

STEVE DUNN HANSON

SEALED UP

THE COURSE OF FATE: BOOK ONE

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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To Jack and Jo Anne Rushton

PART ONE



*No mortal eye could see,
The intimate welding of their later history*

(Thomas Hardy, "The Convergence of the Twain")

1



Thursday, December 21, 2000

NAJA, CHIAPAS, MEXICO

Nacom was dying.

Guanacaste trees filtered the twilight into gold slivers that shimmered across Laguna Naja. The lake bore the name of the Lacandón Maya village nestled against it. Kish squatted on the ribbon of beach that framed the giant pond and stared at the darkening blue water. His black hair hung like string around his face, and his white tunic draped him like a sack. Koh Maria told him to wait there. She said her grandfather wanted to speak with him.

Kish knew what Nacom wanted.

“Who will follow a nineteen-year-old shaman,” he grouched. Guttural growls of howler monkeys sounded like mocking laughter, and his shoulders slumped. A sharp tug on his tunic pulled him from his petulance.

“Now,” Koh Maria said.

Kish followed her to Nacom’s hut where she pushed open two square-ish boards hinged to weathered posts. Inside, roughhewn mahogany planks of random widths formed the walls. The shaman’s shriveled body lay in a hand-loomed hammock of faded palm-green and corn-yellow stripes. He

cracked open his eyes as Kish stood beside him. With the back of his hand, he dismissed Koh Maria.

“You. *Chilam*.” Nacom whispered. “Itzamná speaks.”

“Priest? Me?” Kish stuttered as he shook his head.

“Obey!” Nacom responded, and his finger pointed to the arcane mahogany box beneath his hammock. Kish did not know what was inside, but something about the box unsettled him. The old man moved his fingers back and forth. Once. Twice. Kish was to pick it up. His hands quivered as he set the box on the simple table by the hammock’s side.

Nacom mumbled something. Kish bent closer. Nacom spoke again. “What day?”

Kish replied in *Hach T’ana*, the pure Mayan tongue: “*Lahca baktun. Bolonlahun katun. Uuc tun. Canlahun uinal. Uuclahun kin.*” December 21, 2000—winter solstice.

“Yes,” Nacom slurred. “You prepare. *Lahca baktun. Bolonlahun katun. Bolonlahun tun. Uaxac uinal. Hun kin.*” In four-thousand-one-hundred-eighty-four days. His hand moved to a thin cord around his neck. He labored as he pulled it from under his white tunic revealing a small key. Kish was to remove it.

With care he raised the old man’s head and slipped the cord over it. For a long moment Nacom lay still; his breath hardly there at all. Then the index finger of his right hand pushed toward the box and wiggled. Kish fought his anxiety as he inserted the key.

“Should I open it?” His voice was high, tense. Nacom’s head bobbed a little. Kish turned the key and raised the lid. A rectangular-shaped object on top was enfolded in white cotton cloth. The one on the bottom, shaped the same but thicker, was wrapped tight in the black pelt of a jaguar and bound with four cords. Kish reached to pick up the white one.

“No!” Nacom’s fingers lifted an inch as he forced out the word with startling firmness. “You. Prepare. Listen Itzamná.”

His breath was heavy. “You. Keep box. *Sacwa'an* (white). Study. Follow. *I'ic'* (black). No you. Give. *Lahca baktun*. *Bolonlahun katun*. *Bolonlahun tun*. *Uaxac uinal*. *Hun kin*.” In four-thousand-one-hundred-eighty-four days. His breath was a gasp and almost ceased. For a long moment there was no movement; no sound, except for Kish’s own nervous panting. Then Nacom whispered, “Not fail. Lock box. Koh Maria.”

Kish closed the lid and fastened it. His hands shook as he put the cord with the key around his own neck. He scrambled to the doorway and motioned to Koh Maria. She entered, opened her eyes wide at Kish’s ashen face, then went to her grandfather and held his hand. His face puckered into a tiny wrinkled smile. With effort he lifted his eyes to reveal red-veined film, and words like a ghost-rustle parted his lips. “The box. Kish.” Koh Maria nodded.

With a gurgle, Nacom breathed in.

Breathed out.

Then no more.

