



Botánicos

A novel

ALAN MEEROW

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1

The phone's insistent ring cut deep into Kovac's REM sleep, and he woke grasping at the last fading tendrils of a vague erotic dream. He withdrew one arm from under the sheet that covered him, and, in his daze, reached for the offending instrument without looking at the screen. He likely would have passed on the call if he had done so.

"Hello?" he murmured.

"Anton, it's Kevin Hobart," perhaps identifying himself lest Kovac had purged his number from his contacts (which he had).

Kovac shot upward in his bed. "Kevin," he replied. "It's been..."

"Twenty years," Kevin Hobart interrupted. Hobart was the most well-known botanist on the planet and director of the most extensive research botanical garden in the United States. He had also once been Kovac's employer. Twenty years ago.

Kovac swung out of bed and traipsed into the small kitchen in his boxers and t-shirt. The shirt, old, thin, and stretched out, had a graphic of an incandescent plant with beautiful flowers. It was a Brazilian species that Anton had himself described a quarter century ago. He started the coffee machine while framing his next words in his head.

"Anton?" Hobart queried.

"Uh, yeah, Kevin ... sorry, I just got up." He paused, closing his eyes and leaning against the counter. "What's on your mind?"

"A mutual friend," Hobart continued. "Garwell Sorrentino."

Kovac grunted and muttered, "You feeling sentimental, Kevin?" He regretted it immediately.

Hobart sighed theatrically, then cleared his throat before speaking again. "I have it on good counsel that he's still alive. I thought you would want to know."

Kovac suddenly grew light-headed and pulled a small wooden chair away from an equally small table he could easily reach in his starkly apportioned kitchen. He fell, more than sat, onto it heavily. "That's ridiculous," he said.

"There was no trace," Hobart replied

"Yeah, I know. And given the preponderance of animal scavengers in the area, no one was surprised."

Garwell Sorrentino was solo piloting an ultralight aircraft above a primary site in southeastern Peru twenty-five years ago, when its engine stalled and caught fire, causing the ultralight to plummet a thousand feet towards the treetops. The craft was smashed to smithereens by the expansive canopy of a forest giant. When a recovery team arrived weeks later (it took a minor miracle to get one into the trackless tropical wilderness at the height of the rainy season), no trace of the botanist's remains was discovered. Sorrentino was widely crowned as the world's most knowledgeable authority on tropical forest dynamics and biodiversity and had been conducting canopy surveys of a region rumored to be the richest tract in the southwestern corner of the upper Amazon basin. Despite entreaties by his collaborators to involve others in these surveys, Garwell had thrown caution to the wind and went aloft by himself that time. His collection numbers were a legend unto themselves; over a hundred thousand unique herbarium specimens bore his

name as the primary collector. Gar, ten years Kovac's senior, had also been his doctoral academic mentor at the midwestern botanical garden helmed by Kevin Hobart, through a collaborative relationship between the Garden and the Ohio State University. In more ways than one, Sorrentino had shaped the caliber of scientist that Anton Kovac had once been, and had also, across the decades of their association, become his closest friend.

"So, Anton," Hobart said. "What's your schedule like in the next few months?"



"He wants you to do what?" Nell exclaimed, eyes growing wide as she lowered her wineglass to the table. Kovac leaned back in his chair and eyed Nell Sorrentino with a bemused look. They were seated at a table for two at Kovac's favorite restaurant in Little Italy.

Nell was Garwell's widow, though truth be told, they had separated shortly before his ill-fated field trip to Peru. Kovac often wondered why she retained her married name all the years since. He paused while their server deposited another basket of warm bread on the table between them. Sorrentino had been a legendary philanderer; some would have said a predatory one at that, based on the average age of his universe of bedmates, starry-eyed female graduate students for the most part, at least those with whom Anton was familiar. The great irony was that Sorrentino treated them badly, casting them off with heartless abandon once he grew bored or they became too besotted. It was the one character flaw in his friend that Anton judged harshly, but he wasn't beneath being the young ladies'

rebound comfort when the opportunity presented itself. Nell had built a productive and awarded career with the New York Botanical Garden as a specialist in the coffee family, a successful, sprawling inter-continental assemblage that included not only coffee but quinine. She had recently accepted a generous offer for early retirement. She had shifted her work on the family to its Asian branches after their separation, and then to Brazil. Both of her children with Garwell, son and daughter, were each pursuing careers in zoology and medicine, respectively. Anton had been something of a Dutch uncle for them in the absence of their father. Nell was nearing 63 but was fit and lithe. Her long gray hair was typically tied up in a bun; that night, she wore it down, and Kovac almost didn't recognize her.

Kovac turned to survey the other patrons at various stages of their meals. His eyes caught those of a middle-aged man of indigenous South American appearance, a phenotype he knew well from years of field experience in the region. The man held his gaze, and a small smile twitched at the corners of his mouth.

