A double cab Dodge Ram 1500 pickup truck switched on its lights and slowly drove closer.

“Laura, lay down.” Victor pulled Laura down beside him, and then pressed the pistol hard into Harry’s kidney.

“Ok, this is how it’s going to work. You are going to sit here until your friend gets out of the truck, then we will all get out together. Laura will then stay here with you, while I go with your friend to where the girls are, bring them back, and you can fly them home. If you cooperate, you may get out of this alive.”

A smile spread on Harry’s face as he listened to Victor’s plan. Stupid man, leave the girl here with me. As soon as you are gone, she is mine, and I alert my buddies. Harry eagerly nodded his agreement, and then looked down at Victor. He is just acting tough. Probably ran away with this girl after he stole money from her dad. The boys will teach him a lesson while I have my way with her. The door of the truck opened, and a bald six-foot 220-pound block of solid muscle stepped out.
“Okay, open the door and ask the man to help you with the girl, and then get out.” Victor poked Harry in the side with his pistol when Harry did not respond. Harry jumped, and quickly opened the door.

“Hi Pete, got a nice one here, come and help me get her out, had to sedate her. She is a wild one.” Harry waited until Pete was 10 feet away, then slid out of the airplane and turned around to look inside. His face went pale as a silencer pressed against his head. Two bullets ripped through his head and exploded at the back in a pink fountain. Quickly Victor pushed Harry’s body out of the way and aimed at Pete as he jumped out.

“On the ground now, hands on your head, or you join your friend,” Victor yelled.

Pete froze, and his jaw hung as he looked at Harry. Slowly his face turned skew as he snarled and his eyes spat fire. Glaring at Victor, he slowly dropped to his knees.

“You must think I’m stupid to leave her alone with you,” Victor commented to Harry, while Laura climbed out of the airplane with their two backpacks.

“Laura, please go check in the truck to see if you can find anything to tie him up with, go wide around him okay?”

“Okay.” Laura went wide around Pete towards the truck. After searching both the front and back of the truck she returned with a rope that was intended for her.

“Thank you. Pete, lie down, hands behind your back.” Slowly Pete went down while he clenched his jaw and his eyes threw death at Victor, who stopped five feet away.

“Laura, go behind Pete and tie up his legs.” As Laura tied Pete’s legs together, he glanced back over his shoulder at Laura.

Zip.

Both Laura and Pete jerked as a bullet ricocheted off the ground an inch from Pete’s head.

“Aah, no peeking. Move again and it’s a bullet in each shoulder.” Pete scoffed at Victor’s threat.

“I need you to talk, not lift heavy stuff.”
For a moment, Pete glared at Victor, and then dropped his head to the ground. *The way he dropped Harry, this is no amateur.*

“Nice work Laura. Pete put your right arm in front of your body, while you keep your left behind you.” As soon as Pete obeyed, Victor continued.

“Laura, please tie his arm and legs together, but leave some slack, so he can get up.” As soon as Laura was done, Victor continued.

“Right arm, Pete.” Pete obeyed, and Laura tied his two arms together. Pete closed his eyes as he tested the ropes, just as he feared, he could stand, but not bring his arms in front of him.

“What do you want from me, money? Drugs? I can give you plenty of both.” Pete’s voice was void of fear, and hinted that he was sizing Victor up and looked for a way out.

“Turn around, lie on your back.” Reluctantly Pete obeyed.

“Laura, can you please open the tailgate?” Laura nodded and did as asked.

“Pete, hop on the back.” Pete pulled his legs together, and struggled to get up, but eventually managed. For a moment he did not move.

“Hop over to the back of the truck and lie down over the tailgate with your feet on the ground.” Victor motioned to the truck with the pistol as he spoke. Pete spat on the ground, then with death stares at Victor, hopped to the truck’s tailgate and lay down. Quickly Victor picked Pete’s legs up and pushed him totally onto the back of the truck.

“Laura, you’ll have to drive, open the back sliding window, and I’ll get the directions from Pete.”

Laura immediately got into the truck while Victor jumped into the back with Pete and closed the tailgate.

“Roll over and push yourself up against the cab until you can sit comfortably.” Victor’s voice was cold and hard. With a moan, Pete obeyed, and then glared at Victor.

“What n…”

Zip.
Pete yelled in pain as Victor shot him in the right foot.
“You are dead. You hear me.” Pete screamed.
“Stop your complaining, it is less than you deserve. Now tell me where the hidden exit point is off the airport to avoid customs before I hurt you.”

Pete’s jaw dropped. *Hurt me, he already shot me in the foot. What does hurt me, mean then?*

“Over there,” Pete pointed with his head towards the back of the hangar.

“No lights until we are on the road Laura, get us out of here. Pete, give Laura directions to the house where the girls are, and no tricks, Harry told me how far the house was from the airport,” Victor lied. Death ran its icy nails along Pete’s back as he stared into Victor’s eyes. He swallowed hard. *This is the first man ever to scare me.*

Pete gave the directions to Laura as they drove, while he planned his escape. All he needed was one mistake from either of them. Pete smiled. *That’s it. I will lie about how many men are in the house. They will get him.* Pete gave Victor a grin, unaware of Victor’s interrogation tactics.

“There, second house on the left,” Pete said after half an hour of driving.

“Stop here Laura, lights off,” Victor said with a polite tone, and then turned his gaze to Pete.

“How many, where, and what guns do they have?” Victor’s voice was cold.

“Two, upstairs with the girls, only pistols, they are expecting me. You can walk right in. The door key is on the truck keys.”

“Good boy.” Victor stuffed a rag in Pete’s mouth. Pete laughed at Victor behind the rag. *Good, he fell for it, sucker.*

Zip.

“MmmmmMMM.” Pete screamed against the rag as Victor shot him in the left knee. Victor let him squirm and patiently waited for him to stop screaming.
“What the hell.” Pete said breathlessly as Victor took the rag out of his mouth. Sweat dripped down his white face.

“How many, where, and what guns?”

“Four, four, three downstairs and one upstairs, all 9mm pistols and 9mm Uzi’s, shit it hurts, fuc..” Victor stuffed the rag back into Harry’s mouth.

“Shh, no screaming, now, password?” Victor slowly removed the rag when Pete mumbled something.

“None, no password,” Pete spat out while his chest heaved. Slowly Victor replaced the rag.

Zip.

Pete squirmed as Victor shot him in the right knee. Tears flowed freely down his cheeks.

“Password?”

There was a moment’s silence, then a muffled ‘Okay okay’. As soon as Victor removed the rag, Pete cried out.

“Winter night, winter night, that’s the password.” Victor replaced the rag and aimed the pistol at Pete’s crotch.

“Password?” Pete cried even harder, and his body jerked from sobbing. Slowly Victor removed the rag.

“It’s winter night. I swear, please I am telling the truth,” Pete cried.

“I believe you,” Victor replaced the rag, and then looked Pete in the eye.

Zip Zip.

Pete squirmed and slammed his head against the back of the truck as Victor shot him twice in the groin.

“That’s for the girls, for the pain you caused them.” Victor waited a few seconds then shot Pete in the head. Blood and brains splattered over the back window, and Pete gave one last twitch before his body went still and slowly slid down on the truck bed. Victor looked up and into Laura’s wide eyes and white face, where she stood next to the truck, with her hands over her mouth. For a moment, no one moved, and then Laura said.
“How can you be so opposite, so cold and heartless -- a killer at times -- yet so loving, gentle, and soft?”

“It is not about whom you kill, but who you allow to live. I kill when allowing that person to live will cause more harm to the world than killing the person. In his case, it was either him or more girls being kidnapped when he heals, or possibly seeking revenge and coming after us. Stay here.”

Victor jumped off the back of the truck as he spoke. Quickly he took the four spare magazines out of the backpack and reloaded the pistol, then walked to the house. A large two-story house, with no fence or garden, just an open dirt patch to the front door, hid the dark secrets that lay inside. The lack of security lights and cameras hinted that it was foolhardy to walk in the front door uninvited.

The single dim porch light gave Victor plenty of shadows to blend in with, as he made his way to the front wall of the house. Victor’s pulse quickened as he pressed his back against the wall under the porch light. A solid pine door with a peephole, barred the entrance. Victor’s eyes darted across the yard in search of threats while he quickly removed his shirt. The heat of the bulb soaked through his T-shirt while he unscrewed it. The bulb ticked as it cooled off where it lay on the ground, while Victor replaced his shirt. Darkness hugged Victor when he knocked on the door. He swallowed and changed his grip on the pistol, his breathing deep and steady.

“Who is it?” Came a tired voice from inside.

“It’s me, Pete, help me. Harry shot me. The bastard double crossed us,” Victor’s voice was hoarse.

“Password Pete.” The voice was laced with anxiety.

“Winter night, fuck, open the door, I need a doctor,” Victor took a step back from the door. The door lock being disengaged was sweet music to Victor’s ears.

“Hold on Pete, we’ll take care of you.” Light from inside lit the porch up as the door opened. Now. Victor exploded into action and kicked the door.
“Uhh.” The man cried as the edge of the door caught him full in the face and knocked him to the ground. Adrenaline rushed through Victor as he busted into the house. Quick, kill.

Zip.

The doorman’s head burst open and shocked-filled dead eyes stared, as Victor jumped over him. Victor’s heart raced as his eyes darted across the room. Move. Two men at a table in the corner jumped to action. They exchanged their poker cards for the guns on the table.

Zip.

The first guy stumbled against the wall as Victor’s round took him in the chest. Duck. Victor bounced as he slammed into the floor behind a couch while 9mm Uzi bullets tore the wall and couch up.

“Die you bastard.” The second card player yelled as he peppered the couch. Feathers and dust rained down on Victor.

Click.

“Oh shit.” The guy looked at the empty machine gun in his hand. His eyes widened and his lips trembled when he looked up and stared down the barrel of Victor’s pistol. He swallowed hard as a tear rolled down his cheek.

Zip Zip.

Two bullets broke his heart for good. Victor jumped over the torn up couch and ran to the stairs. A door being ripped open upstairs, changed his plan and he dived past the stairs and skidded on the open-plan kitchen’s tile floor. His pistol slightly shook in his hand from adrenaline while his heart raced, as a man ran down the stairs.

“What the fuck is g...”

Zip Zip. Two bullets cut the man’s words off.

Victor’s chest heaved as he jumped up while the man rolled down the stairs. Victor’s pulse echoed in his ears as he stepped over the man and inched his way upstairs.

Creek.
Victor’s heart stopped. The floorboards in the landing area above complained as someone shifted their weight on it. *Did Pete lie? How many are there* Victor swallowed as he leaned against the wall and aimed up the stairs.

Creek.

Victor’s eyes narrowed as sweat dripped down his face. His finger squeezed the trigger just as a head inched around the corner above. *No!* Victor’s wrist twitched as the hammer fell on the firing pin and changed his aim at the last moment. Wide eyed, a girl stared white face at him as the bulled slammed an inch above her head into the wall.

“Don’t shoot, we are unharmed.” She cried as she ran naked downstairs and hugged Victor. Suspecting a trap, Victor brushed her aside and slowly moved upstairs. Five rooms waited upstairs for him to have their doors kicked in. With each door that fell before Victor, anger burned brighter in him. Each room had 10 pairs of scared eyes that stared pleadingly at him from shaking naked girls who huddled in the corners, as tears rolled down their cheeks. The top floor covered, Victor slowly moved downstairs and made sure each man was dead. Victor shook his head as he scanned the men. *A small Victory in human trafficking, but a big win for the women.* Soft footsteps from the stairs made him turn around. One by one, the girls came downstairs and looked at their former captures and abusers. Some cried while others kicked the bodies.

“Thank you mister.” A voice said at his side. Soft lips touched his as he turned to face the voice. Hands and lips covered Victor as 50 naked girls thanked him for saving their lives. Victor retreated to the safety of the front door just as Laura walked in. Speechless, she stared at the women all wanting to touch Victor as he made his way to her.

“Wait an hour for us to leave, and then call the police. Give them a false description of us.” Victor said as he reached Laura, and then left the house.
“Thank you.” The girls shouted as Victor made his way back to the truck. Quickly he pulled Pete’s body from the truck, then grabbed a garden hose from a yard and gave the back window and bed a rinse before he jumped behind the driver’s seat. He opened the passenger door for Laura from the inside, and as she climbed in, she commented.

“A lot of beautiful naked women in there, all wanting your body.”

“They don’t have your eyes.” Victor winked, then started the truck and raced away. Laura gave him a kiss on the cheek and placed her head on his shoulder.

“Where to now?”

“There’s a small airport near Ipailes on the Colombia and Guatemala border, we can get a private airplane there and fly to Peru. It’ll be far enough away from this and a small enough airport that no one will be looking for us there.”

“How long will it take to get there?”

“It’s about 500 miles. Around 16 hours normally, running the truck flat-out, half that, getting us there around 9 am tomorrow morning.”

“How do you know all this?” Laura smiled as Victor held up his cell phone with a route plotted on the map application.

“Can you please get my cell charger in the side pocket of my backpack?” Victor asked. Laura quickly retrieved the charger, and plugged it into the truck’s electrical outlet and then into Victor’s phone.

“Thank you Laura. Try to get some rest, you’re going to need it.”

Laura nodded, then climbed over to the back seat and made herself comfortable while Victor opened the truck up to 110 miles per hour. Sleep took its time to come to Laura and she welcomed it when it did.
Three hours later, the lack of bumps and shakes woke Laura on the back seat. Sleepily she yawned and stretched, then looked outside as she found the front seat empty. The truck was parked at a deserted small gas station with a convenience store. Laura pressed her nose against the window and cupped her hands by her temples as she narrow-eyed stared at the convenience store. *Did Victor gas the truck and go inside the shop to get food?*

Screech. “Dance dance dance the night away.”

Laura jerked as an open top, yellow Jeep Wrangler with radio turned full blast, stopped next to the truck with tires screeching. Four pairs of drunken eyes stared into the cab, and then a chorus of hollers erupted as they saw Laura. Heinekens in hand, they waved at her.

“Jump in.” One of the guys in the back yelled to Laura as he stood up in his seat and held onto the roll bar. The Jeep rocked gently from side to side as the driver revved the big motor. Laura gasped as one guy at the back jumped off the jeep and yanked on the truck’s back door.

“Show us some titties.” He yelled, and pressed his face against the window when he found the door locked. His eyes widened when Laura showed him her middle finger. Laura frowned, and then looked away in disgust as the man jumped back onto the jeep, pulled his pants down, and urinated against the back window, closest to Laura.

“I will get her out.” He shouted, as he grabbed a lug wrench from the back. With his pants around his knees, he leapt from the Jeep, drawing cheers came from his mates.

“Open the door or I will smash the window,” he yelled, while tapping on the window with the lug wrench.

Laura’s face went white and her heart raced. Quickly she backed away from the window as the guy pulled the lug wrench far back and prepared to swing it with all his might.
“Ouch.” Slipped from the man’s lips as he dropped to the ground from a kick to the back of his knees, banging his head against the truck. Stars filled his vision as a powerful kick to the back of his head made him kiss the truck again. For a moment, he swayed gently, then dropped unconscious to the ground.

“Gringo, fucking gringo.” The second guy at the back yelled and jumped up in his seat. The man swallowed hard, and tears formed in his eyes as Victor punched him in the groin. Slowly he sagged back into his seat, while clutching his groin. Victor casually took a sip of coffee, as the driver ripped open his door.

“I will, uuuuhhh.” The driver collapsed to the ground as he got the same groin massage, then a knee in the face.