2



Tuesday, October 11, 2011

WESTWOOD, CALIFORNIA

“So where do you get a name like Itzel?”

“So where do you get a name like Paul?”

Paul Olsen inched the left side of his mouth toward his ear in his version of a smile. He stretched his legs away from the table and bit into a French-fry. He didn’t count this as a date. Neither did Itzel. McDonald’s isn’t exactly a date place. He paid for it though. Besides, this was more like business colleagues having lunch. Well, sort of. They both had teaching fellowships working with Dr. Nathan Hill, professor of anthropology at UCLA. He mentored them in their doctoral programs.

Paul finished chewing and took a sip of Coke. “Okay. Paul’s my dad’s name. His folks came from Europe. My mom’s Dominican. How about Itzel?”

Itzel Soto’s lips formed a semi-smile, but there was no mistaking the grin in her black-brown eyes. Their slight slant along with her copper skin and straight raven hair connected

her more to her mostly Maya father than to her mother, a fair-skinned *ladino*. She reached for a French fry. “You’re going to be a world renowned Maya scholar, and you don’t know where the name Itzel comes from?”

“Nope.” Paul took a bite out of his Big Mac and chewed for a second. “Tell me.”

“Well, maybe it isn’t Mayan, but it’s a form of the name Ix Chel and means her daughter. I’m sure you know Ix Chel was the dominant female goddess of the Maya. Like mother like daughter they say.”

Paul gazed at her over his hamburger, chewed what was left in his mouth, and took another drink of his Coke. “Ix Chel. Daughter of Hunab Ku and wife of Itzamná. Goddess of childbirth, fertility, healing, water, and who knows what else. Flirts with all the gods and wears skirts with crossbones on them with a bunch of snakes on her head. She figures that really makes her appealing. That the one you’re talking about?” Paul put the hamburger back into his mouth.

Itzel stared at him. “Impressive. You left off her being the jaguar goddess.” Her look was smug. “Since Itzel is Ix Chel’s daughter, you can consider me what the name Itzel is supposed to mean. Princess of the rainbow or star princess. Either is fine.”

“You got it. If it’s okay though, I’ll just call you princess.”

“Don’t even think it!” Itzel’s new look was not difficult to read.

“Just kidding.” Both of Paul’s hands went up in self-defense. “Kind of,” he mumbled. She heard him and lifted an eyebrow. “Okay. Okay. I’ll never call you princess if there’s anyone else around. That’s the best I can do.” Itzel’s eyes said that was dumb. He winked. “So you came from Mexico, and you have Maya heritage. Tell me about it.”

“Okay, but you first. Where are you from? What brought you here?”

Paul's look was one of mock despair. "How come I'm always first?" Itzel just folded her arms, and he continued. "Not much to tell. I'm from Torrance fifteen miles down the 405. My mom and dad met at Torrance High School, and they both still work in Torrance. My height's from my dad; hair's from my mom." He brushed his hand through his more-brown-than-black two-inch afro. "I was tall enough to play basketball in high school, but not in college. At UCLA I started out in political science until I took Dr. Hill's survey course in anthropology for the heck of it. I was hooked. I got my bachelor's in anthropology here, got my master's at Tulane, now I'm back here with Dr. Hill." Paul glanced at Itzel. "Your turn."

"You get the short version," she said. "I'm from Palenque in Chiapas. My mother teaches high school. My dad's major at the university was anthropology, and he worked on archeology projects around Palenque and in the Piedras Negras area across the Usumacinta River in Guatemala." Itzel looked down at her hands. "That's where he was killed." Paul stopped eating and shifted uncomfortably.

After a brief halt, Itzel went on. "He was there three-and-a-half years ago with Dr. Hill and Dr. Hyrum Bentley from the University of Texas. My dad was the foreman on that expedition. He was good friends with Dr. Hill and Dr. Bentley."

An awkward silence settled as Paul glanced over at her. She was looking down at the table. Her lips formed a tight smile that wasn't a smile at all, and the beginning of a tear eked out the corner of her left eye. As he looked at her now, Paul remembered his impression the first time he saw her. Short, petite, striking. He could imagine her in a *huipil* and Maya skirt on the cover of *National Geographic*. He broke the silence. "Hey, I'm sorry. You don't need to tell me what happened."

