

Dare to

LIVE

BY CARAWAY CARTER

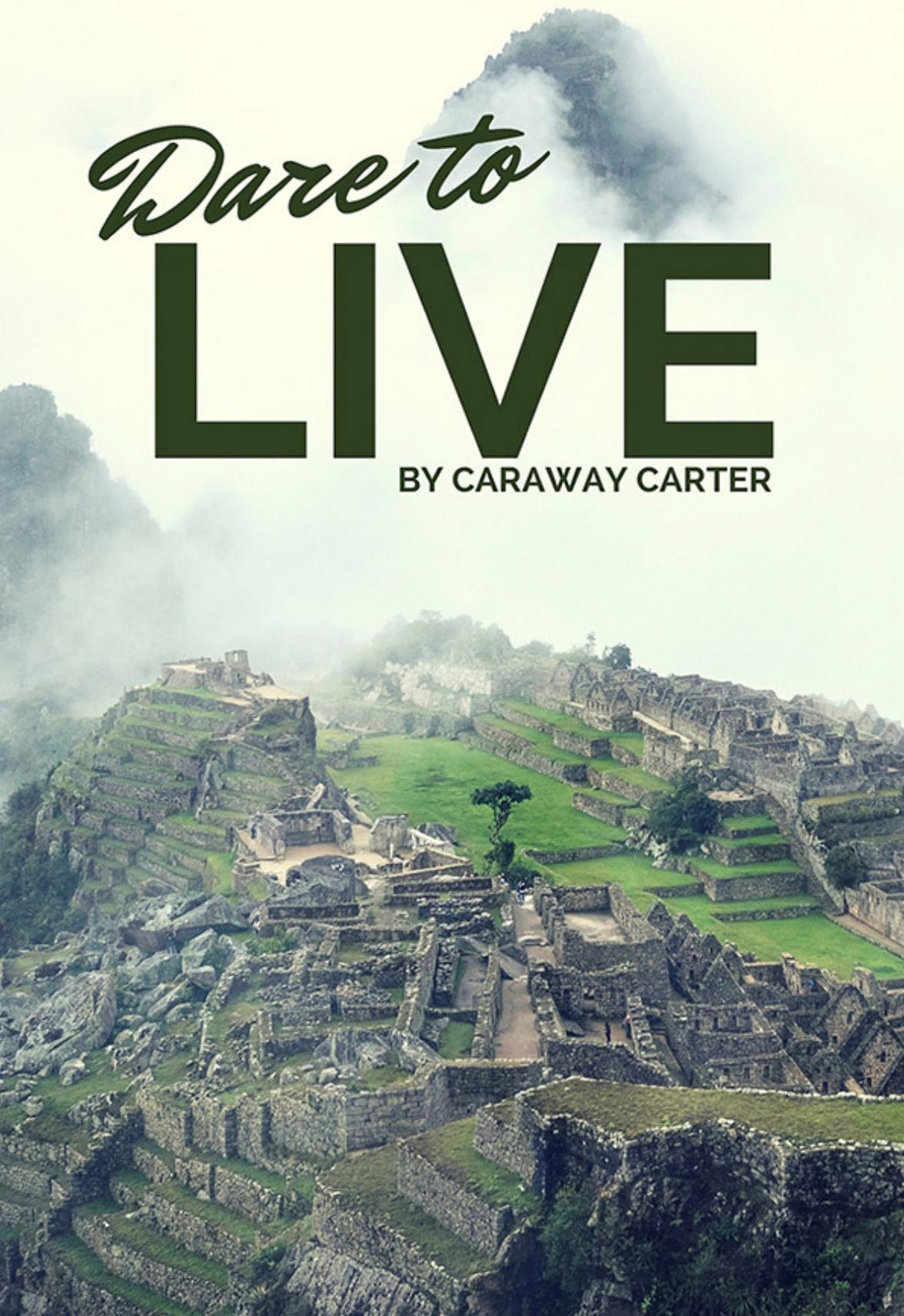


Table of Contents

Love is an Open Road.....	3
Dare to Live – Information	6
Dedication	7
Dare to Live	8
Author Bio	56

Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

DARE TO LIVE

By Caraway Carter

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

There is no image for this prompt.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These two, relatively fit, guys were born in the 1950's, so their passions will never reach the twice-per-day-Olympics that remind many men of their youth. Something larger must bind them together. One has his mixed Irish genes showing (visualize Seeley Booth in his late fifties), while the other has the graying reminder of a coal-black treasure trail leading from his chest to his nether regions (visualize former NJ Governor Jim McGreevey). They survived the AIDS epidemic untouched by the virus, but of course it will have left scars of other kinds. Both have lost many friends and a few lovers. Communion, connection and companionship will build their trust, love and sexual desire as they check out the old adage: "If you still love him after travelling with him for a month, you can live with him forever." A gay group tour following the Inca trail to Machu Picchu might test their commitment, but you choose the destination that works for your characters.