“Really?” Victor said as the fourth guy jumped out and ran around the Jeep to get to Victor. The guy stopped at the back of the Jeep and sized Victor up while balling his fists. Victor took another sip of coffee, and the man took advantage of it and charge. The truck’s back door stopped him dead in his tracks when Laura swung it open. The man swayed a bit and stumbled a step back, then spun to face Laura and drag her out of the truck. His eyes watered as Laura kicked him in the groin from where she lay on the back seat. As the man swallowed his nuts back down, Victor kicked the truck’s door closed. The man’s head whiplashed as the door caught him on the shoulder and threw him headfirst into the side of the truck. As he slowly slid to his knees, he glimpsed inside the truck and swallowed. Blood gushed over his face and shirt as Laura’s kick broke his nose. With a moan, he dropped backwards and then passed out. Victor scanned the men as he took another sip of coffee, pulled out the truck’s keys, and climbed into the driver’s seat.

“There’s milk and sugar on the tray,” he said, as he placed the tray with Laura’s coffee on the center console, not a drop spilled. Laura took her coffee as Victor started the truck and pulled away. She took a sip, and then stared out into the night. Will we ever have a normal life? Laura turned her gaze to Victor and her eyes narrowed, while she studied him for a moment.
“Pull over, I will drive, you are tired.”
“Okay.” Victor replied and pulled over. He was glad to swap seats with Laura.
“How far still? Laura asked as she climbed in behind the wheel.”
“Flat out, five hours.” Victor replied as he lay down on the back seat.
“Five it is.” The engine’s roar drowned Laura’s words, as she smoked the back wheels. The back fishtailed and Laura expertly brought it back under control.
“You have had training.” Victor said impressed.
“A little, Laura smiled as the speed indicator passed 100 and continued to climb.” The road was one empty long stretch that boringly glided by in the early-morning breeze. An hour later, Laura started to shift uneasily in her seat. The welcome cup of coffee was now urging her to see a roadside bush. Laura glanced back at Victor and smiled. He was fast asleep and made light puppy snoring sounds. Gently, Laura slowed down, not wanting to wake Victor, and pulled well off the road behind some large shrubs. Laura pressed her lips together as she held her bladder. She quickly switched the engine and the lights off, and then pressed her legs together while seeking out a suitable scrub.

Relieved Laura quickly unbuttoned her shorts and was just about to pull it down when the roar of a powerful engine running at max quickly approached her. Laura jerked as a strong hand pushed her down just before lights from a Yellow Jeep Wrangler lit the up area. She clenched her jaw and pressed her legs together as she desperately held her bladder while Victor held her down.

“Why are you crying?” Victor asked, as a tear formed in Laura’s eye.

“Turn around I have to go, now.” Laura said through her teeth and ripped her pants down as she jumped up.
“Aaahhhh.” Laura softly moaned as relieve filled her, while Victor bit his lip to stop from laughing. He managed to reach the truck before he gave in and burst out laughing. As Laura proudly walked back, he wiped a tear from his face and giggled as she got into the driver’s seat.

“Do you think they are after us?” Laura asked concerned.

“Yes. I think they mean to settle the score after I gave them a lesson in manners at the gas station.”

“What do we do?”

“Give them twenty minutes head start, Laura.” Victor climbed back into the back seat and lay down again. Laura grabbed one of the snacks from Victor’s backpack with some water, and then leaned back in her seat. 25 minutes later, she slowly eased the truck back onto the road, and let the tires chew up the long boring asphalt. Miles flew past and Laura’s mind wandered through memories and a future to come.

“Victor. Victor, wake up,” Laura whispered three hours later as she gently shook Victor’s shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” Victor’s hand tightened around the pistol on his lap, and he scanned the scene around the truck.

“Up ahead.”

“I see it.” Victor sat upright. 500 feet along the road, a bus was blocked in by a car and a yellow Jeep Wrangler. Laura had seen the lights far up ahead, and had switched the truck’s lights off as she slowed down and pulled well into the bushes alongside the road. Victor made sure the interior light was off, and then slowly got out.

Fearful commanding voices mixed with scared cries drifted into the early-morning air. Victor rechecked the magazine on the silenced 9mm Beretta he took from the hit man, and then slid two spare magazines in his pocket.

“Stay here, lock the doors.” Victor whispered.
The shrubs gave excellent coverage, and Victor sneaked within 100 feet of the bus. A powerful motor fired up, and Victor quickly dropped to the ground. Lights from a Yellow Jeep Wrangler pushed the darkness away as four men, beer in hand sped past. Victor watched the taillights disappear into the darkness. *Those four goons must be hired thugs. They must have seen the truck’s lights approaching, then disappear as Laura switched them off, and now they're going to investigate.* Slowly Victor stood up, and continued to sneak up on the bus.

50 feet away, under the cover of night and shrubs, Victor assessed the situation. A few passengers were lined up alongside the bus, with two armed soldiers keeping guard over them. Two additional soldiers manhandled the remaining passengers off the bus. Each person was brought in front of two other men, one dressed in a pressed black suit, the other in a general’s uniform. One by one, they got the same welcome. A stream of Spanish screamed at them, and when they did not reply, they were forced into a position in the lineup alongside the bus.

“Crap.” Victor whispered to himself as he caught a few Spanish words he knew. *They are looking for stolen money.* Victor inched forward, then stopped and took the safety off the pistol. *This is not good.* Victor’s pulse quickened as a passenger, who was just brought in front of the General, pointed to the cargo hold of the bus. The General snapped an order, and the soldier who just brought the passenger off the bus, ripped the cargo doors open and threw bag after bag of luggage on the ground. He stopped when he pulled two large black sports bags from the hold. Quickly the soldier unzipped both bags, then took out a stack of bills from one and held it up in the air for the General to see. Victor used the opportunity and crept closer. Victor’s heart stopped as the suit waved his hand and barked an order. “Matarlos a todos”, *kill them all.*
Victor swallowed and his heart race. *I have to stop them.* The General nodded to the soldiers, turned around, and followed the suit to a black 500 SL Mercedes parked in front of the bus. Victor quickly moved to within 10 feet of the back of the bus and hid behind shrubs as one of the soldiers went back onto the bus to help his comrade pull the last passengers off the bus. The two remaining soldiers outside, took aim at the passengers lined up against the bus.

Victor’s eyes narrowed as he took aim at the first soldier just as the man raised his machine gun at the passengers. *Now, quick.*

Zip.

A perfect head shot. *Move move.* Victor’s heart thumped as he jumped up and took aim just as the second soldier spun around and took aim at him.

Zip zip.

Adrenaline pumped through Victor as the second soldier dropped, while dark stains formed on his chest. Quickly Victor sprinted to the back of the bus. His chest heaved, as he glanced around the corner. *Duck.* Victor dropped to his knees just as the general squeezed off a round. The bullet slammed into the bus where Victor’s head was just as the pistol in Victor’s hand rocked.

Zip zip…Zip.

Two bullets to the General’s chest spread him over the car’s hood. A single bullet to the suit’s head dropped him next to his car as he stared wide-eyed at this man who dared attack him. Screaming in fear, the passengers ran in all directions. Victor dropped to the ground just in time as a soldier indiscriminately opened up from inside the bus and bullets slammed into the ground next to Victor. Quickly he rolled underneath the bus just as a soldier jumped out of the bus and shot up the back of the bus. *Now.* Victor shot from behind the cover of the back wheel, and the man dropped to the ground. Dirt sprang up in Victor’s face as the last soldier on the bus shot through the floor. *‘Move move.’*
Victor desperately crawled underneath the bus to the front while the soldier inside shot the ground up underneath the back of the bus. Victor swallowed as the pistol, steady in his hands, waited to say hello the moment the soldier stepped off the bus. His finger twitched on the trigger as a pair of legs appeared inches from him, where he lay beneath the door of the bus. Slowly he brought the pistol in line with the man’s calf, and then stopped. Sandals and chapped heels froze his finger on the trigger.

Sweat dripped from Victor’s brow as he patiently waited for the soldier to push the farmer forward and exit himself. 30 seconds passed before the farmer unwillingly moved forward. A smile touched Victor’s lips as a pair of boots and Camo pants filled his vision. Hello.

Zip.

The man’s screams filled the empty night as his shinbone shattered. As the soldier dropped to the ground, Victor offloaded three rounds at random into his body. A single shot stopped the soldier’s moans as Victor crawled out from underneath the bus. Slowly, scared eyes emerged out from the night, then came over and thanked Victor, who understood less than half of what they said.

“First you sort out a rude server, then you rescue a room full of pretty naked girls, and now you save a bus full of people. What next?” Victor spun around to face Laura.

“I thought I told you to stay in the truck, what are you doing here?” Victor said out of breath, his heart still wildly pumping adrenaline-loaded blood. Laura ignored his question and continued. “They’re asking you, what about the money?”

Victor looked down at the two black bags, and 10 million dollars smiled back at him. His eyes then scanned over the malnutrition and poorly clothed people that surrounded him. Slowly he turned to the bus driver.

“Get them back on the bus and out of here, then later divide the money equally.”
“Yes senior, yes.” The driver responded and started herding people back onto the bus, then stopped. Victor pushed through the people and ran down the road as the roar of a powerful engine foretold the returning of four drunk and angry men. Victor reloaded as he ran. He squatted 400 feet from the bus behind some shrubs. His pulse slightly raced while he waited.

Victor took a deep breath when the Jeep came into view and jumped up just before the Jeep passed him. His body turned with his aim as the Jeep passed by. The pistol kicked in his hand. A red splash against the driver’s side of the front window testified of a hit. Tires squealed as the Jeep veered left then right, then sharply left and tipped over and rolled. Beer bottles and men were thrown from the jeep as it tore itself to pieces. Victor’s chest heaved as he ran flat out after the Jeep. The two back passengers lay bloodied and moaning in the road. Victor gave each a sleeping pill to the head.

Coughing came from beneath the mangled upturned Jeep, and Victor quickly made his way over. The front passenger was pinned beneath the Jeep, his body almost cut in half. Crimson blood flowed with every cough as he killed Victor with his eyes. He spat a mouthful of blood at Victor, which missed and said. “Fucking gringo.” His head rocked twice as two bullets were the last things that went through his mind.

“Does death always follow you?” Laura asked from where she stood, wide-eyed, a few feet away.

“Laura, quickly, get our backpacks from the truck, we have to get out of here.” Victor ran towards the Mercedes and searched the general. Laura joined him when he found the car keys, and quickly they jumped into the car. The car was pointing in the wrong direction, and Victor smoked the back wheels as he reversed the car a distance, then slid the rear around until the car pointed in the right direction. Smoke billowed from the back as the big 5L V8 propelled the car down the road.
“Not bad for a biker.” Laura laughed and got a wink as a reply.

“Why take the car?”

“We need to get as far away from here as quickly as possible. That may be a corrupt General back there, but he is still a General, and I think the guy in the suite is a local drug lord who controls the army. Soon the roads will be crawling with police and there will be more roadblocks than stars in the sky.”

The big Mercedes chewed the road up and two hours later, they passed a sign that proudly said. ‘San Luis Airport’. Victor pulled the car far off the road, near the side road that the led to the airport. He wiped the pistol he took off the hitmen and his own, clean of fingerprints, and then buried them a distance away from the car.

“Why did you get rid of your pistol?” Laura asked when Victor joined her by the car and they started to walk to the airport.

“Those pistols killed a lot of people, and it would not be wise to be caught with them if we get searched by customs.”

The early morning sun spread its warmth over the valley and smiled upon them while they made their way to the airport.

“It is larger than I thought.” Laura said when they came to stop at the entrance. A medium-sized airport with two runways and multiple buildings proudly stood in front of them. Inside, Victor quickly located the information desk and inquired about hiring a private airplane. After five minutes, he left the desk, armed with a phone number and directions to a pay phone. Laura went to sit on a bench nearby while Victor made the call.

“Ola.” A friendly female voice said after three rings.

“Uh...Hello.” Victor made a mental note to learn Spanish in the distant future.

“Oh, hello, how can I help?” Relieved that she spoke English Victor replied. “We were given this number to call for hiring an airplane. Do you rent out airplanes?”
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

“Yes, that is my son. Wait, I will call him.” Victor scanned the near empty airport while the sounds of dogs barking and a woman calling in the background came from the phone.

“José speaking. You want to rent an airplane?” Asked an out of breath young male voice a minute later.

“Yes, can you take us immediately?”

“Depends on where you want to go and how many.”

“Peru, two, a romantic trip.”

“Where in Peru do you want to go? Cusco and Lima are impossible for me.”

“We seek a private tour to some of the ruins in the lost valley, starting with Vilcabamba and progressing on to the new ruin site that was found.”

“That I can do. Did it twice before. However, I have to follow the river between the mountains. At 20 000 feet in some places, only a commercial airliner can go over them. It is a bit of a bumpy ride, but the scenery is very beautiful.” came José’s eager response.

“Perfect, how much?”

“Two thousand dollars each.” Even though it was a bargain to Victor, he did not want to sound too eager and replied. “One thousand each.”

“One and a half.”

“Fine, but you handle the customs and get us through without needing to stand in long lines.” Victor chanced that José had contacts or could bribe the customs officer.

“No problem. Where are you?” José’s voice was filled with eagerness for the trip. Romantic private tours always held the possibility of additional side trips at huge cost.

“We are at San Luis Airport.”

“That is where my airplane is. However, I can only be there in four hours. Wait for me just outside the departure area; I will be wearing a blue shirt saying ‘José’s Travels’ on it.”

“Four hours, we’ll be waiting.”

“Are we walking or flying?” Laura joked when Victor joined her on the bench.
“Flying, I hope. He said he could get us through customs.”
“Another smuggler.” Laura rolled her eyes.
“Hope not. You want breakfast? He will be here in four hours.” Victor held out his hand, helped Laura up, and went in search of a place to eat. 20 minutes later, Victor’s mouth watered as the server placed his breakfast of steak, eggs, toast, and coffee in front of him.
“So you have been avoiding telling me exactly what you did.” Laura cut her bacon while she waited for a reply.
“Well, in short, private black ops. Counter sniping for presidents or large cooperation directors on functions, protection in high profile kidnapping ransom exchanges, rescue of captured crew from pirates, elimination of Warlords for governments, elimination of terrorist leaders when they hid in countries the US or UK could not legally operate, that kind of stuff.”
“I see. And now someone sent those men to kill us in Cayman, why?
“I believe the same person that originally ordered the rogue spy eliminated, have now placed a contract on me. And I think it has something to do with the dossiers of the 500 people. I think that someone very powerful is afraid that I know he/she is not who they say they are.”
“In that case they will never stop chasing us.” Laura’s eyes searched for Victor’s as she spoke.
“No, probably not until they are caught or eliminated.”
“What are we going to do, Victor?”
“First, we need to make sure the scrolls don’t fall into Russian’s hands. Then we will live under the radar for a while and hope all blows over. I will contact the agency after some time, and see what’s up.”
“And if they still want us dead?”
“Then a lot of people will die until I figure out who wants us dead.”
“Then we had better find the scrolls fast before they find us.”
Laura took a bite of bacon and scrambled eggs while her words hung in the air. They finished their breakfast in silence, and then went window-shopping until it was time to meet José. The departure's area was almost deserted, save for two elderly people waiting to board a flight. Victor and Laura took a seat near the exit and waited. A few minutes later, a mid-20s, 5 foot 3 inches man of medium build, with dark tanned skin and long black hair, walked towards them. He wore a blue shirt with small lettering embroidered on it that read ‘José’s Travels’ with an airplane flying around the lettering.

“You called for a private airplane?”
“Yes, name’s John, this is Sue.”

“Nice to meet you, I am José. Come with me, I will help you through customs.”