"It's okay." Itzel wiped her eye and looked back at her

hands. “My dad and Dr. Bentley went to see maybe the largest *cenote*—you know sinkhole—in Central America. The ledge they were standing on collapsed. Dr. Bentley landed on a ridge below them, and my dad fell all the way to the bottom. He was killed. Dr. Bentley’s a quadriplegic now.” She gazed up at Paul. “Dr. Hill has been like a father to me since then. He got UCLA to pay my mother an annuity for the rest of her life. He made sure I could finish my schooling at the university in Mexico City, and he brought me here for my doctoral work.”

Paul put his wrappers and cup on his tray. “How’s your mom doing?”

“She’s adjusted. She is a teacher and keeps busy with school.”

“Is it hard for you to be away from her?”

“Sort of. I was closer to my dad. Chac, that’s my dad’s name, and Itzel go better together than Esmeralda and Itzel, huh?” Itzel forced a laugh. “I miss her, but I’d be in the way if I were home.”

“You ever go with your dad on any of his expeditions?”

“Yes. To Piedras Negras the time before the accident. I was a go-fer. Is that what you call it?” Paul nodded. “But Dr. Hill let me do some of the trowel and sifting stuff.” She looked up at Paul. “Have you been on many digs?”

Paul looked embarrassed and shook his head. “I’d like to do something in Mexico or Central America. Does Dr. Hill have anything in the mill you know of?”

Itzel gave him a don’t-you-know-look and shook her head. Paul turned over his hand signaling her to explain her look. She didn’t, but went on. “I also worked on the Palenque ruins a couple of times. My master’s thesis was on a project at the Lacandón village of Naja last April. No ruins there, but I worked with a shaman. His name is Kish. He even took me to his god-house.”

“So you know a shaman? Cool.”

“I know the Lacandón language pretty well so I could talk with him. My master’s thesis was on the change in the Lacandón over the past ten years. They’re losing their culture. Kish is an anachronism even in Naja.” She raised her eyes. “Is anachronism the right word?”

“Yeah.” Paul inclined his head to mask a very strong feeling of envy. Itzel put her food wrappings and cup on her tray and stood up. Paul took it and walked to the trash can.

“Thanks,” Itzel said. “Looks like your mother trained you well.”

“Actually, my dad.” They walked out to Paul’s dozen-year-old white Corolla. He opened the door for her then walked around to his side and got in. As the car started he felt Itzel’s hand on his arm and glanced at her.

“Just after my dad’s accident, Dr. Hill’s wife Karen found out she had cancer. She had it before, and they thought everything was clean. It wasn’t. Now it was in her pancreas. She just lived a couple of months. So when Dr. Hill was doing all of this for me and my mother, his best friend was a quadriplegic, and his wife was dying.” She lifted her hand from Paul’s arm and looked out the window as they pulled out of the parking lot.

“Dr. Hill hasn’t been on an expedition since.”

3



Wednesday, October 12, 2011

GARDEN GROVE, CALIFORNIA

The strains of *By the Power of the Cross* wafted through the closed office door as Luke Melvin Clinton knelt by his desk. “Give me your power tonight.” That’s all the prayer he had time for. He stood up and turned to the mirror at his side. He looked with satisfaction at how his maroon T-shirt hugged his arms, shoulders, chest, and waist, while his pleated alabaster trousers gave subtle hint of his muscular thighs. He glanced up and took in his hair. Ginger in color and peppered with gray, it was coarse and thinning on the crown. Unmistakable evidence he was no longer a young man. “I sure as Hades don’t look fifty-two,” he grunted.

He looked into his gray-green eyes. *They’re alive!* He gave

himself a half smile revealing a small chip on his right front incisor, then he slipped on his midnight blue blazer. He didn't need to see how that looked. He knew. He wore a size 42, though it should have been a 44. His coat stayed open, and framed the muscles of his upper body including his six-pack abs. Tonight everyone would see *Power in the Lamb* printed in glittering gold across his T-shirt.