I would prefer the bond between them not be made with S&M / B&D glue.

Sincerely,

Mateo

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: friends to lovers, over age 40, grieving, widowers, hiking, Machu Picchu, sweet/no sex, hurt/comfort

Content Warnings: cancer, death of partners

Word Count: 19,614

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to my husband, Adam. I look forward to our golden years.

DARE TO LIVE

By Caraway Carter

Jon opened the closet door with a cardboard carton in his hand, and the past hit him in the face again.

He'd had the shirt for thirty-two years. Edwin wouldn't let him throw it out or even give it away. For years, he'd open their closet and see green-and-black flannel plaid hanging on the back of the door. "Why are you keeping this?" he'd asked Edwin once, about a year before the diagnosis.

"It was the shirt you wore on our first date," Edwin replied. "This way, even if I don't see you, I can go to the closet and hold you."

"So are you saying that you want to keep our love in the closet?" Jon had joked.

Edwin had smacked him playfully and then caught him in a kiss.

Jon blinked away tears. There was no point in keeping the shirt now, was there? It had been Edwin's memory, not his, and some poor homeless gay man could probably use the shirt to keep him warm. He reached out to take it off the hook on the back of the door and put it into the carton.

Then he pulled his hand back and turned to the clothes hanging on the rod instead. *I'm not ready to let that go yet. Maybe next week I'll be able to.*

Edwin had been dead for six months.

The house was his, at least. Edwin had insisted on marrying him on the first day of "the window," as soon as it became legal in California. They'd already been together for twenty-six years—and their marriage lasted six years more. Five years plus a diagnosis later, he was holding Edwin's hand as it relaxed and his raspy breathing stopped.

Edwin had been in a coma for a week at that point, but it was all right. He and Jon had said their good-byes, when Edwin had rallied and was really *there* for the first time in almost a month. The doctors had told Jon to expect that.

"Don't let yourself fall apart over me," Edwin had said. "I want you to keep on living, do you hear me?" He coughed—lying in the bed without any activity

had given him a good start on the pneumonia that would kill him—and glared at Jon. “You have a lot of living yet to do. Do it for both of us.”

Jon had agreed, because that’s what you did when the love of your life was dying. Let them go out on a high note, or something—don’t be a downer, don’t be negative. They don’t need that as they pass over the bright line between life and death. That’s what the hospice brochures all said, anyway.

So he had stayed, smiling, and nodding, and agreeing. “Yes, Ed. I will. I’ll hike Machu Picchu and bring you back some photos, how’s that sound?”

Edwin had grinned. “Sounds like we should have done it years ago. I look forward to the pictures.”

An awkward silence fell between them, broken by the nurse coming in to change Edwin’s IV bag.

“I mean it, Jon.” Edwin was serious. “Go do all those things you and I wanted to do, but I couldn’t do. I know that you’ve shut yourself off from a lot of things because I couldn’t do them. Go do them, okay?”

Jon couldn’t answer. The hell with the hospice brochure—he didn’t want to be fake in front of Edwin. Not after thirty-two years together.

“I—will try, okay? I’ll really try.” He looked into Edwin’s eyes. “But it won’t be the same without you.”

“Then find someone to do it with you,” Edwin said. “I don’t expect you to go alone. You’re a klutz! You’d fall over the ravine the first time you weren’t paying attention.”

“Are you saying I should get myself a babysitter, Ed?” He couldn’t help grinning.

“Maybe,” Ed allowed. “But don’t hide away from the world just because I’m not in it anymore, okay? I’ve lived my eighty years. We both knew I couldn’t live forever.”

I didn’t know that until now, Jon thought, but nodded. “Okay. I’ll go to Machu Picchu. And I’ll find someone to go with me.”

“Good.” Edwin coughed again. “Will you stay with me while I sleep a little, hon? I don’t want to be alone yet.”

And he had stayed, but that was the last time he had talked to Edwin. The sleep became a coma, and a week later, Edwin was gone.