José led them through the airport to the customs section. He stopped a short distance away from a window where an elderly woman sat with a teacup in her hand, staring at a magazine crossword puzzle.

“Passports quickly.” José held out his hand, and Victor quickly handed over their passports. Laura swallowed as José walked up to the woman and started to weave his charm. Gently, Laura slipped her hand into Victor’s, who lightly squeezed it. Her pulse quickened when the woman shoed José away with her hand and informed him that he must follow protocol.

“Victor, this is not looking good.”
“I know.”

Laura and Victor slowly started to inch backwards, but stopped when the woman placed her teacup down and glared at them. For a moment, she scrutinized them, and then shifted her attention to José, who was promising her an attractive list of favors for helping his customers on her tea break. Laura sighed when the lady held out her hand and took the passports from José.

“Oh crap.” Victor whispered.
“What’s wrong?” Laura’s wide eyes pleaded for an answer.
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

“I forgot that we never had our passports stamped when we came into Colombia with Harry. How are we going to explain that one?” Laura’s grip tightened on his hand. Her heart raced when the woman flipped through their passports, dropped her eyebrows, then smelled the passports. For a moment, her trained eyes scanned every line on the passport while her fingers glided over every fold, and then looked directly at Laura. The woman’s eyes crumbled Laura, who cringed under the suspecting stare.

Seconds became eternity, and then slowly the woman raised her hand and moved it over to a red button on the counter. For a moment, her hand hovered over the button. Laura’s heart was in her throat, and she had a death grip on Victor while she held her breath. Laura gasped when the woman’s hand dropped to press the button. Just as her hand touched it, José slid a $100 over the counter to her. The woman stared at the money, her hand gently resting on the red button. Slowly José leaned forward and whispered a few words to her, while they both looked at Laura.

The woman scratched her chin for a moment, then nodded and picked up the two passports and stamped them. José thanked her as she handed the passports back to him, then left her drinking her tea again.

“What did you say to her to get her to stamp the passports?” Laura asked when José led them away.

“I told her you came into Columbia by boat, near Tomaco on the coast, with new friends you made in Mexico. However, you found out they were drug dealers, so you ran away, and now I am flying you back to Mexico.”

“And she bought it?” Victor’s voice was full of skepticism.

“Let’s not stand around to find out,” José replied, while he made for a bag scanner where his cousin was on duty. José slipped him a note, and the man just glanced at the exit stamps in their passports, and then quickly waved them through without scanning their backpacks.
“This is too easy,” Victor whispered to Laura when they were out of earshot from the scanners.
“You are just being paranoid.” Laura smiled back.

Victor managed a weak smile, letting his eyes dart around while they followed José to a waiting area with a glass wall. Several small airplanes proudly spread their wings outside.

“That one is mine,” José said, and pointed to a Piper PA-28 Pathfinder Cherokee airplane.

“Uprated single engine, putting out 335 horsepower, she can do 190 miles an hour. 100 horsepower and 30 miles an hour more than a standard one.” José proudly smiled.

“What is her ceiling and range?” Victor wondered aloud. José laughed, and answered. “Do not worry, we will clear the smaller mountains. She can go just over 14 000 feet with a range of just over 500 miles. Come, let’s go.”

José spun around and walked directly into a large man in a General’s uniform. The man’s dark brown eyes bore into José while he twisted a long mustache that partially hid a scar on his left cheek. Laura gasped when four armed soldiers behind him stepped closer. Her heart raced when she glanced over her shoulder. Six more armed soldiers approached them from the scanner they had just come through.

“We are o…” José stopped when the General held up his hand. Laura’s hand was wet and cold as she crunched Victor’s when the General turned his attention to them. His eyebrows slowly dipped as he studied them for a moment, then stepped towards Victor.

“Your passports.” The General’s deep voice commanded respect.

Laura swallowed hard when Victor reluctantly handed over their passports. Her heart raced when the six soldiers behind them stepped to within arm’s reach of them while the General studied every small detail of their passports.

“Looks new but smells old.” The General held their passports close to his nose for a moment, and then handed them to a soldier behind him.
“My name is General Conzales. I am not sure if you are aware of four separate incidents that have occurred in the last 24 hours, involving a man and a woman fitting your description?” Victor shook his head while Laura stared at the floor. Her heart stopped when the General continued.

“Apparently a man attacked a server at his work, who happened to be Hernandez’s son. Hernandez was the largest drug lord and human trafficker in the world, until he and General Peppy, turned up dead on the road to this airport.” Conzales waited a moment for his words to sink in. Laura bit her lip while her knuckles turned white as she clenched Victor’s hand.

“We also found a pilot dead by his airplane at a small airport half a day’s ride from here. We’ve long believed him to be involved in smuggling drugs, guns, and women, but he’s managed to avoid being caught. And you say you know nothing of these incidents?” Victor looked Conzales in the eye for a moment.

“No Sir.”

“That is strange. For in another incident, the house where Hernandez kept the abducted women was hit, and all his men killed and the women freed. They say a handsome hero saved them. One girl took this photo of the hero with one of the dead men’s cell phone.”

Laura’s knees almost gave in when Conzales held up a cell phone with a picture that clearly showed Victor and Laura as they stood at the door of the house. Laura jumped when a soldier firmly took hold of her shoulder, while Victor got a hand on each shoulder. Conzales took a deep breath, and then sighed.

“I was working under the corrupt General Peppy, and now that he is dead with Hernandez, I am assuming command as General. I notice you have no entry stamp for Colombia in your passport. Do you have anything to say in that matter or about this picture?” Victor shook his head while José stood back and studied Victor intently.
“It is you. I thought I recognized you. I was on the bus. You saved us.” Victor stood frozen when José jumped forward and hugged him. Victor swallowed. Betrayed by someone I helped. Conzales nodded his head.

“Thought so. José, step back.”

“Yes, Dad.”

Laura’s jaw dropped, and she looked wide-eyed from José to Conzales and back. Her shocked expression drew a laugh from Conzales.

“Yes, he is my son. He stupidly stole money from Hernandez and thought he could get away with it by escaping on a local bus of all things.” Conzales shook his head at José who looked down at the ground.

“José would have been dead with all the people on that bus, but then you came and changed everything. In fact, you have done in one day what I could not do in five years.” Conzales stepped forward and shook Victor’s hand, who stared speechless at Conzales.

“Thank you, you saved our country and many lives. We are currently rounding up all the drug smugglers, corrupt politicians, and police, including many of Hernandez’s men who created and smuggled drugs for him. Some are now even coming forward and giving themselves up.” Conzales continued, as he turned to the soldier who held the passports.

“Make sure they have the correct entry stamps in their passports.” The man nodded, then ran off to one of the customs booths. A short while later, he returned and handed the passports to Conzales, who in turn gave them to Victor.

“I take it you need to leave for reasons I probably do not want to know?” Conzales asked as he looked at the airplane outside.

“Something like that.” Victor offered.

“Can you fly that airplane?” Conzales pointed to José airplane.

“Yes.”
“Take it; I need José here to help me rebuild things. We are indebted to you.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

Victor dropped one eyebrow when José tugged on his shirt’s sleeve and pulled him a short distance away.

“I need to tell you how to get to Vilcabamba.”

“Okay, what route should I fly?”

“The mountains are too high for you to fly over. I made the trip twice after studying aerial photographs of the mountains. You need to fly between the mountains, staying in the valleys.

“The route and waypoints you need to follow are already set in a GPS device in the airplane. Simply follow all the waypoints and turn into each valley as indicated on the GPS, and you will be fine.”

“What happens if I miss a waypoint?”

“Victor, my friend, then you owe me an airplane in our next life.”

“Understood, I will bring her back safely once I have finished with my business in Peru.”

“Good, I look forward to hearing some stories of how you managed to take care of all those people by yourself.”

“Deal, but I did not do it all by myself, she helped a lot,” Victor nodded towards Laura, who was approaching them slowly. José’s eyes widened and his jaw slightly hung.

“Is she good with a pistol?” José quickly asked before Laura was within earshot.

“Actually, she prefers to use her hands, twist a man’s head with one move and break his neck, snap, and it’s over.” Victor replied loud enough that Laura could hear, who acted as if she had not.

“Are you two done talking by yourselves or do I need to get rough before we can leave?” Laura placed her arm around José’s neck playfully and pulled him close to her.
We are done, we are done. Have a safe flight,” José blurted out, then pleadingly looked at Victor for help. Victor gave a slow nod to Laura, who slid her arm off José, then turned around and walked towards the glass door.

“That was close,” Victor commented and slapped José lightly on the shoulder, before he followed Laura.

José swallowed while he stood frozen, unsure if they were joking or not. Victor caught up with Laura by the glass door, and held it open for her while she stepped onto the tarmac. Hot, humid air greeted them while the sun smiled upon them.

“You are so mean,” Laura laughed while they made their way to the airplane.

“As if you did not like playing along.”

“I loved it, it was so cool.” Laura glowed, while her eyes sparkled, and she hopped to the airplane, then stopped and gasped when she looked at the name painted on the side. Dream Catcher.

“Jump in, Laura.” Victor threw their backpacks on the back seats while he noted the tail number of the airplane. ASIN1. Quickly he jumped into the pilot’s seat, and then helped Laura secure her seatbelt before he secured his. Satisfied that they were strapped in, he took a clipboard hanging by the controls and started the preflight checklist.

“So you learned to fly for your missions?”

“No, it is a hobby of mine. I love to just be in the air and punch through the clouds.” The airplane shuddered as the engine stuttered to life, and then settled in a low hum.

“San Luis Ground Control, this is Alfa Sierra Indigo November One, requesting permission to takeoff.”

“Alfa Sierra Indigo November One, this is San Luis Ground Control. You are cleared for takeoff on runway two, have a nice flight.” Victor lifted an eyebrow as he listened to the radio.

“General Gonzales is that you?”

“One and only.”
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

Victor taxied the airplane to the runway marked ‘2’, and then glanced at Laura while he opened the throttle up. The airplane shuddered slightly while it made its 800-foot dash down the runway.

“Wow.” Laura held her hands to her racing heart when Victor purposefully pulled hard back on the controls and pushed the airplane as fast as possible up to 12,000 feet.

“First time in a small airplane?” Victor tried to hold a straight face while he engaged the autopilot.

“Yes. That was amazing, and scary.” Laura gasped, then starry eyed stared as the world passed below them.

“Are we flying to Lima and then to Cusco?”

“No, Lima is almost the maximum altitude level of this airplane’s ceiling. We would be lucky if we cleared the mountains. We are heading directly to the lost city. They have tourist facilities there now, we will be able to land on a normal road with this plane.”

Laura appreciated the scenery for a few minutes, and then placed her left arm over the back of her seat while she rested her chin on her arm. Her eyes flowed over Victor.

“Were you born in the city?”

“Yes, Pretoria.”

“Pretoria. Sounds so cool. I was born in Carolina. Bet I got you beat. I was born in a clinic.”

“Actually, I was born in a monastery hospital with nuns as nurses, it was the only one left of its kind at the time.”

“What?” Laura gasped.

“Yup, beat you.” Victor laughed.

“Did you grow up there?”

“No. We moved to a farm for a few years, and then to the outskirts of the city.”

“You said you were in the army, but then worked for this covert company. How did that happen?”
“Was drafted when I got out of school. Military service was still mandatory back then. I managed to attract the attention of a general who secretly worked for the group and he offered me a different life.”

“And you worked for them up until this mission?”

“No, actually I left them a year ago, which is why it is strange why they suddenly want me dead. I only took this mission as a favor for the Vatican.”

“So where have you traveled to?” Laura gently bit her lip and waited with bated breath, but Victor let the question gather dust in the air.

“You’re not going to tell me?” Laura’s mouth drooped.

“Not now, another day.” Victor checked the map on the GPS to make sure they were still on course; he swallowed the lump down in his throat. He desperately tried to clear the reason why he attracted the General’s attention out of his mind.

“Okay, one day,” Laura said. The air in the cabin tensed up for a moment, and Laura undid her seat belt and leaned over. Gently she massaged Victor’s neck and the air in the cabin relaxed with his muscles.

“So, where are we going to land exactly?”

“There is a small airfield near Vilcabamba in the city of Santa Teresa that we can land on. The Peruvian government wants to promote tourism and is building an airport there. Although the airport is not finished, they have finished two runways to allow them to fly in building material directly, easier than trekking it up the mountain and through the jungle by trucks. From there we can rent a taxi to the lost city and start our search.”

“I will need new shoes for that.” Laura laughed while she leaned back in her chair and took her sandals off. Slowly she stretched herself out, and then placed her feet on the plane’s dash while her eyes eagerly drank up the scenery. Several hours later, mountains came into view.
“That is breathtaking.” Laura sat upright in her seat and peered out of the window. The mountains loomed in the distance, their tops shrouded in rolling white dragon’s breath. Lush green vegetation marched up from the foot of the mountains and made their stand high up against the white. Laura’s head tilted slightly when Victor banked the airplane left.

“We are almost at our first waypoint.” Victor said, as he reduced the scale on the GPS to more accurately resemble the ground below. One wrong turn would guarantee a date with the side of a mountain.

“That’s our way in.” Laura followed Victor’s hand and gasped. A large jewel-blue artery of earth lay bare in front of them as it snaked away between two peaks, their tops, sprinkled with white. Laura’s pulse quickened as Victor slowly reduced altitude and banked the airplane more. Her mouth formed a silent ‘wow’ as the sun’s rays glittered on the river 1000 feet below, and reflected in her sparkling eyes. Laura held her breath as Victor banked the airplane hard right, and steered it between the two peaks that stood guard at the entrance of a valley.

The engine settled into a low hum as Victor pulled the throttle back to just above stalling speed, more time for Laura to ‘oooh’ and ‘aaah’, and more time for Victor to turn. Giant boulders that hiked from their home on the top, now gathered at random in the river, where white foam held meetings around them. A long strait gave Laura and Victor time to flirt with their eyes. Laura’s heart fluttered while her head soared higher than the white dragon’s breath above, when Victor softly glided his hand over her naked thigh. Gently, she cupped his hand with hers, and then placed it over her beating heart. Her body showed its eagerness for his return in her, while trees either side, made an honor guard along the river for them.

“Shit.” Victor cursed.
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

Laura’s heart echoed her shock to Victor through his palm on her chest. She gasped as he pulled his warm hand away, and slapped the GPS, now dead. Laura’s face went ghostly white, while her large eyes stared at the fork up ahead. Which way, left or right?

“Laura, check the fuses.” The urgency in Victor’s voice quickened her pulse.

“Where is it?” Laura’s eyes frantically darted around the dash with its buttons and switched scattered around.

“By your feet, under the dashboard. Quick.” The fork loomed less than a minute away, with the airplane already at minimum speed. Laura’s breathing matched her racing heart as she ducked under the dashboard, and her fingers found the fuse box.

“Now would be a good time, Laura.”

Laura’s heart stopped, the lid refused to move. *Hurry, get it off.*

“The lid is stuck, hold on, okay got it.”

“No time.”

“Follow the river.” Laura yelled.

“It flows both ways.”

Laura’s heart dropped to her feet as Victor’s words echoed in her ears. Pain filled her head when it kissed the floorboard as the airplane banked hard right.

“Ouch, watch your flying.” Laura rubbed her head.

“Shit.”