He pulled himself from the mirror and glanced down at the text message from Kish. For some reason, Kish wanted to meet with him. Soon. *What for?* Luke shrugged as he walked out of his office and down the wide hall. He pushed through the double doors at the end then waited for the final words of his congregation's hymn. While the last note hung, he bounded onto the large set. With his right hand raised, he trotted to the far end and back to the middle as the music morphed into thunderous applause and uncoordinated shouts of "Brother Luke!" He stood in the middle of the stage with both hands raised high in the air. Then as the camera zoomed onto his chest, he yanked back his coat so the words on his shirt seemed to leap out. The congregation became one resounding chant.

"POWER IN THE LAMB!"

"POWER IN THE LAMB!"

"POWER IN THE LAMB!"

The torrent of sound washed over him—water to a very thirsty man.

He removed the mike from the stand in front of him as if it were Tiffany crystal. He raised it to his lips and lifted his free hand toward the noisy onslaught. The hand of Moses could

not have halted the flood more suddenly; more completely. He smiled at the overpowering silence, and while his face filled the monitors, he scrunched his eyelids tight.

“Let’s pray,” he whispered in a voice graveled by countless sessions like this.

“O God, we feel your power tonight.

“We feel whole tonight.

“We feel cleansed tonight.

“WE FEEL POWER IN THE LAMB TONIGHT!”

Then with a burst that needed no amplifying, “AMEN AND AMEN!”

“AMEN AND AMEN!” A thunderous echo from his flock.
“AMEN AND AMEN!”



Exhausted, Luke fell out of his blazer and dropped into his plush high-back leather desk chair. His extra effort tonight would bring an increase in contributions when the session was broadcast Sunday evening on GCN (The Greater Christian Network). He was sure of that.

The thought of his peers in other television ministries who weren’t even close to matching him for audience or money wiggled into his mind. “Detractors,” he mumbled. They cattily called his televised devotionals *performances*. They were stupidly jealous. They had no idea what it was like to be moved by the Spirit; to be almost drained of life because you gave so completely to those who worshipped you.

“NO!” he shouted. He wouldn’t let that notion linger. “YOU

ONLY WORSHIP GOD!” He was only God’s servant.

But when the Spirit was in him wasn’t it as though he were God? After all, he preached power. Wasn’t this the power? Becoming as

“NO!” He brushed the sacrilege away. The knock on Luke’s office door pulled him from his thoughts.

“Brother Luke? Are you in there?”

“I’m here.” He coughed to get the rasp out of his voice. “Come in.” Audra opened the door and went over to his desk. “When you goin’ to stop calling me Brother Luke?” he chided. “You’ve been here for what is it, three months, four months?”

“Sorry, Broth” She caught herself. “Sorry.”

Audra Chang’s age was indecipherable. She could pass for a college coed some days; then appear closer to what she was—a 37-year-old very shapely business woman. She wore her straight black hair long, and her face was an attractive Sino-Caucasian blend. Luke never failed to notice the way her 130 pounds fit her 5’7” frame. Audra was hired as an office manager of sorts. But in her short time with the *Apostolic Power in the Lamb Ministry* she proved herself capable of doing about anything. Luke treated her more and more like an executive assistant. That kept her near him.

Luke picked up the black wind-up alarm clock on his desk: 10:02 p.m. His mother gave him the clock his first year in high school. *The start of me controlling my life*, he thought. He pushed himself out of his chair, and moved around to Audra who stood in front of the desk. “What’ve you got?”

Audra handed him a folder as he sat on the desk’s corner. Every Wednesday evening after his session he reviewed how

his ministry was doing. How *he* was doing. These reports covered the previous calendar week. He removed the top sheet and read the title: “STANDINGS.” Then he read the report out loud. “Viewers—one-million-eighty-two-thousand; Ranking among inspirational programs—three.” He looked at the comparative figures from the corresponding week in the prior year. “We’re holding our own. Good.”

He pulled up the second sheet and read the title: “CONTRIBUTIONS FOR THE WEEK.” He reviewed each category to himself then read the last one. “Contributions for our Lacandón mission, six-hundred-twenty-six-thousand dollars. Totals, one-million-three-hundred-thousand.” He gave a satisfied grunt and placed the sheets back in the folder. “Thanks to God, I’ve come a long way.” His head bent toward Audra. “It sure as Hades wasn’t always this way. You’ve probably heard about it.”