The rest of the clothes went smoothly into boxes: suits, shoes, jackets, sweaters, hats. Jon smiled as he held back the ratty old brown fedora that Edwin had insisted on wearing every time they went out in the sun, with its yellowing white band around the brim. *I can keep this, can't I? I'm sure he wouldn't mind.*

He was bagging up Edwin's underwear and socks in a garbage bag when his phone went off in his pocket. He answered without looking at the caller ID. "Hello?"

"Jon? It's Darrell. Are you busy?"

Jon immediately sat down on the bed he and Edwin had shared. "No, of course not. Are you doing okay?"

"I'm... I'm not sure. Does this get any better, Jon? Or is it always going to hurt like this?" Darrell was suppressing tears.

A wry smile crept onto Jon's face and he shook his head. "It's only been four weeks since she died, Darrell—"

"*Three* weeks. And five days," Darrell corrected.

"All right, three weeks and five days. You're still in the early pain. It won't always hurt like this, I promise."

Darrell sounded doubtful. "I can't see living without her. How did you do it after Ed died?"

Jon sighed. "Badly, at first, I admit. But there were things that had to be done, and so I just went along on autopilot for a while. I'm a little better now. And you will be soon, too, Dare."

"I've told you not to call me that," Darrell grouched. "I haven't *dared* to do anything since Cece left me."

"Darrell, she didn't leave you. She died. It happens, and someday it'll happen to us, too."

"I know, I just... she was only fifty-six. I didn't expect her to go before me. I was supposed to go first."

"Why, because you always go first?" Jon said, hoping that it would make his friend smile. Darrell had always had a penchant for melancholy, although it was hardly surprising in this case. Jon and Edwin had expected that Edwin would go first, with the twenty-year gap in their ages. But Darrell's wife Cece

had been six years younger than Darrell, and the brain cancer that had hit her came so quickly that the time between diagnosis and death could be measured in weeks, not months.

“No... yes... I don’t know,” Darrell said. “I don’t know why I called you. I’m sorry.”

“Maybe you wanted to see where we could meet for dinner,” Jon said. “I could use a break from packing up Edwin’s things... it’s kind of grim here.”

“I don’t eat much any more,” Darrell said, his voice distant.

“Well, we both need to eat. How about I come over and pick you up? We’ll go out for bad food and worse drinks. What do you say?” Jon grinned into the phone.

There was silence on the other end as Darrell considered. “Well...”

“Come on. If nothing else, we can talk about something that isn’t how bad we miss them.”

“All right,” Darrell said. “Just beep twice when you’re at my house.” The phone went dead.

Jon blinked, surprised. *I didn’t expect that.* He had been trying to get Darrell to come out of the house since the day after Cece’s funeral, as much for his own distraction as Darrell’s, but so far he hadn’t been successful.

He put Edwin’s hat on his head, pulled on a gray sweater, and headed to his car.

When they’d been younger, back in their college years at UCLA, he and Darrell had been boyfriends, although they didn’t call it that. Three years apart in age and two years apart in class standing, they’d written articles and taken photo spreads of everything from the Los Angeles art scene to the Los Angeles gay scene, publishing as freelancers around their college work and their track and field meets. It was a heady time, before the AIDS crisis hit big, and before they had to worry about real, adult worries. Being young kept them out of Vietnam, and being with each other kept them out of romantic entanglements that might have tied them down.

But Darrell had graduated first with a job in hand, and he’d moved back to New York, editing copy for one of the big magazines. Their last time together had been bittersweet, because both of them knew that a cross-country relationship wouldn’t be possible, and Jon couldn’t leave school without his degree.

“Why can’t you get a job here in Los Angeles?” Jon had asked afterwards as they lay in Darrell’s bed looking out at the night sky.

“It’s my father, Jon. You know that. I wouldn’t have a job if he hadn’t pulled strings for me. I *have* to go.”

They hadn’t even argued, really. Darrell had just left. Jon had graduated, the AIDS crisis had hit, and they pretty much lost contact. They’d seen each other once more, at Darrell’s wedding to Cece, and until Darrell and Cece had moved to Los Angeles after her retirement four years ago, the most contact they’d had had been Christmas cards. By then, of course, Jon had been married to Edwin for quite a while, and resuming the old friendship was as much as either of them could do.

If it hadn’t been for Edwin and Cece... well, who knew? Jon still had a soft spot in his heart for Darrell—because even at sixty-two, Darrell was still a hot property.