“It’s okay, it wasn’t that bad.” Laura commented as she started to crawl out from under the dashboard.
“Dead end.” The roar of the engine at full throttle drowned Victor’s words, while the airplane shuddered. The blood drained from Laura’s face as she gasped. A massive cliff barred their path. White mist hung from the top like a curtain and pooled at the bottom. Laura’s jaw dropped as her eyes darted between Victor’s and the wall of death that rushed towards them. Victor’s muscles bulged as he strained against the shaking controls, urging the airplane to climb. 40 degrees up, come on, 50 degrees. Sweat dripped off his forehead, while he clenched his jaw as the airplane and controls shook almost uncontrollably. 70 degrees up, almost there. Slowly the sky started to come into view. 50 feet away from the wall, a blue sky filled the windscreen. Laura clung to her seat as the airplane climbed vertically up the waterfall.

Beep beep beep.

Laura jumped when the stall warning sounded. Victor strained against the controls and pulled back more. Laura’s scream almost shattered the windows as the airplane went over 90 degrees and tilted backwards. With a thud, she landed on the roof as the airplane fell inverted back down the way they came. Victor dipped the nose to build speed while the ground rushed at them. Laura braced herself with all fours against the roof as she looked past Victor’s head to the boulders below, which seemed eager to crush them.
“Nooo,” Laura screamed, as she crossed her arms in front of her and braced for the impact. Her throat tightened as the G-force pressed her flat against the roof when Victor at the last moment, pulled the nose up and flew the airplane inverted over the river. 10 feet bridged the gap between the tip of the tail and the river as they skimmed over the water. The engine strained while the airplane rattled as it picked up speed. The fork where they went wrong flew past them and gently Victor pressed forward on the controls and lifted the inverted airplane’s nose up. Laura jerked as a shockwave went through the airplane when the tip of the tail momentarily dipped a few inches into the water. With a shudder that threatened to rip the airplane to pieces, the airplane started its inverted climb. Victor was drenched in sweat as he battled the controls when the blue sky once more filled the windscreen. Laura laid spread eagle against the back fuselage when Victor pulled over 90 degrees and completed the top of the loop.

“Umff,” Laura uttered, as the headrest of her seat slammed into her stomach. She crawled into her seat as the airplane’s nose dipped steeply towards the ground. The loop had brought the airplane to near stalling speed. The river and the fork in the valley raced at them for first place, with their price the front of the airplane.

The seatbelt slipped out of Laura’s hand as her body was thrown around when Victor pulled up and banked hard left. The left wing skimmed mere feet above the water while the right trimmed the tops of the honor guard. Victor concentrated on the left wing and slowly increased altitude while he kept the airplane banked to follow the snaking valley.

“Tree!” Laura’s panicked voice ripped through Victor and his blood stalled as he glanced ahead. A massive tree had stepped out of line with the others, and defiantly waved its thick branches at them. Laura’s teeth rattled as the airplane shook when the left wing’s tip, dipped slightly into the water and caused a wake behind it.

Crack crack.
Laura covered her face with her arms as small branches slammed into the windscreen while the right wing shortened the tree. Cleared of the tree, Victor lifted the left wing out of the water, then pulled up and leveled the airplane.

“Fancy flying,” Laura gasped.

Victor glanced over at Laura when she spoke, and shook with laughter. Laura’s hair was a mess where she looked up at him from the floorboard, having slid half off her seat and under the dashboard. A curl of hair covered her right eye, and she blew some air sideways out of her mouth to get the hair out of her face, annoyingly it dropped back down.

Victor reached down and took her hand, pulling her onto her seat. Laura turned over in her seat and stuck her head back down under the dash, then commented.

“That was close, shall we not do that again.”

Victor gave her a light tap on the buttocks as she pulled the blown fuse out.

“Hey, watch it, just now I am going to get charged here.” Laura laughed as she replaced the fuse.

“How’s that?” Laura asked, as she pulled her head from under the dashboard. The startup screen of the GPS proudly gave the answer. Laura leaned back in her seat for a moment, and then reached over to Victor. Her kiss made the birds in the trees they passed blush.

“Thanks for not crashing.” Laura licked her lips as she sat back in her seat. Ten minutes and four more turns later, the valley opened up and they could see for miles as they cruised 3000 feet above the ground.

“Is that Vilcabamba down there?” Laura pointed to ruins coming up on their right.

“No, Vilcabamba is still three miles away.” Victor zoomed in on the map displayed on the GPS.
“I do not know what ruins those are, let’s take a closer look.” Victor banked the airplane slightly right and descended to 1000 feet. The road that linked up to Vilcabamba in the distance, ran past the ruins that were only 300 feet from the road in the dense jungle. Scattered buildings and a large structure, partly obscured by the forest, flashed by underneath them.

“Is that what I think it is?” Laura’s eyes sparkled with excitement.

“Looks like it, let me turn around for another pass and go lower this time.”

“Can we fly over Vilcabamba as you circle around? Just to make sure that there are no other objects the same as the one we spotted.”

“Good idea, Laura.” Victor made a large turn and flew low over the ruins of Vilcabamba. There were a few tourists around, and immediately they stared up as the airplane circled low over them.

Below, three men sat a distance away from the ruins in an old Willis army jeep, while they studied the airplane going over them.

“Some tourists just do not have the stomach for a close up encounter with the jungle. Getting a few mosquito bites is probably too much excitement for them to handle. Bet you they are a bunch of city slickers,” one said. They all shared a good laugh, and then ignored the airplane while they continued to study a map of the ruins.

Victor hugged the trees when they went over the first set of ruins again.

“It is it, we’ve found it.” Laura yelled in excitement as they pass by a massive stone statue of a jaguar that guarded a structure almost totally swallowed by vegetation.
“It must be it. The riddle said that the entrance is guarded by ‘Tepeyollotl’. He is believed to be the god of caves. The Aztecs and Incas depicted him as a jaguar in all their drawings and made statues of Jaguars to worship ‘Tepeyollotl’. His name means ‘heart of the mountain’.” Laura proudly said.

“We can land on the road and leave the airplane in that open area next to the road there.” Victor pointed to a small open area next to the road. He circled the airplane around and lined up his approach with the dirt road. Slowly, he eased off the throttle and held the speed to just above stalling as he gently touched down. The slower landing speed required less road to land, that reduced the chance of hitting a pothole that could damage the suspension or flip the airplane over.

The three men at Vilcabamba sat in their Jeep and curiously looked on as Victor landed the airplane. They were all specially selected to assist Russtof in finding the scrolls and were currently waiting for him at the coordinates that were texted to Russtof.

“You reckon they know something we do not?” Anthony asked. His gray eyes reflected the emotionless attitude he picked up in the 20 years he had been a mafia hit man in Italy. His 6-foot, in shape body made the seat complain as he shifted his 200 pounds behind the driver’s seat. With his love for archaeology that saw him obtain a master’s degree in his spare time, coupled with the numerous trips he made to Peru in his life, he was the perfect candidate as navigator for the mission.
“Maybe a private VIP tour of ruins not on the map?” Morné more suggested than asked. His low voice was as rough as his unshaven hard face, and his methods. An ex-South African Special Forces sergeant, then known as ‘Rekkies’, who turned gun-for-hire. His blue eyes reflect his hate towards the world; while his short cut dark blond hair and pumped-up muscles, made him a good contender for a body building commercial for the same steroids that laced his blood. He was a stark contrast to the loving and caring person he was before his parents were murdered on their farm while he was in the service. When he had finished his mandatory tour, and came home to an empty farm, he had a clear idea of where to release his anger -- a mercenary for hire. He spoke little about his career in the army, but once let slip that he at one time, forgot his pants’ belt in camp, and caught a Green Mamba snake and used it as a belt to hold his pants up with the snake still alive, knotted at the head. His reputation for extracting information gave him the opportunity to fill the role of intelligence gatherer for the mission.

“Could be just what we have been looking for all along,” Boris commented. His stocky and slightly overweight Russian body did not hint to the fact that he worked for the same secret branch as Russtoff and were comrades, who had received their training together. He was chosen to lead the small group whose orders were to assist Russtoff and find the scrolls.

“Shall we go and have a look, Boss?” Morné was eager to get the job over with; he had not killed anyone in days, and was getting bored with walking around looking at ruins. The only thing that interested him about ruins was if he could make them himself with mortars, hopefully with people still in the buildings.

“No, not now, we will go tomorrow. They should fly out later today. I do not want anyone else to go sniffing around there by following us over.”
Dust swirled around the fuselage when Victor taxied the airplane to an open area next to the road.

“Laura, check under your seat, maybe there is something useful we can take with us.”

“Will this help?” Laura held a survival Rambo type knife up.

“Definitely, it will go nicely with this.” Victor held up a Ruger SR22 .22 caliber pistol with ten rounds in its magazine, and then continued as he jumped out. “Would you grab the backpacks please, I want to check the cargo hold?” Laura grabbed both backpacks, and then jumped out.

“Seems like José likes camping out,” Laura commented, when Victor pulled out two machetes and a small hand shovel, wrapped inside a ground sheet. Laura turned and scanned the jungle across the road.

“That looks like a good spot to enter.” Laura pointed excitedly to an area 100 feet away, where the jungle was less dense, while Victor locked the airplane.

“Then let’s go do some exploring, Laura.”

Laura gave Victor a quick glance while they walked. Mmm, all he needs now is an Indiana Jones hat and a Bullwhip, and I so need a pair of Angelina boots.
Beetles sang their praise to the sun while birds chirped in at times, as a path manifested in front of Victor’s machete. Laura’s machete did the final trimmings as they immersed themselves deeper into the ancient forest. 100 feet in, the forest started to test their resolve in having it reveal its secrets. Sweat dripped of Victor’s muscles as they flexed with every swing at the green wall in front of them. The progress changed from walking and ducking branches, to squeezing between thick, vine-covered branches. Laura’s chest heaved as she stopped for a moment to wipe the sweat off her brow, and then looked at her watch. The forest had claimed two hours of their time, and was yet to reveal any of its mysteries. Laura took a deep breath and pushed her way through after Victor, while a bird whooped its encouragement. 10 minutes later, the forest rewarded their efforts, with a hint of its secrets.

“Wow.” Laura’s eyes glittered as she pushed past branches and came to stand next to Victor in a small clearing. A six-foot high stone wall, richly decorated with moss-covered Mayan hieroglyphics, welcomed them to a forgotten city. An archway, closed by a curtain of vines, stood a few feet from them. Laura’s machete whispered in the air a few times, and drew the curtain away. Her pulse quickened as she stepped through the archway, back in time.

“This is amazing.” The carpet of leaves gently sank beneath her light feet as she explored an open area, 100 by 80 feet in size. What trees and bush had once stood was replaced by moss-covered statues of King Manco Inca, and his wife, flanked by two high priests. Laura stood in awe, as sunlight broke through the canopy of leaves above, and illuminated the statues. Victor’s eyebrows dropped as he scanned the clearing. His eyes failed to find any obvious signs that testified to recent human activity, yet the clearing could not exist without the hand of humans.
“There are more ruins, Laura.” Victor’s voice made her spin around. Her eyes followed his hand as it pointed out three partially visible buildings in the forest. All wore the same decorations as the wall they had stepped through.

“We will rest here a bit.” Victor pushed the point of his machete into the ground, and then dropped his backpack next to it.

“Hungry?” Victor held out water and snacks to Laura when she came to stand next to him.

“Thank you. What’s the plan?” Laura gratefully took a fruit and nut bar with water.

“Rest, then continue the search until nightfall. We can sleep in the airplane tonight, and then continue our search tomorrow. If we find the treasure tomorrow, we will take the scrolls and fly out, else we will go and get more supplies, then return to renew our search.” Victor sat down on the ground, and Laura followed. She took a few sips of water, and then looked at Victor.

“Do we have enough fuel to make it back to José?”

“No, we have only enough to fly to the small airport where we can refuel and get supplies.” Laura raised an eyebrow for a moment, and then let the gears in her head run as she looked at the statues.

“If this is the place where the treasure is hidden, it makes sense why neither the Spanish nor anyone else after them ever found the treasure. Vilcabamba is miles away, and even if someone found this place, they would not know that the jaguar showed the entrance because the Vatican kept the information secret.” Laura stood up, and then dusted her buttocks off.
“I’ll start clearing a path on that side. You take another corner, and if we’re lucky we may find the statue before nightfall.” Laura picked her machete up and then playfully hop-skipped to the far left corner of the clearing. Laura gasped and stopped when a butterfly softly landed on her arm. Gently, it opened and closed its black trimmed, dark-blue wings. Two large red spots on the top of the wings, winked at Laura each time the wings opened. The butterfly winked a few more times, then glided away. *Batesia-hypochlora-f-cryochlora* Laura smiled. *Dad would have been proud of me on remembering the name.* Butterflies were a passion; Laura partially shared with her dad, partially because she did not believe in pinning them to a board.

“Yell if you find anything or need help, let’s be back in two hours.” Victor’s voice brought her back from forgotten treasured moments. Laura glimpsed at Victor over her shoulder, and then gave a quick wave before she started her search. Her heart fluttered from excitement, all she needed now was two pistols strapped to her hips and a pair of black boots.

Although Laura had less jungle growth than Victor did, the going was slow and hard work for her tired muscles, yet invigoratingly exciting. Time wasted away as one vine after another parted for them. One and a half hour later, Victor’s chest heaved as he stared at the dense forest in front of him. He had made it to the building he had seen from the clearing. A forgotten empty five-roomed structure, with no roof, that long ago revealed all secrets that lay inside. He had pressed on past, but was rewarded only with sweat and a growling stomach. He took a deep breath, and then turned around to the clearing. Victor’s pulse quickened when he found the clearing void of Laura’s energy. Quickly he sprinted over to the path she made, and then stopped. Intently he listened, yes, there it is again. Victor smiled and relief filled him. Laura’s sweet singing voice announced her arrival long before her.

“Wow, this is hard work, but so exciting.” She glowed with joy as she hugged and kissed Victor.
“Find anything Laura?”
“A large structure with some broken statues, none of them a jaguar.”
“Same, except for the statues. Maybe tomorrow, let’s get some rest.” Victor started for the archway when Laura’s voice stopped him.
“Oh, can we sleep in the jungle tonight?” When Victor turned around, she batted her eyelids and continued in a sweet voice.
“You can make us a camp fire; it will be so romantic, please?”
“You are not afraid of the jungle night life?” Victor came to stand in front of her, and gently she placed her right palm on his heart.
“A little, but you’ll protect me, right?” Laura squeezed Victor’s biceps, who laughed as he returned the favor on her buttocks, and then went to collect twigs and branches for a fire. Half an hour later, Laura stared up through the canopy of green with blue patches that slowly changed to black with silver winking freckles.
“I love the stars.” Laura’s eyes sparkled in unison with the stars above as she took another bite of her power bar. Victor’s biceps gently flexed under her head. Laura’s heart fluttered when Victor slowly rolled her on her side towards him. Stars exploded in her eyes when their lips met, his kiss as soft as the fleece jackets and thatch leaves under her. In a chorus, they sang the song of love while the orange glow of the fire bathed their naked skin gold. The logs in the fire applauded while the flames gave their encore performance a standing ovation. The leaves rustled while the cool breeze gently cooled their burning breathless bodies. Locked in a lovers embrace, they glided into dreamland together, unaware of the yellow eyes that watched them. Saliva dripped off bone-crushing teeth as powerful muscles waited for the right moment to strike.
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

The moonlight smiled down on the lovers below, while the jungle night sounds sang lullabies. Razor-sharp nails sliced into the leaf covered ground as giant paws softly tested each footing. Muscles rippled as 450lbs of killing instinct, tested the air. Four-inche-long, canine teeth glistened in the moonlight, and hinted of a blood link to a giant prehistoric jaguar, long thought to be extinct. Few remained, hiding deep in the Peruvian jungle, protected by locals that worshiped them. Compared to a normal male jaguar of 250lbs, this was a monster.