"Says he'll pay for the entire trip with a generous per diem," he said, turning back to the still-warm bread.

"To look for my dead husband," Nell snorted.

"In a nutshell."

Nell inhaled deeply and raised herself up in her chair. "I'm coming with you," she said forthrightly.

"No, you're not," Anton replied. "That's a non-starter—end of story. I haven't even said 'yes' yet."

“Oh, you will,” Nell retorted. “And I’m coming with you. I’ll buy my own ticket.”

Kovac sighed. He’d known Nell long enough to be familiar with her powerful obstinance. “What will you tell the kids?”

Nell smiled sweetly. “That their uncle and I are taking a field trip to Peru.”

2

Cusco had changed in the twenty or so years since Kovac had last been to Peru. For one, virtually everyone walked the streets of the old city with their noses pointed down to a cell phone screen. Internet cafes alternated with coffee shops and bars, and myriad 5-star hotels were clustered in the city center. Kovac and Nell were bivouacked in adjoining rooms in one of the best.

The elevation had laid Nell low, so while she slept, Anton roamed the streets of the Incan capital, surprised by his familiarity with the city after so many years. After climbing a steep cobbled street, he was forced to pause to catch his breath. Tourists were everywhere, seemingly outnumbering the locals. Machu Picchu awaited them via the Inca Trail or by train to Aguas Calientes, which he remembered as an absolute pit of a town, apparently now grown into an only slightly seedy tourism hub. Kovac envied their cosseted exploration of a long-departed empire's once-secret hideaway. Where he and Nell were headed, there would be few creature comforts.

Kovac sat down at an outdoor coffee house veranda and ordered a *café con leche*. He was both relieved and apprehensive about having Nell along for the ride. Anton had only the slightest sense of where they would head once they arrived two days hence in Puerto Maldonado, gateway to the Madre de Dios region. He had written a letter to Oscar Crescente, his and Sorrentino's frequent field companion back in the day, during the two weeks of preparation for the trip, but had yet to receive a reply. Crescente was a half-Belgian

Peruvian naturalist, primarily self-taught, whose familiarity with the sparsely inhabited forests of southeastern Peru was second only to Garwell Sorrentino. Kovac didn't know if Oscar was still alive; he wasn't even sure if he could pick him out of a lineup, although he was only a few years older than himself. Oscar had loved Gar like a big brother. They had traversed countless square miles of primary forest together. Kovac had hired him as a guide for some of his own field trips. "For you is cheap," Oscar always greeted him in self-parody.

While he nursed his coffee, Kovac reviewed the trip preparations. He and Nell had flown directly to Cusco from JFK. His ticket had been business class, but halfway through the flight, he graciously exchanged the comfort of his accommodations for Nell's coach seat. Wandering toward the back of the plane, the aisle was choked with passengers embroiled in conversation with family members and friends, a melange of Spanish and Quechua. He caught the gaze of a man seated alone with a few rows in front of Nell. He paused, and his brow furrowed, while a slight chill crawled up his spine. The man nodded, and Anton was positive that the same fellow had locked eyes with him in the restaurant two weeks ago. He shook his head to dispel the odd feeling the stranger's stare inspired, both now and in the recent past. All had spooked him.

Twenty years ago, Anton was caught in *flagrante delicto* with Kevin Hobart's first wife deep in the bowels of the herbarium of the Cincinnati Botanical Garden by no less than Hobart himself. The scandal that erupted soon led to Kovac's termination as a research

botanist for the institution, and ultimately to Hobart's divorce. Kovac moved to New York and managed to obtain a nine-month per year teaching post with a local community college in Queens, a position he viewed as mostly penance for his folly. His research career ground to a halt, as no other botanical garden dared risk the ire of a cuckolded Kevin Hobart. Over the following two decades, Anton passed by fifty, cultivated a beer belly, and found professional solace in the occasional student who discovered a love of botany and successfully climbed the academic ladder. He lived in a studio apartment close to the college and spent a lion-sized share of his time feeling miserable. He dated sparingly, always short-lived affairs, the epitome of which was a spate of one-night-stands in his early forties with married women who'd momentarily tired of their husbands. The *après sex* talk generally resulted in Kovac agreeing that yes, they were far better off sticking with their husbands. Nell Sorrentino was his only friend.

When he returned to the hotel, Nell was up and about and had procured herself a large mug of *coca* tea, which helped alleviate the symptoms of altitude sickness. She was writing in a notebook when he knocked on the door that separated their rooms. "Good morning," she said brightly.

Kovac glanced at his watch. "Afternoon," he replied with a wry smile. "Feeling better?"

Nell lifted her mug of tea in a silent toast to the efficacy of the ancient remedy for *soroche*. "I thought we could maybe head up to Sacsayhuamán." The ancient Incan fortress was one and a quarter

miles from the city's central plaza, and the highest point in Cusco. "We can take a bus up and walk back down."