“Well, bits and pieces. Merle’s told me some.”

“He’d know.” Luke paused. “I know it’s late, but would you like to hear about it from me?”

Audra hid her surprise. Luke had never offered to tell her much of anything about his history. She nodded. “I would like that.”

She sat in one of the red velvet overstuffed chairs in front of his desk, and he sat in the other. “I like you Audra. I like the way you anticipate my needs.” He continued to look at her. She met his gaze then shifted uneasily. He moved his eyes away and sank back into his chair. “I won’t bore you with how poor we were and my brother dying of leukemia.” He pointed at the bottles of vitamin and mineral supplements on his

credenza. “That’s why my mother turned me into a health freak—so I wouldn’t get what my brother had. Her exact words whispered in my ear as a baby and repeated at least every day of my growing-up years were: ‘No devil disease is going to claim Luke Melvin Clinton. You got my word.’”

For a moment Luke sat with his eyes closed, then spoke. “We went to the church where my mom and dad met before they were married. The minister was Harley Adams. When I was sixteen or so Harley had me help him at his youth outreach camps. I was a big kid and very strong.” Luke flushed at his brag. “Well, that’s what happens when you lift weights night and day.”

“Looks like you’re still doing it,” Audra commented.

Luke gave a not-all-that-humble-look. “Anyway, Harley did this sermon for kids based on my lifting weights and flexing my muscles. I wore the tights he gave me, and he painted the word ‘prayer’ on my biceps, ‘giving’ on my thighs, and Well, you get the picture. Then he’d talk about power in prayer, and I’d do curls with my weights so my biceps popped out with the word ‘prayer’ on them. I’d do that with my other muscles as he talked.” Luke tipped his head. “Now you know where I got the routine for my ‘Jesus Workout’ DVD. The whole theme and name of my ministry came from this.”

“How did the girls like it?”

Luke’s mouth formed a kid’s grin. “Never had a problem getting a date.” He stopped, and his tone turned serious. “When I was eighteen, Harley and I were doing our power sermon in front of maybe two or three hundred kids at a large church in downtown St. Louis. We went through our routine,

and it was time for me to testify. I began to say what I usually said, but my tongue froze. I couldn't do anything. I put my weights down on the floor and bawled like a baby.

"Harley came over and said in his booming voice, 'This boy's just been reborn!' The place was bedlam. I closed my eyes and buried my head in my hands as hallelujahs and amens bounced off the walls. The power of God soaked through every last one of my cells, and I knew right then He was gonna use me."

Luke glanced at Audra. "Don't wanna bore you. Got another minute?"

"It's interesting." Audra *needed* to hear more.

"Well, Harley was on the board of directors of Benson Theological Seminary in Joplin, Missouri, and made sure I got a full ride scholarship. I think he paid it. By the way, that's where I met Merle."

Audra glanced at the gold name plate that sat on the desk with *Luke Melvin Clinton, PhD* written on it. "Is Benson where you got your PhD?"

Luke's look was sardonic. "My two years at Benson, my four years as associate pastor to Harley, and a thousand four hundred and thirty-seven bucks paid to Benson for who knows what, got me my PhD."

Audra hesitated before asking her next question but went ahead. "When did you meet Bette?"

Luke cocked his head then stood up and walked behind his desk. "Bette."

He opened the bottom file drawer on his right and sifted through the folders. He selected one and opened it. "You know

we're divorced. This is the statement I gave to the press: 'Bette and I have been together for a long time. We have had a wonderful marriage. Over the last few years we had some challenges that we have both tried hard to work out. I strived to bring healing to our marriage, but have failed in my efforts. Bette has decided to proceed with a divorce. While my heart is very heavy, I will be supportive of her now, just as I have been throughout our marriage.'" He slipped the folder back into the drawer. "I think that's all I need to say about Bette." He walked back around the desk and sat down. "Any more questions?"

"What do you think has made *Power in the Lamb* so successful?"