But right now? When he’s grieving? Now is not the time. Besides, I don’t want him on the rebound from a dead woman.

An hour later, he was honking his horn in front of Darrell and Cece’s Laurel Canyon bungalow.

Darrell’s beard had grown out wildly in the three weeks and two days since the funeral. His light-blue cardigan, which he was never seen without, looked like it could use a wash. His eyes were bloodshot, and the bags beneath them sure weren’t from Coach. He looked too much like his house after the second earthquake had hit it a few years back, when the saltwater fish tanks exploded all over the beautiful parquet floor. But at least it hadn’t slid down the hillside with most of its neighbors that year. Neither had Darrell, although he looked like he wished he had.

He walked down the cracked driveway and slumped into the passenger seat of Jon’s MG. “Where are we going?” he said without any greeting, which was typical for Darrell.

“When we get back from dinner, we are taking care of that mop on your face, man,” Jon said, looking at the wild beard. “You look like Hughes after he became a recluse. It doesn’t suit you.”

Darrell grunted. “Cece loved my beard. She thought it made me look sexy.”

“Cece never saw it like this,” Jon said, putting the car in gear and backing out of the driveway. The comment fell on dead air, and Darrell looked out the window towards his house as they drove away.

“So, where *are* we going?” Darrell repeated. He sounded like he didn’t care, but Jon jumped into the silence and filled it up.

“We’re going to the Chateau,” he said. The bar and grille had been one of their favorite haunts during college—from the outside, it looked like an old log cabin built up on black bricks. Inside, it smelled of beer and good food, with leather-covered booths and a tall, heavy bar made of slabs of solid redwood. It had rickety wood floors polished by a million dancing feet, and if it didn’t break Darrell out of this malaise, probably nothing could.

Jon had to order for them both. He ordered from memory: Chateau Burgers, onion rings for Darrell, tall local beers from the tap, and a messy concoction called the Chateau De Luxe: a plate of fries smothered in cheese, bacon, sour cream, and incongruously, a sprinkling of capers across the top. Darrell picked them off his portion, while Jon asked for extras.

Despite their agreement not to talk about their late spouses, the topic wouldn’t stay away from their conversation, and by the time they were eating their Chateau Burgers, Darrell was talking freely about the shock he’d been in since Cece’s diagnosis, and how he didn’t understand how she had stayed upbeat and positive even when they told her, six weeks before she died, that there was no hope and the tumor would kill her.

“How do you stay calm after something like that?” he complained, pushing aside his last few onion rings. A third beer waited for him on the table, and he sipped it. “And yet Cece was never anything but positive about it. She dragged us off for that last big trip to Europe, and you’d have never known she was sick.”

Jon wasn’t about to play one-upmanship games with his old friend about how their spouses had died, but he could have wished for a last trip to Europe if Edwin hadn’t been so weak, and he couldn’t help resenting his friend’s good fortune a little bit. “You didn’t get to tell me about that trip, not very much,” he said, trying to keep his voice neutral. “Did you get pictures?”

“There speaks the photo bug,” Darrell said, his first smile of the night crossing his face, if only for a moment. “Yeah, we got some. They’re all on our phones, you know. I should probably pull them off of hers so I have them on the computer.”

“No professional pictures at all?” Jon couldn’t quite keep the disappointment out of his voice. He’d shown Darrell his cameras a number of times, but Darrell had never really understood the point when he had his smartphone available to take a quick shot here and there.

“Nope,” Darrell said. “But here—this is a good one. We were in Ireland and she had to kiss the Blarney Stone, you know.” He held out his phone to Jon. Cece, a laughing ebony-skinned woman with dancing eyes, head wrapped in a scarlet scarf to hide her cancer baldness, lay with her back over a stone wall holding on to two metal poles. A man in a blue shirt and a sour expression braced her. “Kiss the Blarney Stone,” said a sign in the lower left corner.

“You have to lie down and then lean back to reach it. Cece almost knocked heads with the guy who was making sure she didn’t fall.” Darrell smiled in memory as he took his phone back from Jon. “Anyway, that’s all done now.”

“Edwin and I didn’t get to go where he was hoping,” Jon said. “He wanted to go to Machu Picchu, but I couldn’t see a seventy-five-year-old and a fifty-five-year-old hiking those ruins and that mountain. After a while, he stopped asking, and by then he was too weak, anyway.” Jon tried to smile, felt the smile crumble on his face, and wiped it off. “But we did talk about it, even after it was clear he’d never go.”