Anton shrugged. "*¿Porque no?*" he answered. "We have all day. Finish your tea."



It was pleasant to leave the crowds that overflowed the city's narrow streets. Their busload of mostly tourists soon dispersed across the grassy meadows that intervened among the ruins, now brown during the dry season. Anton and Nell strolled in silence, except for the sound of their labored breathing. Llamas grazed at the base of the structures, only the largest stones of which remained since the conquest. Here and there, a few *qantua* shrubs, the sacred flower of the Incas and both Peru and Bolivia's national flower, held out a few early blossoms, over which several hummingbirds competed aggressively, the metallic buzz of their wings rising and falling in pitch as they flew close to their ears and then retreated.

"What are the odds?" Nell suddenly said. Kovac knew exactly of what.

"Not very good," Anton replied.

"Then why are we doing this?"

Kovac sighed. *Why indeed*, he thought. "Unfinished business, I guess," he answered.

Nell nodded in assent and wandered off by herself. Kovac continued on his own way towards the structures known as the "Bastions," zigzag walls of limestone that stood on terraced platforms. He was overcome by weariness suddenly, but he knew it

had nothing to do with altitude this time. It was accompanied by a deep sense of foreboding, as if the ghosts of the ancient Inca surrounded him. They were surely mocking him. The sun disappeared behind a cloud bank, and he perceived the cold on his skin, which the thin air and sunlight had momentarily disguised. He turned around a blind corner and immediately collided with someone, landing square on his backside. “*Discúlpeme señor,*”¹ said a figure dressed in local garments, who extended a hand to help him to his feet. For a brief moment, as the short-statured stranger assisted him, their eyes locked, and Anton visibly started. He was absolutely certain it was the same man he’d seen in the restaurant in New York and on the flight to Cusco. “*¿Está todo bien, señor?*”² the man inquired.

Kovac just stared at him, his mouth agape. “*¿Yo a usted lo conozco?*”³ he stammered.

The familiar stranger was already bounding away, but before he disappeared behind another wall, he glanced over his shoulder at Kovac and flashed a wide smile. “*Todavía no,*” he answered—Not yet.



On the way back down from the fortress, Anton told Nell about the odd encounters. “Why would we be followed?” she asked.

Kovac threw up his hands. “The only possible explanation I can come up with is Kevin.”

¹ Excuse me, sir.

² Are you O.K., sir?

³ Do I know you?

“Why on earth would Kevin have someone tailing us?” Nell wondered.

“Because he doesn’t trust us,” Kovac replied. “At least not me.”

“You mean he doesn’t trust you to tell him the truth? Anton, that’s absurd.”

The streets lost grade as they neared the central plaza of the city. “I’m starving,” Kovac said, changing the subject. “I’m up for barbequed *cuy*.”

3

When the engine of his aircraft suddenly stalled with a cough and a plume of smoke, Garwell Sorrentino realized he had perhaps fifteen seconds to react. He reasoned quickly that he had to separate himself from the ultralight just as the wheels neared the forest canopy. Gar unbuckled himself and began scanning the treetops for a suitable candidate to intercept his fall without breaking too many of his bones. A large well-branched *guarumo* tree stood out in the distance by its large silvery, palmate leaves, a fast-growing tree gap colonizer whose supple branches might slow and eventually halt his descent. Sorrentino had to estimate his forward motion, and precisely choose the optimal time to jump. He prepared as the tiny plane dipped towards the ground, lowering the visor of his helmet over his eyes. He counted down the seconds, preparing as seamless a pitch over the side of the ultralight as could be managed. His chosen target loomed ever larger, green arms beckoning like a forest siren. When he reached 15, he threw himself out of the craft, clutching his small pack and knees to his chest. "Oh baby," he whispered, whether to the tree, some god or a distant shadow from the future he didn't know.

The highest branches of the *guarumo* barely stopped his momentum, but as the greener branches piled up, rather than fell to the lower canopy, they cushioned the blows. Without the helmet, he would have been knocked senseless, if not killed. He was finally halted about the mid-trunk of the tree, some thirty feet from the ground. Every bit of bare skin was lacerated; his legs and arms were severely contused. However, as best he could tell, prone in his nest

of piled *guarumo* branches, nothing was broken. Gar winced as he gingerly shifted his position, causing some branches to bounce up and down. There was a sharp crack, and one side of his platform listed downward. His pack was miraculously still with him. Inside was 30 feet of nylon rope. He hoped he hadn't underestimated the distance to the ground. Availing himself first of two aspirins from the pack, which he was forced to chew as his water supply had gone down with the ship, Garwell carefully extracted the rope from his pack, along with a pulley connected to a grappling hook. He reconnoitered his savior tree, looking for a place to secure the line. *Guarumo* belonged to the genus *Cecropia*, the species of which harbored fiercely defensive ants inside their twigs in a mutualistic relationship. For the ants, the trees provided room and board in the form of protein bodies, and they, in turn, kept the trees clean of pestiferous insects and even invading plants. Sure enough, he became aware of the burn of multiple ant bites, which added impetus to his industry. He fastened the hook and pulley assembly to the rope.