Luke's eyes gleamed like they did on his sessions. "God! Plain and simple. God! I know what God wants for His people. Look at me! God doesn't want wimps! God wants me to do what I'm doing. He wants me to" Luke stopped, sweat beading over his brow. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead and his mouth. He raised a hand in apology then stood up.

Audra had one more question. "You've said several times since I've been here that the real change for *Power in the Lamb* came in a miraculous way about four years ago. What happened?"

Luke's answer was a smile as he walked to the door and opened it. "I think that's the end of Luke Clinton 101 tonight. Ask Merle to come in before you go home." Audra sat for a second startled by the abrupt end, then got up.

She would have nothing new to report to Lon tonight.

Audra went to her office and picked up her purse. *Luke!*

Sometimes he's a ... She cut off her thought and yawned. She glanced at the clock: 10:30 p.m. A long day. Wednesdays always were. But Thursdays she had off, and she didn't work Saturdays or Sundays although Luke expected her to watch one of the GCN broadcasts of his Wednesday session at either 5:00 p.m. or 8:00 p.m. on Sunday.

She went down the stairs to the parking lot and glanced up at the smog-orange quarter moon. "What phase do they call that? A waning crescent or something?" She shook her head absently. Her Huntington Beach apartment was a 20 to 30-minute drive depending on traffic. She didn't live as close to the beach as she wanted, but she didn't pay \$3,000 a month for rent either. Her \$1,500 got her close enough. The apartment was on the ground floor with two bedrooms, so she had a room to exercise in. That's all she needed.

She pulled out into heavy traffic. "Where's everybody going at 10:30 at night!" Her irritation started to build when her cell phone rang. Only one person would call now. She sighed and answered.

"Hi, Lon."

"Well?"

"Nothing new," Audra answered. "I thought Luke would tell me about how his ministry got off the ground floor four years ago. He didn't."

"Bye." Lon hung up.

Lon Grant defined the word cryptic. Never anything to report anyway. Almost from the beginning she thought her *Power in the Lamb* assignment was a fishing expedition. "Why am I even here?" she muttered in exasperation. And for

the millionth time slogged her way through the reason.

Over a year and a half ago she gave her notice to the agency. Stella Ward, the manager of the department's Los Angeles region, was surprised. But she told Audra the door was always open to come back. Audra didn't intend to go back. She wanted to get away and think for a year or two. Put things together. Figure out where she was. Figure out what she wanted. She sold her Valley condo and stayed with her parents in Pacific Grove for a couple of months. She liked the Monterey Peninsula and might have holed up there if they hadn't been there. She loved them, but at arm's length. She needed to be by herself now.

"Be by myself?" Audra grunted. "I'm always by myself!" She had more than her share of chances to not be by herself. Even marriage if she wanted. But whenever things started to look like they could develop, it was exit stage left for her. She took a deep breath. "Anyway, I don't have time for a relationship if I'm going to do all I want to do." That precipitated an out-loud laugh. "What exactly is it that you want to do, Audra?"

She didn't have an answer.

The traffic thinned, and that lifted some of her frustration. There were some good things in her life. She *was* in southern California. After a couple of months with her parents it was a no-brainer she would come back down south. Here her life was pretty simple. Maybe even idyllic.

She spent an hour each day running on the beach and, depending on the weather, a couple of hours watching birds at the adjacent Wetlands and reading her Kindle. Then she would come home, work out for an hour, soak in the tub, and

do whatever she wanted. Like surf the net and concentrate on in-depth national and world news events and articles pertaining to corporate finance and taxation. She caught up on years of movies she didn't have time to watch before and read, read, read—mostly fantasies and biographies. And, of course, her acting. “My real passion,” she murmured. “My survey of reality.” She was good, and with over two dozen community theaters in Orange County she kept her slate full.

Then Stella called.

Audra gazed out her window. She was almost home. She gave up trying to figure out how Stella knew how to get hold of her. Didn't matter. Maybe time for her to get back to doing something anyway, and working for a big-time televangelist wasn't dull. Under Stella's direction, Lon Grant in the agency's Orange County office had kept an eye on the *Apostolic Power in the Lamb Ministry* for the past year; maybe a little longer. When the Ministry advertised for an office manager a few months ago, Stella saw this as a time to do something more than watch from the periphery. She contacted Audra to work for the agency surreptitiously. With an agency provided résumé, Audra applied for the job and got it. She was considered a fulltime employee with the agency as well as at *Power in the Lamb*. Double income wasn't bad.