Saliva dripped on the ground, as death stalked the smaller of the two succulent meals. One bone-crushing bite to the neck would secure the hold for its dash back into the jungle. Smoke trailed up from the dead fire that had held the killer at bay. Three feet to go, a paw tested the ground, and stopped. The tiny meal moved. Hungry eyes watched as Laura slowly rolled on her back. Peacefully, she slept while death loomed close by, eager to claim her. Seconds dragged by, then leafs gave in as weight shifted from paw to paw. Soft scent drifted up into the large nostrils above Laura as a massive jaw parted. For a moment, teeth glistened inches from Laura’s neck, hungry to rip her flesh from her bones, then jaw muscles flexed.

Click.

Powerful muscles froze while deadly teeth lingered an inch from Laura’s neck, stopped by the sound of a pistol being cocked. The jaguar’s tail twitched when Victor pressed the pistol’s barrel against its head. Slowly it lifted its teeth away from Laura’s neck, and locked eyes with Victor.
“Piss off or die.” Victor’s soft but commanding voice was answered by a soft growl and twitching whiskers. Slowly the massive head turned as the jaguar broke the stare-down and looked deep into the forest. Victor jerked when nails sliced into leaves while the ground sunk in when powerful leg muscles exploded. In a split second, the jaguar glided over Victor and landed five feet away, then slipped silently into the jungle. Victor closed his eyes and waited for sleep to come. Many years of camping in the wild South African bush, had him wake up to death staring down at him. The danger would not return tonight.
Chapter 12: Will You Just Die

Sounds of birds chirping and monkeys calling woke Victor up. The cool jungle morning air filled his lungs, while a bird whooped him on as his muscles flexed while he stretched them. The sun’s morning rays came in white tinted beams down through the treetops. Victor tiled his head as he intently listened to the monkeys’ call. They sang a familiar song to him, a song of loss. The jaguar ate last night.

Movement 30 feet away, froze him. A large bird casually looked for insects in the soft ground. Victor slowly lined the sights of the small pistol up.

Bam.

The pistol rocked just as Laura sat up and wide-eye, she stared as the bird’s head exploded.

“Ouch.” Laura rubbed the spot where the spent cartridge that was ejected had bounced off her face. Her eyes narrowed as she glared at Victor.

“You really do like shooting things in the head don’t you?”

“Are you going to complain or help me prepare breakfast?” Victor laughed as he stood up and started to get dressed.

“Hell no. You shot it, you clean it. I buy my chicken plucked.” Laura sat with her hands on her hips with pursed lips and dropped eyebrows, while she tried to look serious. Victor laughed at her, and then shrugged his shoulders.

“Wow, my first night in the wild under an open sky, it’s so cool. I thought it would be scarier and more dangerous.” Laura jumped up and grabbed her clothes, then stopped and stared at Victor, who was busy kicking leaves and dust up as he scraped his shoes over the ground.

“What on earth are you doing?” Laura tilted her head as Victor quickly rubbed another paw print out before Laura could see it.
“I got bird shit on my shoe, just trying to get it off.” Laura rolled her eyes at Victor then finished dressing, before she picked up her machete.

“I’m going to explore a bit further while you play chef.” Laura winked as she made her way to the path she started the day before.

“Be careful, and yell if you need help or find anything.” Victor breathed life into the fire when the jungle swallowed Laura. While Victor plucked the bird, three men in a Jeep made their way along the road from Vilcabamba towards the clearing where Victor had parked the airplane.

“Do you think the tourists left? I did not hear an airplane take off last night?” Anthony asked while he shifted the Jeep into a higher gear.

“I think they did. We must not have heard them leave, and maybe they left late at night, after their guide told them some scary campfire stories,” Morné’s comment caused laughter to erupt from the men.

“How will we know where they stopped?” Anthony wondered out aloud.

“Fancy tourists who rent a private airplane and a guide, will not get their feet wet and muddy in a jungle. There must be some upscale facilities there. Reckon they will not walk much either, look out for a road or pathway into the forest, boys,” Boris replied.

The rattling of the Jeep as it bounced along the road was the only sounds that filled the air for the rest of the trip, while narrowed eyes scanned the road.

“Boss.” Anthony pointed to an airplane up ahead.

“Pull up next to it,” Boris commanded.

Minutes later, the Jeep’s engine ticked as it cooled off, while three men slowly inspected the airplane.

“They never left. I do not think they are tourists, maybe officials?” Anthony took his hand from the airplane’s cold engine cowling. Boris scratched his chin for a moment while he contemplated Anthony’s suggestion.
“No. This is not a government marked airplane.”

“Maybe the agent we are supposed to meet?” Morné suggested.

“Not sure, let’s be careful, looks like they went in there.” Boris pointed to a few leaves and branches that lay on the ground where Victor had cut them off to make a path. With caution, they entered the humid jungle and followed in Victor and Laura’s footsteps. The deeper they went the more the vines and branches rallied against them. With each step, clues to the direction Victor took, evaporated under their eyes.

Sweat dripped from Anthony’s face as he pushed a branch out of the way. Three more branches jumped in his way, while vines made a waterfall in front of him. Slowly he turned to face Boris.

“Which way, Boss?”

“Not sure, Morné what do you think?”

“They could have gone directly on, or possibly left around and down there.” Morné pointed to where Victor had started a path, abandoned it, backtracked a few steps, and then started a new one.

“Okay, Anthony, you go directly on. Morné you are with me, we go left.” Anthony nodded, then pushed hard against the branches and squeezed through. Pain filled his face as one defiantly slipped out of his grasp and slapped him in the face. For a moment, he stood motionless as he cursed in his mind, and then renewed his struggle against the jungle.

“Interesting.” Anthony whispered to himself, when a stone wall with an archway, replaced the branches and vines in his path a few minutes later.

Snap, crack.

Anthony dropped to the ground when the sound of twigs breaking came from behind the wall. His heart thumped in his chest as he slowly drew his pistol. Anthony swallowed, and then inched his way over to the archway. Carefully, he peered around the opening, and then dropped an eyebrow as he tilted his head.
A man was busy stoking a fire, his back turned. Anthony lined the sights on his pistol up, and took a deep breath to steady his hands. For a moment, he remained motionless, undecided. *This man does not look like what Boris described the agent to look like. Maybe he is just an adventures, camping mad tourist.* Slowly Anthony lowered his pistol, then inched forward and sneaked up on Victor, who started plucking the bird. The going was slow, as Victor periodically scanned the area, however the statues gave great opportunities to conceal Anthony’s presence.

A distance away in the jungle, a machete jerked in Laura’s hand as it sliced through a branch. With a deep breath, Laura wiped the sweat from her brow and stared at the two branches that jumped up to take the fallen ones place. Behind them, an army of vines laughed at her. Laura smiled, exhausting as the work was, it required no mental effort, and her mind had drifted off to Cayman, and the night at the Resort.

Gently Laura ran the tip of tongue over her lips, and sighed. Victor was exciting and unknowingly pushed her to face her fears, but what will happen when they find the scrolls? Will he stay or treat it as another successful mission and move on? Laura’s knuckles turned white around the machete. *What if I am just another fling to him?* Laura’s eyes narrowed and spat fire as she brought the machete high up. Anger turned her swing into a devastating blow. The machete sliced through the air, hungry for more branches, yet it found none. Laura gasped as the heavy machete arranged a date between her and the ground.

“Umf.” Escaped from Laura’s lips as she kissed the ground hard, her breath almost knocked out of her. Dirt clung to her face as she lay half stuck in the bush she tried to cut down. Laura spat the dirt out of her mouth, and sighed. *Yes Suzy, I know I overanalyze things.*

“Go with the flow.” Laura softly repeated Suzy’s words.

Growl.
Laura’s heart stopped when the ground beneath her vibrated. She swallowed hard as a second growl reverberated through her body. Ice crystals formed along her spine and choked her. Something huge breathed heavily in front of her, and sent a shiver down her back. Laura’s heart raced while cold sweat ran over her trembling lips as she looked up. She gasped as she wide-eyed stared into yellow killer eyes. Massive canines glistered as a bone snapping jaw opened an inch from Laura’s face. Saliva dropped on her face as a growl washed over her with a breath almost as nauseating as the thought of large teeth slicing into her skull. Goosebumps sprang up all over Laura’s body as dread pinned her to the ground. A tear ran down her face while her body trembled with fear.

“Make it quick,” Laura softly said, as the giant head pressed hers into the ground, while the jaguar sniffed the fear on her neck and head. Time faded away as whiskers brushed her neck, while teeth inches away, waited for the command to crush. Laura jumped as a softer growl ran all the way down her spine and shook the ice crystals off that paralyzed her. Carefully, she slowly reached back with her hands and started to crawl backwards, a quarter inch at a time. A foot of progress in, a soft growl stopped her. For a moment, Laura remained motionless. Did it really sound like a pleading growl? Laura swallowed, took a deep breath, and then lifted her eyes up to meet the jaguar’s. For a moment, their souls communicated, and then the jaguar pulled Laura’s eyes to the ground with his. Laura flinched when her gaze fixed on the jaguar’s bleeding front right paw, trapped by a wire noose that cut into the flesh.

“Are you serious?” Laura murmured, when the jaguar picked his leg up an inch. Laura searched for his eyes again, but the jaguar evaded confrontation and turned its head. Laura took a deep breath, then gently stretched her arm out and touched the paw. Laura jerked when the jaguar’s leg muscles flexed as pain shot up its leg. Slowly Laura closed her eyes and whispered.
“Please don’t eat me.”

Laura strained at the noose. However, she was too far away to loosen it. With her heart in her throat, she inched forward until her head was directly under the jaguar once more. Gently, she pried at the wire noose and slowly pulled it out of the jaguar’s flesh. Laura clenched her jaw as the ground beneath her vibrated and shook her body as the jaguar growled. Laura shuddered and cold chills ran through her. Spurred on by the jaguar’s inaction, she continued.

Laura sighed when the wire noose was wide enough to slide down and over the jaguar’s paw. She placed the noose on the ground, then softly cupped the jaguar’s paw and pulled up. The jaguar sensed her intention and slowly raised its paw out of the noose.

Heart racing, Laura lay motionless while the jaguar licked its injured paw. Laura jerked when the jaguar’s whiskers brushed her neck and face. She swallowed hard when a large tongue gave her as lick on the cheek, and then muscles exploded as the jaguar jumped over her and disappeared silently into the jungle.

“Shit,” Laura said, as she rolled on her back and clutched her heart. She glowed and her eyes sparkled. She felt more alive than ever before. For a minute, she let her thoughts race around in her mind. *I can make it work this time. I will make Victor want to stay.* Excitedly Laura jumped up with star-filled eyes. *Wait until Victor hears how close I came to a jaguar.* For a moment, Laura studied the deep claw marks in the ground where the jaguar’s paws dug in as it powerfully launched itself over her. *I just hope he does not thank me later by eating me or Victor.* A soft growl made her look down, and Laura pressed her lips together when her stomach complained again about its void state.

“Yeh yeh, you win.” Laura laughed, and with new eyes, she looked upon the world as she joyfully made her way back. Each step brought her closer to Victor, and death.
In the clearing, flames eagerly leapt up from the dry twigs Victor had placed crisscross over each other. Matches inside the handle of José’s survival knife made child’s play out of starting a fire. Victor sighed as he plucked another handful of feathers, then looked at the additional contends the knife had held, now neatly arranged next to his knee. A compass in the lid, eight remaining of 10 safety matches, two fish hooks and fishing line, two needles with some thread, and a steel cutting cable with rings on each end. Inserting an index finger in each ring, made for a very good saw to cut round objects like branches. All were useful for survival, but not plucking a bird.

Victor choked as pain filled his ribs when a powerful kick in his ribs drove the air from his lungs. The force lifted him a foot in the air. Instinct rolled Victor’s body away from danger, and onto his back to face his attacker. Victor’s knee shot up just in time to block the second kick.

Crack.

A scream ripped through the air as Victor’s kick snapped a knee. The man crumbled to the ground as his support leg gave in. The man’s head snapped back when Victor’s punch filled his eyes with stars. Victor rolled backwards and flipped himself into the air. The familiar feel of cold steel of a pistol filled his hand when he landed in a crouched position.

The man’s eyes widened, and his face went white when Victor lined the sights up with his Italian head. A shiver ran down his spine when the barrel sucked his gaze in, while Victor stood up. He swallowed when Victor’s finger twitched on the trigger, and closed his eyes when Victor pulled it.

Bam.

The jungle went silent as Victor was spun around and knocked to the ground. Blinding pain in his head overruled the burning in his side as his head bounced on a rock by the fire. Slowly the pistol slid from his hand while the ground spun under him. Hanging his head, Victor closed his eyes for a moment to clear his vision. Noise a short distance away made him look up.
His heart dropped next to his blood on the ground. Two men emerged from the jungle while smoke gently trailed from the pistol in the hand of the shorter of the two men.

“Can you walk?” Boris asked as he came to stop in front of Anthony.

“The fucker broke my knee, kill him.” Anthony spat out while his eyes spat fire at Victor.

“Can you walk?”

“Sort of.”

“Two people, one is a girl,” Morné said, as he inspected the bedding, and then continued. “Footprints lead towards that opening there.” Boris nodded as his eyes found the opening Morné pointed at. Morné came to stand next to Victor and smiled as his experienced eyes assessed Victor’s chances of survival. None without medical attention very soon. Morné bent down next to Victor and their eyes locked.

“Ja broer, vandag het jy jou gat gesien.”

“Gaan kak in die mielies.” Victor’s voice was weak while cold sweat ran down his white face.

“Jy praat Afrikaans, en is windgat, wag tot ons jou girlfriend kry.” Victor’s heart stopped at Morné’s reply. Slowly Morné stood up when Victor rolled onto his side and closed his eyes.

“Morné, keep an eye on him while I help Anthony to the jeep.” Morné nodded his head when Boris helped Anthony up.

A distance away in the jungle, Laura’s heart raced in her chest as she fought her way back to Victor. The sound of the gunshot still rang in her ears. Her chest heaved as her mind ran amok. Did the jaguar attacked Victor? Her heart shattered into pieces at the thought of losing Victor. With Victor’s name on her lips, she fought the vines that desperately tried to hold her back. Almost there.
“Vic…” Laura’s heart stopped and her words evaporated. A cold ghost jumped into her and painted her face white as she stopped dead in her tracts. All her attention focused on a pistol held to Victor’s head by a short Russian. Anger raged through her and she leapt forward and charged the Russian, but Morné was too fast. Sharp pain ripped through her jaw as her head snapped back from Morné’s punch. Her shoulders arched back as her body lifted an inch off the ground. A blurred sky came into view when her feet slipped out from under her, and she came down hard on her back. Laughter filled the air as she lay gasping for breath. No no. Laura’s mind screamed while her eyes teared up when a hand gripped her by the hair and dragged her towards the center of the camp.

“Bitch,” Morné yelled, when Laura dug her nails into his arms and scratched him. Laura wheezed when Morné’s fist drove the air from her lungs. Gasping for breath, she was dropped next to Victor, who desperately clung to consciousness.

“Kitty’s got claws boys. I think she wants to play.” Morné laughed as he touched the scratches on her arm. Boris again helped Anthony up, and then started for the jeep.

“Kill them both,” Boris barked over his shoulder.

“Can I play with her first?” Morné licked his lips at Laura.

“Do as you please, and then kill them. You have ten minutes, and then join us at the Jeep.”