Not too far from his perch, and at about the same height, he sighted a branch of an adjoining tree, a species of Spanish cedar in the mahogany family, seemingly thick enough to support his weight. Carefully, he lifted himself to a seated position. He took a sufficient lead line and swung the hook back and forth, weighing just how much strength to put behind his toss. He was fortunate that it was a clear shot, free of intervening branches, and his eye didn't fail him. "Fuck all," he whooped, as the four hooked arms of the grappling bit

into the wood of the *Cedrela* branch. A few explorative yanks on the line convinced him he could proceed successfully. Moving slowly, in an effort not to rock his cradle, he tied his pack to the free end of the rope, and lowered it slowly towards the ground where it landed with a satisfying thump. To his gratified ears, it was the loveliest sound that he'd ever heard. Gripping the rope with his ant-bitten hands, Sorrentino rolled out of the *guarumo* into the open space between the two trees, dangling only a few feet below the anchored grappling, his aching legs wrapped around the rope. Slowly, he commenced his descent, inching his way downward in a reverse rope trick. Gar was tall and wiry, but muscular, with a phenomenal ability to block out pain, and his descent was relatively easy.

After trying in vain to dislodge the grappling from the cedar branch with several painful yanks, Sorrentino reached into his pack and took out a lightweight 9 mm semi-automatic pistol. "More than one way to skin a cat," he muttered. That had been his old man's favorite aphorism. The Cincinnati Botanical Garden's field office in Lima at the National Museum was well-apportioned with accouterments for surviving field trips into the tropical wilderness, and he had two more clips in his pack. He took sight of the cedar limb that held his hook and pulley assembly. Bullet by bullet, he blasted the wood away from the points of the hook. Garwell was a very good shot. Still, it took most of the 13-round clip to liberate the grappling, and with a last pull, the assembly and rope tumbled to the forest floor. He cleaned the sharp hooks off carefully, capped them, and returned the rope to his pack.

The events of the day at last overcame him, and he sank to the ground, growing light-headed. His body ached again, but the thought of chewing two more aspirins made him grimace. He glanced at his watch. It was 3 pm. He had about 3 hours before darkness to find some food and water, especially the latter. *I should make a shelter*, he thought. His eyes grew heavy. "No!" he said aloud. But his chin fell to his chest, and he was soon asleep.

He woke with a start. "Shit!" he exclaimed as he rose to his feet. Sorrentino now had only an hour of gloomy daylight left at his disposal. Gar surveyed the area. He was amid primary *terra firma* forest, and so successfully did the rooftop canopy intercept and consume the sunlight that there was a park-like understory that needed no machete blade to clear a path. Sorrentino spied the trunks of two sub-canopy trees that would serve as posts to string his hammock. And the rope tied higher on the same trees would allow him to erect a tarp roof to stay dry, under which he could hang his mosquito netting. The dry season was nearing its close, and the intermittent storms that occur periodically during the dry months were increasing in frequency. As if to add credence, he heard the distant rumble of thunder. He set off to make his camp, extracting one of two energy bars that he had in his pack, savoring small bites as he labored.

As his bedroom took shape in the last light of day, the forest sounds transformed into the night suite of nocturnal birds, the hum of insects, and myriad sounds for which Sorrentino could only guess an identity. A spectacled owl began its low whooping call in a nearby

tree. Gar fished in his pack for the last energy bar; tomorrow, he would search for breakfast in the forest. He was fairly confident of finding at least some errant fruit at the tail end of the dry season when many of the tree species would be flowering. But water was his foremost concern. And insect repellent, as the mosquito hordes gathered wherever bare skin presented itself. He applied it lavishly, withstanding the painful stinging that exploded across his ant bites, and then set about making a small fire using the lighter in his pack. Dry fiber from the old leaf bases of an *inayuga* palm served as tinder, followed by some fallen dead tree branches that snapped sharply across his knee (only the right one, as his left was swollen with a bruise).

Garwell pulled a headlamp from his pack and pulled the woven elastic band around his head. He clicked it on, and a bright LED beam bathed his encampment in harsh light. Sorrentino intended to always keep his fire in sight but hoped to either spot some edible fruit or a stem he could tap for water. To his satisfaction, only a few yards from the large *inayuga* palm, he found a younger and shorter individual that bore a cluster of ripe fruits. Gar peeled the tough skin of the fruit with his knife and popped it skinned into his mouth. The pulp was sweet and refreshing, allowing him to swallow three aspirin whole. He ate his fill, placing the seeds in his satchel to crack open later and eat the oil rich endosperm inside. "Not bad for a start," he mused.