Darrell nodded. “I don’t know if Cece would have wanted to go. I know I wouldn’t. Too many hills, and too much exercise. I’m retired now. I want to take the rest of my life easy.”

Jon looked at him, the dimmest glint of an idea surfacing in his head. “Are you sure about that?”

“Well, I mean, I’m not in shape,” Darrell said, taking another swig of beer. “Although I did beat your pants off in that last half marathon we ran, as I recall.”

“That was thirty years ago,” Jon protested. “I was still recovering from the flu! Otherwise I’d have had your ass over a barrel.”

“Sure, you would have,” Darrell retorted. “But we’ll never know now, will we? And then there was that time in college track...”

“You’re older than me! I was a freshman! You were a junior! You had an unfair advantage,” Jon retorted.

From there, the game of one-upmanship *was* on. Darrell needled his friend to prove how in shape he still was, raising example after example of Jon’s

unfitness over the years, and Jon, after trying to defend against the examples, riposted with a challenge for Darrell to put his money where his mouth was.

“So you think you’re still in better shape than me?” Jon finally said, as the waitstaff hovered, waiting for them to leave after closing. Beer bottles littered the table and their plates had long since been cleared.

“Yesh, I do,” Darrell slurred. “And what’s more, you can’t prove otherwise.”

“Sure I can,” Jon retorted. “I dare you. Climb Machu Picchu with me this summer, and we’ll see who’s in shape and who’s just all talk.”

Darrell glared over the table. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, I’m serious. But I’ll bet you won’t. You always ducked out when we were kids.”

Darrell flared up. “Oh, no, man. You can’t shay that about me and live to tell ’bout it. You’re on. Mashu Pishu it is!”

Jon lost the fight for the check, and when they stumbled out of the restaurant into the chilly California evening, it only took a moment to call a cab.

The cab took them back to Darrell’s house, because Darrell had beer and wine in the refrigerator, and a cabinet of harder stuff out in the living room. In the cab, Darrell kept trying to repress snickers and snorts of drunken laughter, continuing to rib Jon about his complete failure to be as fit as he had been back in college. Jon simply threw back the challenge he’d issued in the restaurant, and each time, Darrell agreed more and more fiercely that it would be a valid test of who was the fittest. By the time they reached Darrell’s house, a plan to look up costs and flights had solidified in the alcohol-soaked air between them, and they stumbled into the foyer both wrapped in fits of laughter.

Darrell got them another two beers and they sat down together at the computer in his office. When Jon looked back on their activities on the computer later, there was no clear memory beyond laughter, the beer, and a drunken game of Top ’Em driving their searches and their research. At one point, they gazed at a picture montage of the ruins and the trail, including something called the “Sun Gate” where many of the hiking tours witnessed a radically early sunrise. A niche inside one of the ruins’ corridors drew Jon’s attention. “I could leave Edwin’s ashes there. That way he would have gone to Machu Picchu.”

“Sure, we can look for that, after I walk you into the ground,” Darrell retorted.

“Like that’d happen,” Jon retorted back. “Hey, look at that picture...”

The next morning, Jon woke first. He was lying on the couch in Darrell’s living room in his underwear, one sock, and his T-shirt. His sweater, his jeans, his shoes and Edwin’s hat sat on the floor next to him. His other sock, and Darrell, were nowhere to be seen.

I have to remember that I can’t drink like the young man I was any more, he thought, cradling his throbbing head. Orange juice. Orange juice and aspirin. That’ll be a start.

He toed off the one sock, dragged himself into the kitchen, and sure enough, orange juice was waiting in the refrigerator door. He pulled out a water glass, filled it brimful, and drank it down at a draught. He chased it with two glassfuls of water, and then started coffee in Darrell’s coffeemaker.

The clock on the wall said 7:30, so it hadn’t been too bad of a bender. But then again, he and Darrell were men in their early sixties, so their options for benders were limited.

He went to the restroom off the hall, used it, and investigated the medicine cabinet. He found ibuprofen—better than aspirin—and swallowed two of them dry. He left the bottle on the kitchen counter, filled a cup with coffee and dumped sugar into it, and went out on Darrell’s back deck.

The day was beautiful—one of those Southern California days that ought to have had a trademark on it—and except for his throbbing head and aching body, he could almost enjoy it. He sat in one of the redwood deck chairs after a long pull at his coffee, leaned back, and closed his eyes.