Morné’s eyes eagerly drank Laura’s curves up as he grabbed her by her hair and pulled her to her feet. His hand clawed at her buttocks as he roughly slammed her against him and kissed her. Laura’s fists futilely bounced off his chest.
“Fuck,” Morné screamed, when Laura dug her nails into his cheeks while her teeth sank into his lip and ripped a piece off. Laura’s head whiplashed from a punch that almost dislocated her jaw. Morné released his hold on her buttocks, and then grabbed her by the hips. Laura clung to consciousness by a thread when he slammed her body into the ground. Morné’s eyes narrowed as he wiped the crimson blood from his clenched jaw. His knuckles turned white as he balled his fists at her.

“You will pay for this.” Bar fight, crooked teeth sliced the words razor thin as he slowly pulled his pistol and aimed it at Laura.

“Left or right kneecap?” He laughed, then snapped his head around. His heart went cold as massive canines closed around his head. His bone-chilling scream joined the snapping sounds as his skull was crushed in. Laura’s heart raced as the jaguar stood over her, while bones, shattered and brains and blood spilled to the ground by her feet.

Boris calmly pulled his pistol as he left Anthony where he dropped him just before the archway. Carefully, he kept his aim on the massive jaguar as he neared it from behind, while he waited for it to give him a head shot.

Snap.

The jaguar spun his head around and growled at Boris when a twig snapped under Boris’s shoe.

“Gotcha.” Boris smiled as his finger tightened around the trigger. Fear gripped him when a steel cutting wire cut into his throat and neck. Desperately his hands clawed at the wire that was severing his head. His power left his hands as fast as the blood drained from his severed carotid arteries. The sawing stopped when his knees gave in. Near death, Victor collapsed next to Boris, having used every grain of energy he had left. His fading eyes searched for Laura one last time, and failed as blood loss denied him the pleasure. The grim reaper’s breath was cold in Victor’s face as he bent down over Victor.

Bam Bam.
Laura jerked as two bullets slammed into the ground next to the jaguar. Her vision partially cleared, she rolled over on her stomach. Her lips trembled as she stared at Anthony. His pistol shook gently in his hand while he shuffled past Victor and Boris. Hopping on his good leg, he came a few steps closer. He took a deep breath to steady his hands while he took careful aim at the glaring yellow eyes -- a perfect kill shot.

Anthony gagged and arched his back as pain ripped through his chest. He blinked his eyes a few times, and then stared at his chest. Confused, he looked at the spear tip that protruded from a crimson spot on his shirt. His body rocked as two more spear tips burst out of his chest. Blood and froth ran down his lips and chin. When Anthony turned around, a line of native Peru warriors, with shields and spears, slowly came out of the bush all around him. Anthony tilted his head, and then lifted his pistol at one that had a massive gold ornamental, feathered hat on. The glitter from ten spear tips as they flew through the air reflected off his eyes before their impact lifted him off his feet. Death claimed his soul before his body hit the ground.

100 warriors surrounded Laura with shields up and spears ready to plunge into her heart where she sat. Slowly they advanced...10 feet...5 feet. The warriors pulled back the spears to impale her.

Laura jerked when the ground under her shook. Gaping holes formed on scared faces when soft fur brushed against Laura. A massive paw, cut by a wire, crushed the ground next to her leg. A second growl rattled the bones of the dead and forced the shaking warriors to their knees. Satisfied, the jaguar lay down in front of Laura and placed its massive head in her lap. Laura stared open mouthed at the jaguar for a moment, before she instinctively stroked its large head, which made it purr like a household kitten.
A chorus of chanting erupted from the kneeling warriors, while they placed their hands in front of them and looked down. Laura’s pulse quickened as the leader slowly made his way through the warriors while they shifted to let him pass. Five feet in front of Laura, he slowly dropped to his knees and assumed the same position as the warriors. The jaguar gave him a sideways glance and then dug its head into Laura’s chest, wanting her to stroke him some more.

“Who are you?” Laura asked while she obediently stroked the jaguar’s head.

“We are the protectors of the treasure, oh savior.”

“Please, help my friend.” Laura pointed to Victor. Her heart yearned to run to him, but the jaguar on her lap and the warriors around her and Victor, froze her to the spot. Immediately the leader snapped an order over his shoulder and 10 warriors around Victor jumped up, and carefully lifted him on their arms, then hurried him away. Laura attempted to follow, but the leader held up his hand.

“It is better that our healer attend to him alone for now. You will see him again if it is written so. Laura’s heart disappeared with Victor down a hidden path in the jungle. Slowly Laura stood up, and the jaguar followed suit and took a place at her side. Some of the warriors looked up and seeing the jaguar guarding her, again buried their faces in the ground and chanted to her.

“Why did you call me savior?”

The leader’s eyebrows dropped, and a perplexed expression filled his face at Laura’s question.

“Why, you are the one from the prophecy, the one that will lift my people out of poverty. You control the jaguar, a sacred animal to us, you are her.” Laura stared blankly at the man.

“What prophecy? What are you talking about?”
“A prophecy was made generations ago, that foretell of a woman that will open the door to the King’s hidden treasure. A woman whom the ancient jaguar protects. She will open the door, so that we can rise out of poverty, and once again be a great nation.”

“What door?” Laura’s mouth slightly hung open.

“I will show you, follow me.” The man stood up and beckoned Laura to follow him. With longing in her eyes, Laura stared at the place where the men had taken Victor into the bush.

“He is in the best hands there are. You cannot help him at this moment. Follow me.” Laura took a deep breath and wiped a tear from her eyes, then followed the man. She glanced over the warriors, then at the leader. He must be mistaken, thinking I am part of some prophecy. But as long as they save Victor, I will play along.

The warriors shifted sideways to allow Manco and Laura to pass, while the jaguar walked next to Laura. One of the warriors dared to look up just as they passed him, and he found himself staring directly into the jaguar’s eyes, who growled and showed its teeth. A yellow puddle formed under the man as he slammed his head, with a thud, into the ground and feverishly chanted. The man’s body shook as whiskers brushed against his face while the jaguar smelled his fear. Satisfied, the jaguar turned and followed Laura while it wagged its tail like a household kitten that just had a bowl of milk.

“I am Laura, what is your name?”

“My people call me the elder, but to you, I am just Manco. I was named after the last great Inca king, Manco Inca, who buried the treasure, oh high one.” Manco pulled a curtain of vines away to reveal a secret passage, and then stepped through. He held the vines open for Laura, and then led her down a path.

“Where did you learn to speak English so well?”
“I was raised in Cusco and used to be a guide for tourists for 30 years. I learned English from the tourists I guided. When my father died, I took up his position as elder of the protectors of the treasure.”

“Can all your men speak English, Manco?”

“No, not all want to learn the new language, but I have taught most some basic English to help them earn extra money by guiding tourists.”

“The clearing, what is it used for, Manco?”

“We use it to meditate and pray. We were on our way to come and pray when we heard the gunshot. It is destiny that had us coming at the right time to save you.”

“How so, Manco?”

“We only come here once a week.”

“Then I am lucky today is your praying day.” Laura walked into Manco when he stopped dead. Slowly he turned to her.

“Our pray day is tomorrow. However, something urged me to come today. It is destiny that brought us together.” Laura’s jaw hung as she stared at Manco who turned and walked away. For a moment, she stood frozen, and then made after him.
Laura opened her mouth slowly, and then closed it when words failed her. Gently she let her finger run over the soft moss that grew in patches over the 20-foot jaguar statue. For a moment, she locked eyes with the statue, and then looked down as soft fur brushed against her hand by her side.

“Looks like you.” The jaguar gave Laura another gentle push as it scratched itself against her hip, then lay down. Laura’s heart slightly raced, and she swallowed when she looked past the statue. *Can it be the hiding place?*

A large granite building, with its walls richly decorated in both Mayan and Aztec hieroglyphics, stood behind the Jaguar statue. A small entrance was directly opposite the statue. Only the front wall and 20 feet of the sides were clear, the rest of the building was swallowed by the jungle.

“We maintain only the front side. Too much work to keep the whole building clear, plus it may attract attention.” Manco offered beside her, when he followed her gaze into the forest.

“How come you are protectors of the treasure, when its existence is only a myth?”

“How do you suppose truth stays myth?” Manco laughed.

“That is the only door?” Laura pointed to the opening across from them.

“As far as we could find, yes. Come, let me show you.” Laura’s heart gave a little jump when they neared the entrance. On either side of the doorway was an old flame torch. *This is so Lara Croft style.*

“Aren’t you going to light the torches?” Laura asked, with her heart in her shoes, when Manco pulled out a flashlight from a small hand woven bag around his shoulder.
“What for? This is much better, modern times.” Manco shook his head at Laura, then switched the flashlight on and stepped through the doorway. A plof sound and dust that rose up, told Laura that the jaguar decided to stand guard at the door. Laura took a deep breath, and then stepped into the room. Two steps in, Laura stopped. Her heart fluttered while her wide eyes drank every detail up that Manco’s flashlight illuminated. Every inch of the square room’s 10-foot walls, were covered in colored hieroglyphics and paintings in extreme detail.

“What is this room, Manco?”

A picture of a man in a litter, being carried around by people, drew Laura’s attention.

“This is a records room. These pictures tell stories of events that have happened, and of those that are yet to happen.” Laura spun around and stared at Manco.

“You are joking, right?” For a moment Manco did not move, then slowly raised his hand and pointed to a spot on the wall, illuminated by the flashlight. Reluctantly Laura turned around. She gasped and immediately brought her hands to her open mouth. It cannot be. Laura swallowed as a chill ran up her body. Laura closed her eyes for a moment, and stepped closer; the paintings were still there when she opened them.

Slowly she reached out and touched them. Her fingers traced over each of the six figures. First, a fireball that came down from the sky and smashed into the earth. Then a woman who sat on the ground with a man in front of her, while a jaguar leaped through the air as he attacked the man. The following painting showed the woman with the jaguar’s head in her lap while warriors prayed all around her. Then another painting showed warriors praying while the woman stood in front of them with a jaguar that guarded her. The last painting showed a woman opening a door with treasure that flowed like a river out of the door, while warriors stood behind her, some jumped through the air, some waved their hands in the air, while others bowed down to the woman. Laura’s face turned white as she backed away from the wall, and then faced Manco.
“What does all this mean? I don’t understand.”
“You are the chosen one. You are the one to find the hidden treasure and lift my people from poverty. You are the jaguar lady.” Laura stared at Manco for a moment. *Is the treasure in his prophecy the same one Victor and I am looking for? No, it cannot be. I am here by pure accident, not fate or some ancient prophecy*
“What treasure?”
“The treasure that was hidden from the Spaniards when they invaded Peru, and the treasure that was taken from the Spanish ship that stranded on the coast. It is in the next room.”
Laura stared at Manco with a blank expression for a moment. Her eyebrows dropped as she placed her hands on her hips.
“In the next room? I see no door, and if you know where it is, why don’t you get it yourself?” Laura’s heart dropped to her shoes. *Victor. Is he okay, or are they spicing him for tonight’s feast, with me as dessert?* Manco walked past her and shone his light on the opposite wall.
“We cannot solve the puzzle of the door, and besides, it is prophesied that the treasure is cursed and only the jaguar lady can safely find it.”
“Jaguar lady?”
“After Vilcabamba was overrun by the Spanish, and the king died, only a secret few, close to the king, knew where he buried his treasure. Anyone that opens the door, who is not worthy, will be cursed. The men went to see an old fortuneteller who prophesied that only a woman, who is protected by the jaguar, is worthy of passing the tests. She is the only one that can open the door without being cursed.”
“What tests, Manco?”
“That, I do not know. But the men that saw the fortuneteller, formed a group to protect the site of the buried treasure, until the one from the prophecy who commands the protection of the jaguar, was found.”
Laura stared in wonder at the beautiful life sized painting Manco pointed out. A bare chested young woman, stood with her back to the room, and her arms out to the sides and up. Her eyes were mesmerizing as she stared over her shoulder back into the room. Laura’s fingers glided over the woman’s back to where her heart should be, now replaced by a one-inch hole with a slit in the wall at either side of the hole.

“What is this hole for?” Manco shined his light over the hole and then from top to bottom over the painting as he shook his head.

“I do not know, but my father said it has something to do with opening the door to the treasure chamber.” Laura’s gaze flowed over the woman’s curves down to her feet. Slowly Laura tilted her head, while her eyes narrowed. A few small paintings close to the bottom of the floor, hinted their existence through years of dirt and mud from flooding.

“Do you have some water, Manco?”

Manco called to one of the two warriors who had followed them, and quickly he entered with an animal skin, water canteen. Laura’s heart fluttered as she gently ran some water over the pictures. Slowly the dirt flowed away to reveal the secrets below. Laura’s hand shook as she cleared the mud from the last pictures. Under her fingertips, a set of three inch sized drawings, detailed death, made gloomier by the light from Manco’s flashlight. Laura swallowed hard, and then slowly looked up at Manco with fear on her face.
“There must be another way.” Manco’s voice was soft, yet failed to reassure Laura. She looked back at the drawings, and studied them again one by one, as they told their story of a young woman who stood against the wall with her back to the room full of people. The woman placed her feet apart on the ground and then pressed against the wall. Laura swallowed hard again and wiped a tear from her eyes before she continued. Just as the woman pressed against the wall, a spear came out of the wall and impaled the woman. Her sacrifice allowed a door next to her to open and treasure flowed through the doorway, while people praised her for her sacrifice.

“Manco, how will this treasure help your people?” Laura tried to swallow the knot in her throat, while an empty pit formed in her stomach.

“The rural people of Peru are very poor. Many villages have only footpaths for roads. Farmers struggle to get their harvest to the market. Most small villages have no medical facilities. Sick people often die before they reach a doctor. And often, they die even if they reach the doctor because he cannot cope with the patients or does not have the medical supplies to help. We have few schools in the villages. The government is bankrupt. If the legend is true, then the treasure is worth billions.”

Laura’s throat went dry as her hand touched her shattered heart. Victor. Her lips slightly trembled, and she closed her eyes. This is the only means to find the scrolls, and give Victor a chance for a new life, and also keep the scrolls from the Russians that surely will send another team. They will find the scrolls, even if they need to blast the walls of the building down. And they will kill Manco and anyone that stand in their way. No, the scrolls must be found and kept from them. Laura took a deep breath as she wiped the tears from her eyes, then slowly stood up and faced Manco.
“My dad used to say that only when you accept death, can you truly live your life, and those that have the power to help others, have the duty to do so. This is my chance to make a difference in the world, for my life to have meaning.” Laura’s soft voice did not dull the sharpness of her words. A knot formed in Manco’s throat when Laura stepped forward and hugged him.

“Goodbye Manco.” Laura’s kiss on Manco’s cheek lingered as she slowly turned around. With admiration, he stared at her, so young, yet so much courage. Laura took a deep breath, and then stepped up against the wall. The woman in the painting’s curves and Laura’s matched exactly.

Laura’s left leg shook slightly as she carefully placed her foot on the tile by the painting’s foot. Her heart leaped and she froze for a moment when the tile slightly gave under her weight. Laura swallowed hard, and then moved her right leg to the correct tile. Her lips trembled while a tear wetted her cheek when the tile gave as well.

Grrr Clunck tik tik.

Laura jerked when scraping and mechanical sounds came from the wall. For a moment Laura stood frozen, then reached out with her hands and let her body and the painting’s become one. A pair of small bumps on the wall fit into each of her palms. Laura turned her gaze to Manco, who stood shaking. He wiped the tears from his eyes, before he answered her eye’s plea for comfort. Slowly Laura looked forward and closed her eyes. Good buy Victor, my love. The bumps easily gave way under her palms.