The thunder had not abated, had in fact grown closer. A gusty wind rustled about the canopy trees. Gar made his way back to the fire. The air below the forest giants was yet still. The owl had ceased

to call. He checked the tie-downs for his tarp rain fly, threw another few pieces of wood on the fire, and sat down, but not before checking the immediate surroundings for tarantulas, scorpions or snakes. Garwell was as home in the Amazon basin forests as he had been in the temperate Ozark woodlands of his Arkansas boyhood, an only child of a Christmas tree farmer and his flower grower wife, both now departed. He had walked those woods for days at a time as a boy during spring especially, when the understory erupted with ephemeral exhortations of magnificent wildflowers: trilliums, spring beauty, violets of various sorts, lady slipper orchids; the rarest he sought out with particular acumen and success. His friend Kovac once remarked about Sorrentino's dogged focus, suggesting that he lay somewhere on the Asperger's spectrum. Certainly, he internalized nothing, and that more than anything may have accounted for his seemingly guilt-free extramarital adventures. He could also be an imperious asshole, caustically scolding when a student mis-identified a plant.

As the rain fell above, he poked at the fire with a stick and attempted to devise a plan. He was confident that his GPS would fail to find any satellites unless he could stumble upon some open sky. Nevertheless, he would give it the college try in the morning. With a lurch of aggravation, he remembered removing his satellite phone from his pack and laying it on the ultralight's small console, along with his canteen. "Strike two," he sighed. Rivers were the byways of the Madre de Dios forests, and he needed to find flowing water that would eventually lead him to some human contact in the least

inhabited portion of the Peruvian *selva*. He looked up, feeling the first drops from the drip-tip leaves of the upper canopy. Gar found a spot on his rain fly with frequent drip activity and fashioned a conduit to collect and funnel water to one spot. He used his helmet as a bucket reservoir. The precipitation increased perceptibly, and Sorrentino called it a night. He scooted below the tarp and netting, and gingerly lowered himself onto his hammock. He was suspended to about one and a half feet from the ground. His tightly zipped pack he hung from a hook that he screwed into the trunk of one of his post trees. Gar heard the comforting gurgle of a steady stream of water echoing in his helmet. Sorrentino wrapped himself up in a Mylar thermal blanket and inched around for a comfortable position. The temperature would drop ten degrees before daybreak. He watched his fire die, and the fading flames lulled him to sleep. He awoke only once during the night. Some animal he could not recognize was emitting the most mournful sound he'd ever heard. It sounded like the wail of some creature knowing that death was approaching. It repeated itself maybe six times before moving off or passing on.

Garwell woke as soon as daylight penetrated the primary forest canopy. It was cool and humid; he kept the thermal blanket around himself for a while until it became an encumbrance to activity. The fire was out, and he didn't relight it, since he wished to move on as soon as possible. But he was thirsty, and his helmet was full. He pulled a collapsible plastic cup from his pack and dipped it into the water. The water tasted like divine nectar to his parched lips. He slugged down four cups, reducing his reservoir to half its volume.

From inside his pack, he withdrew a collapsible plastic bottle, which he extended and filled with the remainder. Thirsty no longer, Sorrentino tried to bring his GPS to life, but he quickly turned it off when it warned that no satellites could be found. He concluded it was time to find breakfast.

He walked with his short machete out, putting small blazes onto the side of tree trunks he would most readily see on his return. Garwell used his compass religiously, maintaining a northeastern track. A huge, buttressed forest giant, a fig, he surmised, was his traveler's tree. He never let it out of his sight. He knew how bewildering the forest could be. Gar had not proceeded half a mile before he found a fruiting *ñejilla* palm, a clustering and ferociously spiny species of *Bactris* that also produced delicious fruit pulp. A single cluster of the purple fruits, looking to be at peak ripeness, dangled from one stem. Sorrentino would have to maneuver his hand through a labyrinth of sharp, black spines to extract the fruit, or do some judicious pruning. He cut off some stems that were in his way, removing thorns from the bigger stems, until he created a clear path to cut off the fruit cluster. Coupled with the remaining *inayuga* palm fruits, he would be well sated before commencing his trek. He made his way back to his soon-to-be abandoned camp and made good on his bounty of palm fecundity.

On the way back to his camp, he identified a *sangre de grado* tree, the sap of which was a powerful healer of wounds. He made several blows to the trunk with his machete, and it immediately exuded the red sap. He used the sticky liquid from the injured tissue to make a

poultice, which he applied to the cuts on his arms and legs. Gar knew from experience that the cuts would start to heal as the gummy sap dried.

Sorrentino broke camp with customary efficiency, rearranging his backpack to keep essentials near at hand. He hung the water bottle and helmet from external loops using sturdy clips, and placed the pistol in his waistband below the pack. He tested his reach and clenched the firearm easily. When his tasks were completed, there was little trace that the encampment had ever been there. He reasoned that maintaining a southeasterly track would most likely lead him to creeks and streams that would eventually flow into a navigable river.