He couldn’t remember the previous night after they’d entered Darrell’s house, apart from some very good beer, some very loud laughter, and some pretty pictures on the computer screen. And the challenge, of course. The challenge of climbing Machu Picchu.

Did that really happen?

He didn’t know. He hoped it had, but the night before was dissolving into a hangover-driven sparkle of random images that didn’t really go together.

He sipped his coffee. His head throbbed. His thoughts limped along, sluggish and unfocused.

The deck overlooked the lushness of Laurel Canyon, but it was screened from the neighbors' prying eyes by an awning shaded by bougainvillea vines that were a riot of magentas and pinks in the spring sunshine. A barbecue sat against the back of the house, and at the far end of the deck was a heavy canvas cover and a metal post with controls on it.

He set his coffee cup down and crossed the deck. *I feel like an octogenarian*, he thought in wry amusement as he flipped a switch and pulled the canvas top aside. Below it was a large, sunken hot tub. The jets began to pulse and the water began to roil and bubble.

What the heck. Maybe a cold bath will wake me up.

He pulled off his shirt, hesitated, and then drew his underwear down and dropped them both on the deck. Then, without allowing himself to think about it, he slid naked into the lukewarm water.

"Holy fuck!" he shouted as his body rashed out in goose bumps. "Some hot tub this is!"

"What in hell are you doing, Jon?" Darrell asked from behind the screen door, dim and blurry in a blue terrycloth robe.

"I'm waking up. Isn't that obvious?" Jon said, wading to the side of the tub and perching on the seat.

"Obvious to me and the neighbors, too," Darrell said, opening the screen and coming out onto the deck himself. He had a cup of coffee in his hand, and he set it beside the hot tub.

"Is it just me, or was last night wild?" Jon asked.

"It was. There was a lot of beer, and I think we had some guys wanting us, too. Wasn't sure. But I found a phone number in my underwear this morning." Darrell grimaced. "What a shame the ink ran. Might have been nice."

"You're kidding, right?" Jon said. He really wished he could remember the previous night better.

"Yes, of course I'm kidding. This is the control for heating up the water, you doofus." Darrell twisted a knob that Jon had missed on the other side of the little metal tower. "It's not going to warm up much for a while, though. A tub this size could take two to three hours."

“Why don’t you join me?” Jon asked. “The water’s fine, once you get used to it not being hot.”

“I haven’t had my first cup of coffee yet, thanks. I’ll get my trunks in a little bit and join you.” Darrell walked over to the deck chairs and set his cup down on the table between them. “Speaking of coffee, is this yours?”

“Yeah, could you bring it over here?” Jon asked. He took the cup gratefully and sipped again as Darrell returned to the deck chairs and sat down. “You don’t need trunks, you know. Do you think I brought mine?”

“What are you wearing, exactly?” Darrell said suspiciously.

For answer, Jon stood up on the bench inside the tub. “What did you think?”

“Jon! Get back in the water. I have neighbors, you know.” Darrell shook his head.

“It’s seven thirty in the morning on a Sunday. Half your neighbors won’t see the light of day until noon, and I’ll bet none of them have visited their back patios in years.” Jon finished the last of his coffee and splashed back down under the water, covering himself to the armpits. “But fine, be a wet blanket. I’ll be a wet friend.”

“How are you doing this morning?” Darrell asked more seriously. “We had a lot to drink last night.”

“You don’t seem to be feeling it,” Jon said. “But I admit that I have a hangover. Not a bad one—I’ve had juice and ibuprofen, and once this thing warms up I’ll feel better—but it’s there.”

“Oh, I’m feeling it,” Darrell said. “But I spent some time in devout prayer at the throne after you passed out last night. So maybe I’m not feeling the effects as badly since it didn’t stay down as long.” He grimaced again, and took another sip of his coffee.

“You know... that really wasn’t my intention when I invited you for bad food and worse drinks,” Jon said after a moment.

“No, I know. But it’s okay. I do feel better even though I feel like ass this morning. So thanks, Jon.”

“No problem. Hey, do you remember looking at those pictures of Machu Picchu on the computer?” Jon asked, as warmer water began to pulse through a jet near his hip. He shifted to place it over the small of his back.

“Sort of?” Darrell said. “It’s all kind of blurry now.” He stood up, walked over to the tub, and dropped his robe to reveal his lack of clothing underneath it. He stepped down into the water with a grin at Jon’s shocked expression. “What? The bougainvillea’s there to keep nosy Mrs. Lassiter’s nose out of our business. Cece had words with her once, but she never stopped trying to see what we were doing back here, and we had some wild parties once upon a time.” Darrell smiled in memory.