Audra pulled into her carport and shook her head. She had been nearly sitting on Luke's lap for three months and hadn't found a thing that got more than four or five words out of Lon. She smirked and opened her door.

“Oh well, it's the DEA's money.”



“You wanted to see me?” Luke glanced up as Merle spoke. Merle Washington was Luke’s not-so-secret weapon. He produced and directed the sessions, provided the music, and even warmed up the congregants with his pithy pre-sermons.

“It’s late. I won’t keep you.” Luke opened a folder on his desk and held up a large photo of a new white 24-foot-long Isuzu box truck. “Thought you would like to see what we bought for the mission.” In dark blue stylized letters on both sides it read: *Poder en el Cordero*. These words, stacked in two lines, filled one-third of each side of the truck. A bright colored montage of Lacandón Indians wearing white tunics covered the remaining two-thirds of both sides, with *Apacienta mis ovejas* written in translucent white across the bottom.

Merle whistled. “Impressive.”

Luke sat back in his chair. “I saw it Monday. It’s at USA Used Clothing getting loaded up. Our biggest shipment yet. Twenty, three-hundred-pound AA summer clothes bales and a couple of hundred hygiene kits.” Luke stopped talking, and Merle looked at him expectantly. Luke cleared his throat. “I’m going to drive the truck down to Palenque and drop it off at the mission. I’m leaving tomorrow.”

Merle was never shocked at what Luke said. Not after all these years. But this time he came close. In the three-plus years since the *Power in the Lamb* mission began in southern Mexico, Luke visited it a couple of times a year by flying to San Cristobal de las Casas. There he rented a car and drove the five hours to the mission headquarters in Palenque. Merle stared

at Luke. The truck ride from Orange County would take at least three days.

“Why?” Merle’s head was shaking.

Luke faked a casual look. “I’ve never done it before. I want to see what it’s like to take a shipment down. I’ll take my Canon **Vixia**, and it’ll be a no brainer to get the video we need to make a first class DVD. That’ll bring in more contributions than the trip and the truck will cost. Anyway, the drive will be routine.” Merle looked unconvinced. Luke went on. “The bales are pre-stamped for customs so I won’t have trouble at the border. We don’t have problems there anyway, and I have the paper work to register the truck in Mexico.” Luke stopped talking again.

Merle’s expression said he wasn’t through listening. “Who’s going with you?”

“No one.” Merle stared at him. Luke forced a laugh. “You ever seen the cab of an Isuzu NRR? It’s like a Lexus.”

“Luke, it’s twenty-four hundred miles. That’s from here to Cleveland!”

“I’ll take my time and drive it in four days. I’ll leave the truck at the mission, rent a car, and take a day to drive down to see Kish in Naja. Then I’ll fly home. I’ll be back Wednesday in time for the session.” He arched his eyebrows. “With a story to tell!”

Luke fell silent as his mind went somewhere else. When he spoke, it was more to himself than to Merle. “Kish wants to see me. He’s never texted me before. Didn’t know he had a smart phone. How did he even know how to use one?” His jaw twisted a little as he contemplated his question.

Merle watched him for a moment. “You okay, Luke?”

“Huh? Oh yeah.” He slapped his legs and stood up. “It’s late. Let’s go home. I’ll leave first thing tomorrow, so I won’t be in at all. I’ll call you every day.” Merle’s nod and expression said he thought Luke was doing something more than stupid. Luke ignored the obvious signal. “I need some think time,” he said with feigned nonchalance. “This trip will give it to me.”

Merle left, and Luke turned off the light and shut the door behind him. He took a breath. Then another. His phone conversation last week with Hector Hernandez, the manager of his Palenque mission, ran through his mind. Hector’s insistence that Luke drive the truck to Palenque and do it alone was a bombshell. Hector’s response to Luke’s stunned, “Why?” was that it was important. Luke knew better than to take it any further.

“A conundrum,” he grunted. “And what’s so blasted important that Kish wants to see me right now?” He shook his head.