Garwell moved through the forest on his compass track, which he wore around his neck from a leather thong. He paused now and again, to strike a glancing machete blow at a tree trunk, observing the color of the sap, the smell of the freshly cut wood. From these clues, Gar could frequently identify trees to family, and half the time to genus. He read the forest only as someone with a rare intimacy with it could, which gave him a deep and, by most estimation, peculiar satisfaction. Most of all, he experienced no fear. His own death was as much an abstraction to him as the emotional lives of his wife and children. Yet when in his company, the fearlessness was contagious, and Anton Kovac could remember those moments over a quarter of a century past as the truest instances of freedom he'd ever experienced, deep in the sodden womb of tropical rainforest.

As he pushed forward into the forest, Sorrentino kept his eyes peeled for a tree gap. An open stretch of sky was his best hope for getting a GPS connection to some Southern Hemisphere satellite. Instead, the canopy remained unbroken, as the temperature rose as morning ebbed. He passed below a rare deciduous tree of the forest, a pink trumpet tree, or *ipê*, which, judging by the sheer abundance of its fallen large flowers, was in peak bloom. He had sailed over a few on his ill-fated canopy survey. A blast of sunlight up ahead stopped him in his tracks. His luck remained consistent. A forest giant had come down recently, and he had a shot at determining where in southeastern Peru he stood.

Garwell made his way to the tree gap, which was no more than perhaps twenty feet in diameter. He dropped his pack, found the GPS, and powered it up. The instrument's search seemed interminable, but the device finally contacted a single satellite. Gar hoped the latest maps had been downloaded to memory. A map view suddenly burst into focus. He zoomed in as more features appeared. Sorrentino immediately identified the Las Piedras River and estimated that where he stood now lay over a hundred miles to the northwest. He had departed the previous morning from the small river town of Lucerna and had maintained a northwest bearing. Gar zoomed in, hoping that smaller and closer tributaries of the river, itself a significant branch of the Madre de Dios, would resolve on the screen and be situated much closer to where he found himself. A small squiggle appeared on the GPS screen. If he maintained his southeast track, he'd intercept the nameless river in about twenty

miles. He had little hope of encountering any boat traffic on the closest tributary of the Las Piedras. It was the dry season, and significant lengths of the smaller rivers were likely passable only by canoe with lots of intermittent portage. Another trek of 60-70 miles would bring him to the Las Piedras, where he assuredly could find boat passage to Lucerna and ultimately Puerto Maldonado. He turned off the GPS. He was at about 900-foot elevation. If he stayed on course, he'd intercept the small river at 700 feet. He figured he had at least five days of forest slogging ahead, longer if he botanized, which he most assuredly would. Sorrentino had penetrated the Madre de Dios Territorial reserve. The only humans living in the reserve were tribes that forsook a contact with the modern world. The odds of encountering any were infinitesimally small, though even if he did, they'd likely remain invisible to him.

Gar drifted through the forest understory, across the gently rolling terrain, taking compass readings every twenty minutes or so to maintain his path. He spied little in the way of animal life, aside from insects in the dark understory of the forest. Most of the birds and arboreal mammals would be high in the canopy. Descending a gentle slope, he surprised a troop of brown capuchin monkeys, who seemed to deride his presence with sharp guttural vocalizations. They peered down at him with their perches in the lower branches of an *abiu* tree, which bore a smattering of fruiting branches. He circled the trunk of the tree, eyes glued to the blanket of leaf litter. Gar found six relatively unscathed fruits. He cut into the yellow drupes with alacrity, involuntarily closing his eyes as he bit into the sweet and

astonishingly delicious white pulp that surrounded the black seed. The genus *Pouteria* to which *abiu* belonged was a goldmine of forest fruits in the sapote family.

The hours slipped by rapidly as he walked. High above him, toucans and macaws serenaded him. The toucans occasionally dropped into the sub-canopy and regarded him with a mixture of defiance and indifference. It surprised him to see how late it was when he glanced at his watch, nearing four in the afternoon. He anticipated that he'd accomplished half of his first trip. Tomorrow, by this time, he should be on the bluffs overlooking the tributary of the Río Las Piedras.

He searched his vicinity for a campsite. As always, his first objective was two trees close enough together to support his hammock. One half mile further into the forest, he found two small trees that sufficed. Everything else proceeded by rote. A swift movement caught the corner of his eye. He deftly turned toward the spot and immediately caught sight of a fat *paca* foraging in the leaf litter about twenty feet away. Stealthily, Gar reached for the pistol in his waistband. He was not a vegetarian, and this forest cousin to *cuy* (guinea pigs), would fill his belly that night.

Sorrentino skinned and cleaned the *paca* about twenty yards away from his camp to dissuade predators. If a jaguar paid him a visit, perhaps the organ meats would be satisfactory booty. He erected a spit over his fire and felt the protein's siren call as the flesh roasted. His stomach gurgled in anticipation. Gar chased his *paca* with the remains of his water that night.