Jon wasn’t quite sure what to say to that. Seeing Darrell without his clothes on had triggered a cascade of memories, when both of them had fewer gray hairs and neither of them was a widower.

Man, I wish I’d been at some of those wild parties with you, Dare.

They chatted as the water warmed, their bodies responding to the caffeine and hydration they’d put into them, and after a half hour, Darrell stood up. “I should check my emails and you need to get a cab to get your car back. Are you okay to drive, do you think?”

“Oh, yeah. I’m fit as a fiddle,” Jon said. “And I should check my email too. Mind if I do it from here, before I go?”

“Sure, you can use my laptop.” Darrell got out of the tub and wrapped his bathrobe around himself. “Hold on a sec and I’ll get you a towel.”

Jon lifted himself out of the tub and stretched, rolling his neck from side to side and easing the muscles there. His headache had started to recede, and if this followed the course of most of his hangovers, he’d be fine by the afternoon. Darrell returned with a thick purple beach towel. “Thanks, man.” Jon rubbed himself down, wrapped himself in it and bent to pick up his underwear and shirt.

Darrell had not waited to chat, and Jon followed him into the house, putting the towel on the kitchen table and pulling up his boxers. He went into the living room and pulled on pants, his T-shirt, and after retrieving his missing sock from under the coffee table, his socks, shoes, sweater, and hat. About then, Darrell reappeared with a laptop in hand. “Just boot up the browser and you can get to your mail from there, right?”

“Sure thing. Thanks.” Jon logged into his email. As usual, the mailbox was full to overflowing. He picked away at the pile of spam and political messages, until the number of messages reached something more manageable. He clicked on an email from one of the editors he did freelance work for and stared. What was this?

Jon—

I think your Machu Picchu book is a great idea! Give me a call on Monday and we'll discuss the details. Do you have a writer in mind? Let me know so we can get moving on this project. Your expenses will be paid, of course.

M.

He read it twice, not believing it. What was this? Then he scrolled down to the copy of an email he'd apparently sent to Mitchell last night. The timestamp was 12:35 a.m., and he groaned. *Oh, no. I didn't actually send that, did I?*

Apparently, he had.

From the office came a startled yelp. "*JON! Get in here!*"

He pushed the laptop away and hurried into Darrell's office. Darrell was sitting at his computer and staring at his own email screen. "What the hell did we do last night besides get drunk? Look at this—confirmations for a hotel in Peru, and for flights there in July, and for a tour guide and tour group to go up Machu Picchu—what the hell?"

"Um." Jon shifted his weight uncomfortably. "I thought I dreamed that. I guess I didn't."

"How is this—look, these aren't even refundable! The hotel is, but the other stuff isn't! What the hell, Jon?" Darrell's voice rose as he opened several emails at once and spread them out on the desktop. "I know I said we would go, but I was drunk. You can't hold me to that. I'm not able to go to Machu Picchu—it would kill me, I'm so out of shape!"

Jon leaned over Darrell's shoulder. Sure enough, the flights were nonrefundable tickets, and the tour group deposit wasn't refundable either. "Whose credit card?" he asked, his heart sinking.

"Mine. But this makes no sense! I wouldn't ever buy something that wasn't refundable!" Darrell ran his fingers through his hair wildly. "And there's no way I can go on this. But... the money's already spent... and..."

Jon began to grin again. "Why not? If the money's already spent, I mean. Why not go?"

Darrell looked at him, his face disbelieving. "You're not serious."

"Well, you're already in for it with your credit card. You might as well get the pleasure of it, don't you think?" Jon said. "Besides, we have three months to get ready. Plenty of time to get used to hiking and get in shape for this."

“No. It’s not even a question. I can’t go.” Darrell shook his head.

“How about if we got reimbursed for it?” Jon asked. “Would that change things?”

“What are you talking about?” Darrell demanded.

“Well... you weren’t the only one busy on a computer last night,” Jon admitted sheepishly. “My editor Mitchell likes my book idea and wants to run with it. That almost always means the expenses will be paid.”

“Book idea?” Darrell squinted at him. “What book idea?”