Thud, shooos.
Manco jerked as dust filled the room, choking him. The flashlight dropped from his grasp as he coughed. Desperately he wiped the dust from his eyes, and then picked the flashlight up. The flashlight shook in his hand as its beam cut through the dust. Manco brought his hand to his mouth as he looked at Laura, pressed against the wall and covered in dust. A gaping hole had formed in the wall next to Laura’s motionless body. Slowly Manco stepped forward and gently touched Laura’s shoulder.

“Am I dead.” Laura whispered.

Manco pulled Laura from the wall and hugged her with tears.

“I don’t understand.” Laura said as she pulled away and touched her unharmed chest.

“You found the door.” Laura followed Manco’s gaze to the open door.

“But why am I still alive.” Laura felt her chest again to make sure there was no spear stuck in it.

“Are you complaining?”

“No.” Laura laughed, and then stepped towards the new door. Manco followed and lit the path for her. A passage, three feet wide and six feet high, built with large granite blocks, greeted them when they entered. Laura’s eyes widened when she looked left at the section behind the wall where the painting was. Mechanical arms and pulleys filled her view. Manco drew his breath behind Laura.

“You truly are the one.” Manco placed his hand on her shoulder while he looked at the contraptions. Right in line with the hole in the wall was a spear ready to impale Laura. A fraction above the spear rested a large stone slab where it had stopped with a thud against the wall, after it slid down two wooden beams. An intricate system of levers and pulleys connected the weight sensitive tiles to the end of the guides that held the spear in place.
Two different systems pushed the end of the spear up. If Laura was but a fraction heavier, one system would have lifted the end of the spear up and the slab would have pushed it through the wall, and Laura as it slid down. If she was lighter, the second reverse system would have had the same consequences for Laura. For a moment, Laura admired the system, then her eyes narrowed and she stepped closer to the spear. A tiny metal lever rested on the spear against the wall, and was connected to a lock mechanism for the door. The shaft of the spear would have triggered the lever had it been fired, and locked the door forever.

The mechanism went dark when Manco shone the light down the other side of the passage. Laura swallowed as she looked down the long, dark and narrow tunnel that awaited them. The walls seemed to close in on her as her fear of tight spaces choked her. Visions of her and Victor happily together, and Peru children healthy, and learning in schools, filled her mind. She took a deep breath, then put a shaky foot in front of her, tested the ground, then slowly walked down the passage.

Again, Manco lit the path as he followed Laura. Her heart jumped from excitement as they made their way down the undecorated passage. 60 feet in, the passage made a 90-degree turn, and then sloped down at a steep angle. The smell of old air filled their lungs as they descended deeper underground. 50 feet further on, the passage made another 90-degree turn, with a less steep decline.

Laura bit her lip when after 100 feet, they faced another 90-degree turn. Enthusiastically she rounded the turn, and then stopped. Her heart jumped, and then sank to her feet. Her body rocked when Manco walked directly into her.

“What is it, Laura?” Manco lifted his flashlight over her shoulder and lit the path up.

“This cannot be.” Anger filled his words. Twenty feet ahead, was a dead end.
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

“This must be the place. There must be a way.” Laura’s voice was laced with disappointment. She placed her hands on the wall and inspected every groove and every block for signs of a hidden door. Manco followed her, and for 10 minutes, they feverishly pushed and kicked against the unyielding granite blocks.

Laura’s lips trembled as she dropped to the ground on her knees with her back to the dead end. Her body rocked when she placed her head in her hands and opened the floodgates of emotions. After all the events she endured to reach this place, it was all for nothing.

Manco gently placed his hand on her shoulder, as her tears pooled on the floor. He bit his lip to hold back his own tears while his heart bled for Laura. Manco jerked when something pushed him from behind and almost caused him to fall on top of Laura. Manco gasped when he spun around. He stared down the open jaw of the jaguar. Did he come to kill them because they were not worthy of finding the treasure? Manco’s hand gripped the knife at his belt. The passage reverberated from a growl, and Manco was flung against the wall as the jaguar pushed past him to Laura. Laura’s eyes widened as the jaguar’s huge body pressed Manco against the wall. For a moment, Laura and the Jaguar stared into each other’s eyes, and then the jaguar lowered his head onto Laura’s right shoulder.

For a second neither moved, then muscles flexed as the jaguar stood on his hind legs and placed his massive front paws against the wall behind Laura. Dust rained down on Laura as the jaguar placed its head against the roof and sniffed. Again, the passage reverberated from his growl. More dust rained down and blinded Laura when the jaguar pushed his head up and sniffed.

Clunk.

Laura’s heart leapt when the roof stone dropped when the jaguar lowered its head again.
Laura’s scream froze the jaguar when a rat dropped on her head. Her fear of rats took over. Frantically, she slapped it off and send it skidding along the passage. Instantly the jaguar was down on all fours, squishing Manco into the wall, while he slapped Laura in the face with his tail as he spun around and made after the rat. Laura coughed as more dust fell on her.

“Laura.”

“I cough “I am okay.” Laura wiped the dirt from her eyes, as she uttered another cough.

“Look up.” Manco lit the ceiling up with his flashlight. Laura’s heart sang praise when she looked up. A one-inch gap in the ceiling, smiled at her where the last roof stone had moved. Excitedly, they worked together and pushed the roof stone. Laura’s face lit up when the roof stone gave -- inch by inch the stone slit forward. Dust rained down on them and together with their sweat it caked their faces. Finally, the stone stopped dead, while a 12-inch gap in the roof was their reward.

“Okay, up you go.” Laura’s face went white, while Manco held out his hands to lift her up.

“I’m not going up there.”

“You stood before a spear.” Manco said, confused.

“Yes, but that is quick death, not slowly suffocating.” Laura countered.

“There is plenty of air there. Besides, I would never fit. Now up you go.” Manco held out his hands again to help Laura up. Her heart pounded in her chest, and cold sweat ran down her clammy hands. Laura swallowed, then closed her eyes and nodded for Manco to lift her up. He took her hands, squatted, and then waited for her to step on his thighs, and then his shoulders, before he stood up. Laura bit her lip as her head cleared the hole in the roof. The flashlight shook gently in her hand as she lit up the secret passage.

“What do you see?” Manco asked impatiently.

“A 15 by 15-inch passage about 10 feet long with a 90-degree turn at the end.”
“Ok, there you go.” Manco pushed Laura by her legs and forced her into the passage. Laura had no choice but to drag herself down the passage with her shoulders scraping. With a struggle, she managed to reach the turn and peered around the corner. Laura’s heart stopped and her scream almost cracked the stones when a rat jumped onto her head, then run under her shirt over her back. Trapped in her hair, under her shirt, the rat went wild and clawed at her. Desperately Laura tried to reach behind her, but the passage was too narrow. Shivers ran down Laura’s back as the rat pulled at her hair, while it got more and more entangled.

“Aaahhh,” Laura yelled as she pushed her back up against the ceiling. Trapped with a rat in a tight space, her nightmares did not even go this far. The rat twitched as she trapped it between her back and the ceiling.

Snap, crack.

Nausea sat in Laura’s throat with her heart, as tiny bones cracked on her back and warm liquid ran down her spine. Laura swallowed the Nausea down as she turned sideways in an attempt to get the rat to slide off her back.

“Laura?” Manco’s voice was desperate now.

“I am okay.” Laura held her eyes closed for a moment when it became clear the rat was stuck. With a burning back, racing heart, and dead rat on her back, she slid around the corner on her side. Laura’s eyes narrowed as she scanned what lay in front of her. Slowly she crept up to the stone that blocked the passage. Another dead end, yet this one held a puzzle. The stone had two holes in it, just big enough to fit her arms. The flashlight revealed a lever in each hole. Laura’s eyebrows rose when she ran her hand over the sides of the passage. It was littered with one-inch holes.

“Manco, I am at a dead end and there are two holes in the wall with levers in each one, what should I do?”

“Are there small holes in the walls next to you?”

“Yes. Why?
“My father told me about traps like that. It is a protected doorway. One lever will open a door somewhere, while the second lever will cause wooden spears to come out of the holes and kill you.” Laura rolled her eyes. *Great. Impaled like a vampire.*

“Which one, Manco?”

“I am not sure. Try the left one.”

“Try? Manco I have only one chance.”

“Good point. I would still go with the left one Laura.”

“Why?”

“I think my father once told me that King Manco Inca was left handed.” Manco scratched his chin. *Or was it right?*

“Left it is,” Laura replied, as she slowly inched forward until she could get her left arm into the hole. Her heart thumbed against her chest, and she wiped the sweat from her brow before she placed a shaky hand in the left hole. Laura bit her lip as her hand slid through spider webs. She shivered as something landed on her hand and instinctively she shook it off. Deeper and deeper her arm went in. Her shoulder pressed against the wall before her fingers could touch the lever.

Laura took a deep breath, then let her fingers curl around the handle, and pulled. Laura swallowed and tried again, but years of dust held it tight. Laura squinted as she pushed against the wall with her right hand and pulled with all her might against the lever. Slowly it gave little by little, while dust rained on her from the holes in the roof. Strange sounds came from all around her. Again, the lever got stuck, and Laura put all her effort into it. Sweat ran into her eyes while dust filled her nose. *I hope that noise is the door opening and not the spears.*

“Laura.” Laura’s heart stopped and she froze. *‘No, it cannot be.’*
“Dad, is that you?” Laura’s soft voice was shaky and filled with doubt. For a moment, she lay motionless, and then her body shook as emotions poured out of her while memories of her dad flooded her mind. In a narrow passage, in a hidden place far in the Peruvian jungle, she was trapped with the fact that her dad was never going to hug her again. This time, there was nowhere to run or hide, and the floor wetted under her tears. Laura pulled her hand back and crossed her hands over her heart. Manco’s calls faded as she tried to block out the world.

“Laura, we love you, and we are proud of you.”
“Mom, dad.” Laura sobbed as her parents’ voices echoed in her mind. Slowly her lips formed the words.
“I miss you. Please come back”
“Laura, you have to be strong now.”
“No, mom, dad, don’t go.”
“Goodbye, Laura.”
“Bye mom, dad.” Laura’s body shook as she finally got to say the words that burned on her lips for so many years. As the memories faded, her dad’s favorite words formed on her lips.
“The righteous always walk the right path, no matter the consequences.” Laura took a deep breath, held it while she wiped her eyes dry, and then exhaled as she put her right arm deep into the hole. The lever was defiant in her grip, but Laura gave it no option. She braced hard with her left hand against the wall and made it move.
“It’s now or never.” Veins stood up on Laura’s brow as the lever slowly bowed towards her while scraping sounds came from every one-inch hole in the walls.
“Shit.” Laura screamed as the floor beneath her gave. With a thud, she slammed into the floor section that almost drove the air from her lungs. The flashlight rolled away, dented, having survived the four-foot drop. Laura coughed the dust out, then ripped her shirt off and shook the rat out of her hair. She shivered as she looked at the crushed rat, while she replaced her shirt. Slowly she crawled to the flashlight where it had come to a stop against something that partially blocked the beam.

Exhausted, Laura picked the flashlight up and waved the beam around. Her jaw dropped, and the flashlight slipped out of her hand. For a second, she stood frozen, then slowly bent down and picked up the flashlight again. This time she was ready for what lay before her as the flashlight’s beam flowed over the objects.

She stood in the center of the building, surrounded by golden cups, plates, armor, jewelry, coins, and ornaments, mixed with a host of silver items as well. Royal winter clothes, made from bat skin and hair were in one corner. In the distance, golden statues of Inca kings sat on chairs of gold.
Laura’s eyes widened when the flashlight illuminated stairs a short distance away that led to a lower chamber. Curiosity moved Laura’s reluctant feet. 20 feet deeper into the ground, the stairs ended in another chamber, ten times the size of the one above. Almost every inch of the chamber was packed with the treasures that once were spread over the vast Inca empire, which at its height extended from the border of Ecuador and Colombia, down to 50 miles south of modern Santiago, Chile. Over 300,000 square miles housed around 12 million people. Laura whistled. This must be worth billions. A knot formed in her throat. Victor. Is he alive? Quickly Laura ran back up, and searched the walls for an exit. There must be one, the passage I came in with is too small for all this treasure to be brought in through it. Laura scanned every section of the wall for a lever or something as she made her way around the edges of the room. Her face lit up when she saw a familiar face looking back at her. The flashlight bathed an identical painting as the Peru woman outside, in light. The same mechanism ensured than only the jaguar lady could open the door from the inside. Laura’s heart slightly raced as she again became one with the painting and pushed her palms down.

The dust that blew over her was as welcome as the sunlight that eagerly rushed in, having been denied access for hundreds of years. Tears of joy flowed down her cheeks as she stepped through the door, and filled her lungs with clean, jungle air. Thick vines and branches halted Laura’s progress two feet in, and desperately she called for Manco. Laura sighed and relief filled her when Manco answered her call. Blades whistled in the air and snapped vines and branches as Manco and his men rushed to Laura. An existing jungle path that ran close by, sped up the process.

Manco’s jaw hung as he stared past Laura. Ten pairs of eyes popped eagerly over his shoulder and stole glimpses of the treasure. With the treasure beckoning from inside, Manco and his men dropped to their knees and thanked Laura, who placed her hand gently on Manco’s shoulder.
“Use the treasure well, Manco. Help the people of Peru. All I ask is that if any books or scrolls are found, that they be brought to me for safe keeping.” Slowly Manco rose and hugged her, then stopped.

“You are hurt, you shirt has blood on it.” Manco said shocked, then continued. “Come, you need to see our healer, she will help.”

“Do you know about my friend?”

“I do not. Maybe she will allow you to see him now.” Manco took Laura by her hand and led her away, while he snapped an order over his shoulder. Quickly one man dashed off to bring the other warriors. Soon the treasure would be broken into smaller collections and hidden from corrupt officials.

“You finally have your hidden treasure, Manco.” Laura smiled proudly at Manco, who stopped dead and wiped the smile from her face.

“This is only the king’s personal treasure. He had the court’s treasure hidden in several different locations.” Manco walked away and Laura quickly caught up to him.

“I think this is quite enough treasure hunting for one day,” Laura said laughing.

“Indeed.”

Every step Laura took closer to where Victor was taken, her heart pounded louder. Is he alive?
Laura’s eyes curiously scanned the small jungle village in front of them. 20 simple, rectangular, mud-bricked houses with thatched roofs, arranged in a circle around a communal gathering place, hid from civilization. Each house had a doorway to both the outside of the circle and the inside that made it hard for attackers to trap occupants inside their houses. The communal area could sit 30 people on log chairs around a campfire, while matters at hand were discussed over a pot of home-brewed beer. A few children played with a ball in the gathering, and stopped when they saw Laura. Women looked up at Laura from where they sat outside their homes, their cooking and cloth-making temporarily interrupted.

“This is where you live?”

“These are the homes of some of the guards of the treasure, the men you saw earlier.”

“Where is Victor?”

“The healer’s house is over there, come.” Manco pointed to a larger building across from them, outside of the circle of houses. Slowly they walked over to it, while curious eyes followed every footstep.

“Why are they afraid of me?”

“They are not afraid. They are respectful. Would you run up to a queen or the Pope to get a hug?”

“Well, err.” Manco’s hand in the air silenced Laura’s words as they stopped in front of the healer’s house.

“I cannot enter with you.” Manco gently placed his hand on Laura’s shoulder and indicated for her to remove her sandals, then enter.
A solid, dark, wooden door, richly decorated with symbols and talismans, blocked the entrance. Laura took a deep breath, swallowed her beating heart down from her throat, stepped out of her sandals, and opened the door. Soft fur compressed under her feet as Manco closed the door behind her. Candles flickered around the room and danced with the gentle breeze that entered with Laura. The soft orange of their flames, painted the wooden ornaments of tigers, jaguars, condors and snakes, scattered around the room, golden. No space on the walls were in need of decoration, feathers and strings lined with crystals and beads, tied securely in different decorative patterns, saw to that. Myrrh, jasmine, sandalwood, rosemary, and frankincense, hung thick in the air, as it poured slowly from a doorway that led to another room. Two animal skins formed the door. Laura filled her lungs fully with the smell of the incense that reminded her of how much she loved to soak in a bath with a good book and smoldering incense.