He didn't sense any indication of rain in the short term. Sorrentino had to rely upon condensation on his rain fly in the morning and then scout out a liana whose stem, if cut, would yield water. He bedded down for the night and was immediately asleep. He never saw the jaguar slink from around a tree near where he'd deposited the entrails. With a glance over its shoulder at the fire still blazing in Sorrentino's hearth, it made quick work of the heart and liver, before silently moving back into the darkness.

The following morning, he harvested only a quarter cup of condensate off his rain fly. He sipped it slowly, savoring each taste. He found a liana not too far from his camp, and with his machete, first tested the sap. It was clear and had no unappealing odor. Sorrentino cut several feet, first from a spot over his head, and next below, about a foot from the ground. Holding the vine segment vertically, he first filled his water bottle, then collected the excess in his helmet. Gar collected over a quart of water. He drank all that he had accumulated in his helmet. Garwell found another half dozen *abiu* fruits on the forest floor and made quick work of them. He opened a small leather bag attached to his belt and withdrew a wad of coca leaves and some crushed shell powder from a corked vial. Gar wrapped the lime with the leaves and placed the mass into his mouth and gently chewed it before pushing it against his cheek. That side of his mouth grew numb, and he was soon energized, focused, and no longer hungry. He quickly broke camp, packed his things, and continued through the forest.

Sorrentino had a preternatural sense of how the forest changed, with differences in soil composition, elevation and slope. His prescience was confirmed when he saw pink flowers fallen from a tree with buttresses and stilt roots he recognized as a *brea-caspi*. This species was typically found in wet, even swampy places, and its presence in *terra firma* forest meant that he was descending and nearing water. Sorrentino listened carefully. Gar could hear the music of a creek, perhaps a spring, no more than a hundred yards distant. He drew nearer and was greeted by as welcome a scene as he could hope for, clear water burbling over a few rocks as it made its way to exactly where he was headed. Gar filled his helmet and dumped it over his head. The cool water revitalized him, and he filled his water bottle to the brim. There was little sediment in it.

Garwell figured to follow the creek downstream. He withdrew a handful of palm seeds and cracked them open with the blunt edge of his machete. The meat tasted like coconut; it was oily and slightly sweet. He hoped he might surprise another *paca* for dinner when he made camp.

The creek meandered in roughly a southeastern direction, speeding up when the terrain dropped a few feet, slowing down on the more level passages. The forest was changing again, opening slightly. Higher light inspired exuberant growth in the understory, which slowed his pace for the last few miles.

The trees abruptly came to a halt on the cliffs above the river. He had to hack his way through a final curtain of head-high grass and herbaceous vines before he could see the waters perhaps a hundred

and fifty feet below. His companion creek merely tumbled over the edge and formed a small cataract on its descent. Gar welcomed the sun on his face and grinned happily. A few more days, and he'd be on his way to Puerto Maldonado.

Sorrentino figured that at some point he would encounter a low area along the bluff that allowed him to approach the river's edge. The current was steadfast, but the river often broke off into three or more branches that swept past islands of water-smoothed rock. Plants colonized very few of them, for during the rainy season, the river became a raging torrent, rising in places at least thirty to fifty feet above its current bed.

To his surprise, the riverbed suddenly widened enormously where a broad meandering loop had been isolated into a small oxbow lake. On his side of the river, the forest floor gently sloped to a sandy beach. A grove of *aguaje* palms stood at the terminus of the beach, and he was gratified to see that several females held fruit. The first thing he did was shed his clothes and bathe in a deep pool along the river's main course. The water was surprisingly cool. He washed his clothes as best he could, set them on river rocks to dry and made his way back to the palms. The *aguaje* fruits wore their relation to Asia's high climbing and speciose rattan palms in the form of brown scales on the skin of the fruit. Below this was a thick layer of nutritional and comestible enough yellow pulp. The silvery palmate leaves were a common sight throughout the wetter parts of the Amazon basin, sometimes forming immense colonies in swampy places, and the

fruit was much loved in South America, especially for making ice cream.

The absurdity of standing naked in the middle of the Madre de Dios watershed consuming *aguaje* after *aquaje* suddenly occurred to him and he laughed. As he feasted, he roamed the perimeter of the oxbow lake, searching for a site accommodating to his camp gear. He came across two male *aguaje* palms that were properly sized and spaced to hang his hammock, in addition to a rope line for the mosquito netting and rain fly. Few animals other than visiting insects would be attracted to the male palms, he reasoned.

Sorrentino had only been lost once during his many field trips into the Amazon. It had happened almost ten years ago, accompanied only by Oscar Crescente, over six hundred miles closer to the equator, deep within the wilderness northwest of Iquitos. It was also the single instance where Oscar had lost his nerve, convinced that they would stumble about for days without food or water, despite their combined knowledge of the forest's ability to quell both hunger and thirst. Gar had somehow dropped his compass while traversing a log bridge across a small but swiftly flowing stream a few miles from their base camp, and much as they tried, failed to retrieve it. Garwell hid from Oscar the fact that he was feverish, a re-blooming of malaria that he had contracted for the first time three years previously, and his illness had made him careless. As the day waned, Sorrentino sank deeper into fever-induced lethargy, while Crescente mumbled a collusion of prayer and curses. To their surprise and no small amount of relief, on the third day they

suddenly burst into a clearing, no doubt an abandoned slash and burn agricultural site. Clustered at one end of the opening, was an array of fluorescent tents, with a handful of *gringos* standing around, mouths agape at this apparition of two dirty and sweat-soaked young men bursting out of the forest. "Ho," Gar hailed them, raising his arm in a salute. He then collapsed into a heap amid their small circle, while Oscar paced, reciting "*¡El está loco!*" — He's crazy! —, over and over like a mantra. They were ornithologists, chasing rumors of an unnamed parrot species. The leader of the expedition, which had been dropped by helicopter into the old clearing, knew Sorrentino by name, when Oscar told them who they were. The scientists administered water and several quinine tablets to Gar and carried him into one of the tents. He slept for six hours. The next day, one of the ornithologists' indigenous guides led him and Oscar back to their camp. In the intervening years, Crescente never let him forget the incident.

Gar collected his sun-dried clothes and dressed as the air grew cooler and the shadows long. He doused himself with DEET. He rummaged through his pack for his fishing line and hook and strolled over the forest edge. Just inside the canopy, he found a clump of bamboo and sliced off a narrow stem to use as a perfunctory pole. Moving riverside, he caught a grasshopper to use as bait, and was rewarded with a bite after a few minutes, a twelve-inch *pavon*, or peacock bass. Garwell landed it easily and swiped its head off with his machete. He cleaned the fish by the river, and returning to camp,

made a fire to roast his catch. Roasted *pavon* and a handful of *aguaje* fruits made for a comfortably filling dinner.

While he sat ruminating, a family of capybaras emerged from the forest to drink and swim in the lake. For a moment, he considered harvesting one to provide protein for the rest of his trek downriver. But he found the scene so bucolic, he let it go, figuring that the river would provide abundant fish for the next few days. The idea of having to smoke the meat and haul it with him was also unappetizing. Sorrentino was not sentimental. He took no pleasure in dispatching animals for their flesh, but did what was necessary to survive.

His thoughts turned to Nell. Their separation was likely heading towards divorce. Marriage, children—it all seemed like a dream that he haplessly sleep-walked through, with little attention to detail. It had been his friend Anton Kovac who had taught his son to throw and catch a ball, not Garwell. Lord knows, he'd been a terrible husband and a lack-luster father. He sighed deeply. Gar spent half the year in the field, and it was only deep in the tropical forests that he loved did he feel at peace with himself.

Birds gathered to settle into their roosts for the night. A troop of noisy scarlet macaws settled among the female *aguaje* palms, but only stopped to dine before moving on. A harpy eagle wafted soundlessly to its nest in the canopy of a forest giant. The fading diurnal chorus was transformed as nocturnal voices joined the fray. He recognized the moaning call of a great patoo, which would likely sound throughout the night.

As the shadows deepened, he perambulated along the forest edge, gathering fruits of a *sacha inchi* vine that clambered over the other vegetation. Roasted, the seeds lost their toxic principles and were loaded with protein and nutritive oils. He picked a single ripe *tumbo* fruit and sucked the tart juice from around the seeds. Returning to camp, he finished his bed preparations and added wood to his fire. He wrapped the *sacha inchi* seeds in the banana-like leaves of a heliconia that flourished at the forest edge and buried them in the river sand near but below the fire. The coals would roast them slowly through the night.

He woke at first light. A wispy fog of water vapor crowned the forest treetops, the breath of the *selva* returning to the troposphere. He dug the seeds out from where he had buried them in the sand. They were still warm, and a couple of handfuls made a tasty breakfast. He broke camp and filled his bottle from a small waterfall where another creek joined the river.

Gar figured he'd follow the river until its bed became impassable. It was almost eight miles before the channel narrowed through a canyon that forced him to climb back into the forest. Passing the base of a huge Brazil nut tree, he surprised a red brocket deer, which stared at him for a moment before bounding away through the forest. He kept the river to his left as he trekked, and could hear the water's brisk tempo in its passage through the canyon.

Sorrentino suddenly experienced a sharp sting in his neck. Gar reflexively brought his hand up to the spot and touched something feathery. He pulled it out of his skin and glimpsed a dart fashioned

from a palm spine attached to a small iridescent feather. He turned but saw nothing as his knees gave way and he crumpled to the ground.