Laura jerked when the animal skins parted a fraction. Her eyes widened when a wrinkled bony hand, with long black nails, pushed past the skins and beckoned her to enter. The near-skeleton hand disappeared into the darkness it came from when Laura unsurely inched forward. Incense filled Laura’s lungs deeply when she pushed the animal skins apart and stepped into the next room. Laura’s heart matched a hummingbird’s heart in pace, while her eyes adjusted to the dim light provided by the few freestanding candles.

“Victor.” Laura raced to Victor where he lay unconscious in the middle of the room on a large tree trunk, cut through the center and polished smooth. Six tree stumps, pushed into holes cut into the tree trunk at the bottom, served as legs. Laura grabbed Victor’s hand and sat down on a tree trunk cut at knee height that stood in front of the bed. His hand was cold and clammy in hers.
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

Laura jumped when a dark figure moved on a large, animal skin covered bed in the corner of the room. Darkness seemed to follow the hooded figure as it glided towards Laura. A golden Mayan mask, inside a long robe with animal skins draped over the shoulders, came to stand next to Laura.

“Is he dead?” Laura’s wet eyes flowed over Victor’s chest, which was covered in stones, crystal, herbs, and ointments. A large leaf, held in place by vines wrapped around his chest, covered the gunshot wound.

“Not yet, but soon he will step over to another world.”

“Can you save him?” Laura’s voice wavered as she wiped tears out of her eyes.

“No. I cannot. He has too many demons in his past that need too much forgiveness.” Laura’s heart shattered, and she bend forward and placed her head on Victor’s chest. The mask tilted sideways and studied Laura’s back for a moment.

“You are hurt, let me see.” Slowly Laura took off her shirt to reveal the injuries on her back.

“These are nothing. Sit still while I attend to them.”

“What can we do to save him?” Laura whispered.

A bony hand slowly removed the mask and revealed a weathered Peruvian woman’s face. Her eyes spoke of knowledge beyond Laura’s understanding of the world.

“He needs a reason to live. His journey is complete, and he needs to be offered a new journey to live.” The woman rolled a small log stool closer and sat next to Laura. She then cleaned Laura’s back and smeared a paste of herbs and ointment over the wounds.

“How do we do that for him?” Laura’s eyes pleaded for an answer.

“Not we, you. Only you can do that for him.” The woman’s bones complained as she got up. She gave Laura one last look, then walked out of the room. Laura placed her head on Victor’s chest, and held her breath. His heartbeat was faint in her ear.
“Please don’t leave me.” Laura’s heart jumped when Victor’s pinky twitched in her hand. Slowly Laura leaned over and kissed Victor.

“I love you, Victor. I want to spend my life with you. I forgive you for all you’ve done.” Laura’s voice was soft and filled with love for him. Laura waited for a response to her words, and was rewarded by the sound of her own breathing. Gently, she lay her head on his chest again when chanting from outside the hut filled the air. Her tears were warm on his cold chest as she cried herself to sleep.

Laura wiggled her slightly crooked toe into the sand where she stood waiting by the edge of the river. She narrowed her eyes and placed her hands on her hips as she gazed at Victor where he sat in a boat, moored at the opposite shore. Why does he not just come over?

“Victor.” Her call drifted unnoticed past him. For a moment, she stared at him blankly, and then a smile graced her lips when Victor cast the mooring line off and pushed the boat into the river with a paddle. Her smile dropped when he slowly paddled down river and away from her.

“Victor, wait for me.” Laura’s heart raced as she waded ankle deep into the crystal clear water and waved at Victor. Every trancelike stroke of the paddle, took him further from her, forever to be lost to her. Adrenaline rushed through her blood and her heartbeat echoed in her ears, as she stormed deeper into the water. Laura gasped when the river turned pitch black. Movement in the water stirred the calm surface as creatures eagerly waited for her to step closer.
Laura’s heart pounded as she snapped her eyes back and forth between Victor drifting away and the whirlpools that came closer and closer to her. Laura swallowed hard when skeleton hands broke the surface, and then disappeared again as the figures came closer. The river was covered in bony hands and wings with claws that broke the surface. Dread nailed icy spikes in her spine and froze her to the spot. *One stroke at a time Laura, that’s how you get to the other side.* With her mother’s voice echoing in her mind, she jumped head first into the sea of waiting greedy hands. Nails and hands clawed at her, and tore her flesh as she fought her way, punching and kicking to Victor. Laura gulped for air when a powerful creature pulled her under. A fist in the thing’s demented face temporarily gave her freedom and air. Laura yelled in pain as clawed nails ripped into her thigh, and then stripped flesh from her leg as it pulled her under. Anger filled her as she pried the nails free and broke the claw. Her blood spurted into the river with every kick and sent the demons into a frenzy for her soul. Laura’s chest heaved as she gasped for air. *Just one foot, you can do it.*

“Victor.” Laura grabbed Victor’s left arm.

“Aaahhh,” Laura screamed, as massive claws dug deep into her back and stripped chunks of flesh from her back as it tried to pull her down. Defiantly Laura grabbed Victor with both hands. Her body jerked as a giant spike burst through her chest. Crimson blood dripped from her lips as something dragged her and Victor into the water. A sea of bony hands and claws eagerly ripped flesh from their bones.
“Spare him and take my life.” The creatures froze, frantically looked at each other, and then at the tiny white light that formed in Laura’s heart and pierced the darkness. The tiny light of pure love glowed stronger and expanded to fill her whole chest. A spark jumped from it into Victor, and grew in him as it was fed by the light in Laura’s heart. The creatures panicked and backed away in a frenzy of confused looks. The two lights expanded and merged to form one big, brilliant white ball. Ear piercing screams filled the river as the ball exploded and shattered the dark creatures. For a moment, the light blinded Laura, and then faded to reveal a clear river. Quickly she pulled Victor to shore and laid him down. Both heaved as they gasped for air while they lay in the soft sand. Victor’s brilliant blue eyes sparkled as he looked at Laura.

“Your love for me saved me.” His lips invited hers and under a chorus of bird songs, she leaned over to kiss him. Her lips drifted over his, and Laura pushed forward, but something held her back. Slowly she drifted away and the feeling of falling filled her body.

“Victor.” Laura forced his name out with full lungs as he was ripped from her. Her hands frantically grabbed for him. No, Victor. A sharp pain filled her head and blinded her.

For a second, Laura kept her eyes closed while something soft pressed into her cheek. Slowly she opened her eyes and looked up at Victor from where she had landed on the floor, when she fell off her log chair, while she was dreaming.

Her body ached and complained as she slowly stood up. Gently she ran her hand over his unconscious body and white face, then turned to right her log again.

“Water.” Laura spun around at the faint voice and slipped. Her teeth rattled as she bounced on her buttocks. Instantly she was up again and next to Victor, who managed a weak smile.
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

“Glad to see you stuck around, can I get some water please?” The stars in Laura’s eyes brightened the room as she nodded, then spun around to get water. Two steps in, she about turned and rushed to his side. No force on earth could keep her lips from his and her arms from hugging him. Satisfied, she turned towards the door, and with a last glance, she disappeared into the next room in search of water.
Chapter 15: The Beginning Of Adventure

Laura took a deep breath, and held it. The pistol was steady in her grip. Slowly she squeezed the trigger when the sights lined up. The pistol rocked slightly in her hand, and the slide stayed open while Laura kept her eyes on the target.

“Yes.” Laura jumped up when the empty stew can flew off the log and into the air.

“Well done, Laura.” Laura spun around and triumphantly walked to Victor where he leaned against a tree.

“I have a good instructor, even though he is still a bit beaten up after a week’s rest.” Laura laughed.

“Hey, I was only in bed for two days.”

“And you would recover faster if you stayed in bed.” Laura placed the palm of her hand on his chest, and then kissed him before he could reply.

“You hungry?” Laura asked as she took Victor’s hand.

“Who is cooking?” Victor raised an eyebrow at Laura as they walked towards the hut Manco had arranged for them.

“Hey, my cooking has improved a lot.” Laura pulled her nose at Victor. While Victor was healing, Laura helped the women cook for the men. She also helped to clean the healer’s house, who in turn taught her how to use plants to heal anything, from an upset stomach to infected wounds.

“Ah, that’s nice.” Laura picked the flowers and food parcel up when they reached the hut.

“Mmm.” There is a dark chocolate bar in here, want to share?” Laura winked at Victor. Manco made sure that a steady supply of food and other supplies were delivered to them. Laura licked her lips, and gently bit her lower lip as her inviting eyes lured Victor to the bedroom.

“Are you sure about this?”
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

Victor stared at the hotel in front of him while Manco waited patiently beside him for an answer.

“’It has been one month now. It has to be done.‘ Victor turned and walked towards Laura where she waited across the road by an old, flatbed Bedford truck.

“You ready?” Victor softly touched Laura’s shoulder.

“Yes.” Laura placed her hand over Victor’s, then lifted it from her shoulder and locked her fingers in his.

“Thank you for the ride Manco.” Victor nodded to Manco as he came to stand next to them.

“Call me any time when you need any help.”

“Will do,” Victor said over his shoulder, as he and Laura made their way into the hotel. Victor had already booked a room when Laura had said goodbye to Manco.

“This is nice.” Laura dropped her backpack by the bed and fell backwards on the crisp white linen. Victor sat down next to her, then opened his backpack and pulled four scrolls from it. Slowly he balanced one in his hand, and then opened it on the bed. Unreadable hieroglyphs, symbols, and drawings laughed at him from a material he had never seen before. The material resembled leather, yet after all the years it was not rotten, cracked, or damaged by any bugs. Two solid gold bars formed the ends of the scrolls and allowed the scroll to be rolled around them. Even after a month of studying, a knot still formed in his stomach when he unrolled the scrolls. It is as if they screamed at him to destroy them.

Slowly he looked at Laura where she lay on the bed and stared deep in thought at the ceiling. The journey from their hut in the woods to Cusco took two days.

“Laura, order us some food, I will be back soon.” Victor slowly stood up.

“You are not going to wash my back.” Laura pulled a sad face at him and drew a laugh from Victor.

“You are on your own on this one.” Victor winked, and Laura smelled her shirt.
“Hey, it is not my fault. I had to sit and sleep on the back of a truck for two days,” she countered, while Victor walked to the door. When the door closed behind him, she got up and undressed, then took a quick shower and changed clothes before she ordered room service. Victor was back before the food, and quickly showered, then changed clothes.

“Here goes nothing.” Victor inserted the prepaid SIM card he just bought into his smart phone. He took a deep breath as he activated the loudspeaker on his phone, and then dialed a number.

“Dean’s Carpet Service, how may I help?”
“Put me through to Manuel.”

“Sorry sir, there is no one here by that name, can I be of service?” The friendly voice stalled while computers already started a voice recognition pattern. He could have given his secret code, but this is so much more fun.

“Oh shit. Putting you through.” The voice was full of fear that made Victor smile. No doubt, the lady would be staring, wide-eyed, at the message that flashed ‘High priority alert, Follow protocol red immediately’ on her computer screen.

Click.

The call connected, and Victor started the stopwatch function on a cheap digital watch he also bought when he was out. 45 seconds, he reminded himself. The encryption program on his phone could scramble their computers and delay them from finding his location for 45 seconds.

“I was hoping you would call, how are things Victor?” Manuel was stalling.

“Eliminated complication, data secured.” Victor glanced at the stopwatch. 38 seconds left.

“Has courier been eliminated?” Manuel’s voice was emotionless. 32 seconds.

“No. Manuel, I am out. She is innocent and I will destroy the data.” 25 seconds left.
“Victor, Victor, Victor, you know no one gets out of this business, and the girl knows too much, and so do you. And I hear rumors that the treasure was found. I want those scrolls.”

15 seconds left.

“Go to hell.” 10 seconds left.

“We will find you and her and…”

Click.

Victor ended the call. 4 seconds left. Slowly he removed the SIM card from the phone and pulled the battery out.

“They are coming for us, right?”

“Yes.”

“Why, Victor?”

“Because there are people in very high places, whom are not who they say they are, and their names are on the list. They are afraid that I would leak the information.”

“How many will come for us?”

“All they have.” Laura took Victor’s hand, and slowly he turned to face her where she sat on the bed.

“What are we going to do, Victor?”

“Keep the scrolls safe, and hide, while I find out where all of this started and who is behind the order to have us killed. Then end it all.” Laura nodded, and then smiled as she stood up and took her place next to Victor. Hand in hand, they prepared for a new life for both of them.

In a hotel a few blocks away, a cellphone beeped as a text message came through. Unemotional eyes stared at the pictures of Victor and Laura and the message underneath it. ‘Targets are close by your location. Find and eliminate at all cost.’

“We have work to do.” A husky voice filled the air while a pistol’s slide was pulled back then released. A 9mm round dutifully slid into the barrel and awaited further instructions.

Continued in Laura and The God Code
Aurora, a lonely investor, finds her life turned upside down after an argument with her boss. Taking time out, she travels to the majestic temples in Cambodia to fulfill a 22-year-old promise and find answers to questions that haunted her whole life. When a stranger saves her life, an attraction develops.

Chase has been hurt badly in a previous relationship and closed his heart to love. However, when he saves Aurora, he cannot resist the attraction he has for her. While he battles to overcome his fears to trust Aurora, she secretly struggles to accept that she deserves love and happiness.

Can love heal Chase’s scars and drive Aurora’s grandmother’s poisonous words from her thoughts before it is too late and they lose each other.
Love struck, Aurora decides to move to Thailand and live with her dream man, Chase. However, her haste to be with Chase puts her on an adventures path to a different country when she takes the wrong bus.

Rick, Aurora’s ex-boss and womanizer is hell bent on having Aurora as his trophy. Unable to let her go, he decided to do whatever it takes to break Aurora and Chase up. He also needs to make sure Aurora does not find out about his dark secrets that can send him to jail. Maxine, recently divorced, takes a vacation to the resort where Chase works. Lonely and desperate, she is determined to have Chase as her vacation toy boy.

Can Chase’s love for Aurora resist Maxine’s charm and Aurora make it to Chase in time before Rick destroys their relationship.
Thank you for taking the time to read *Laura and the Jaguar Prophecy*.

If you enjoyed this book or found it useful, I would be very grateful if you would please post a short review because your support really does make a difference. Alternatively, consider telling your friends about this book because word of mouth is an author’s best friend and much appreciated.

If you want to contact me personally, send me an email @ anton@antonswanepoelbooks.com
As a Technical Diving Instructor and Cave Diver with over seven years’ experience working in different places, including the Cayman Islands, I have come to believe that limits are what you set for yourself. I used to be afraid of water until I forced myself into a diving course, and then things just kept going and the thing I feared gave me what I dreamed of doing, travel. Having dived to over 400ft on open circuit, I realize how much of life we miss if we let fear run our life.

Sometimes, life is like a dark tunnel that feels like it is going to squeeze the life from you. However, if you just keep going, you are bound to come out the other side. I love writing, travel, diving, caves, motorcycles, and speed, but as a Reiki Master Teacher, I know you have to balance your life with love, and compassion. Be proud to stand firm in your quest for your dreams, but humble enough to ask for help in reaching them.
Laura and The Jaguar Prophecy

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