“Apparently, last night while you and your credit card were running around like drunken little brownies, I sent an email off to Mitchell pitching a book about why people hike Machu Picchu. It looks like I said I’d do the photos and you could do the writing. He loves it. I just got his email this morning.” Jon hung his head. “I’m sorry, Dare—Darrell. I didn’t realize we actually went ahead and did all this.”

Darrell sat chewing over this information. “So we’re locked in.”

“Looks that way, yeah,” Jon admitted.

The silence stretched out for a few minutes.

“Well,” Darrell said.

“Well, what?” Jon asked.

“Well, we’d better start that training today, hadn’t we? Since we’ve already committed to this while drunk off our asses.” Darrell pushed back from the computer with a resigned sigh. “Somewhere, Cece is laughing at me.”

The next few weeks were a whirl. Jon had to get a new passport—his last one had expired back when Edwin was still able to travel and they had visited Barcelona. Both of them visited their doctors for immunizations—and winced at the list and the expense. Both their doctors told them, quite calmly, how rigorous it would be and how ridiculous they were to even consider it at their ages. And each of them privately wondered why they had thought this was a good idea in the first place.

They’d taken to staying with each other. They alternated between Darrell’s home in Laurel Canyon and Jon’s Craftsman in Belmont Shore. The distance, by Los Angeles standards, was enormous: one was on the coast and the other in

the hills, with a drive of better than an hour between them. When Cece started haunting Darrell's thoughts, they'd head to the beach, and when Jon became too overwhelmed by Edwin's things, they'd go back to the hills for a while.

They planned late into the night, looking at videos about the hike and the experience. The trip looked more and more daunting the more videos they watched, but Jon refused to give in to Darrell's wet-blanketing, although Darrell made a valiant effort every day.

"This is stupid," Darrell said on the morning that they drove to the post office to get Jon's passport renewed. "Did you see that hike? We'll never be able to do this!"

"And you owe me a beer," Jon said from behind the wheel. "That's the third time you've said that today. Yesterday you bet me you could go a whole day without saying it more than twice. Pay up."

"I said no such thing," Darrell retorted. "I only said it was stupid once this morning, when we were looking at that video you found."

"Twice," Jon corrected. "You said it twice—once when they were at the Sun Gate and once when they were starting out."

Darrell considered. "It was still only for one video. It should only count as once."

"Pay up," Jon said placidly as they continued toward the post office.

After a moment, Darrell blew out an amused, annoyed laugh. "Fine. When we get home I'll treat you to a beer."

"Oh, no," Jon said. "I can get a beer out of the fridge myself. Besides, I bought those beers. You owe me one that you paid for."

Their good-natured banter continued into the post office, through the abysmal passport renewal process, and back to the house. "Fine! I'll pay up tonight when we hit the Chateau for dinner," Darrell finally said. "But tomorrow I get to say it as many times as I like."

"Nope," Jon refused. "You're limited to three times a day from now on, and for every time you say it beyond that, I get a free beer from you."

"You're a real pain in the ass, Jon, do you know that?" Darrell sighed.

"Of course I do." Jon smirked as they pulled into Darrell's driveway. "Isn't that why you keep me around?"

“You’re impossible!” Darrell said, hauling himself out of the seat and stalking up to the front door.

As long as it keeps you needled enough not to slump back into that depression, Dare, I’ll be as impossible as it’s possible to be, Jon thought, following his friend inside.

After lunch, Darrell called Jon over to look at another video he’d found on the web. “Look. There is no way we’ll make that hike. We might as well hike from your house to mine to train for this.”

In the video, a group of about ten people from all over the world were hiking Machu Picchu. Although they differed in age, none of them were as old as Jon and Darrell. The tour company apparently would go ahead of the hiking group, set up the tents, and make food for the hikers while the hikers set their own pace.

“It’s a five-hour climb!” Darrell pointed out. “Look, that guy is twenty-nine and he’s struggling up those steps. They’re steps! It’s not even a trail. It’s five hours of steps, and you think we need to do this before we die? Because this is going to kill us, and I’m not ready to die. You want me to hike through a place called Dead Woman’s Pass? It’ll be renamed Dead Darrell’s Pass when we’re through with it—or maybe Dead Jon’s Pass. That has a nice ring.” He ran his hands through his hair again, making it stick up in all directions. At Jon’s insistence, he’d trimmed his beard down, but his hair more than made up for it.

“Then we’ll start training now,” Jon said. “We’ll walk the steps in Santa Monica, in Palisades Park.” He went into the kitchen, set up a blender, and put together a disgusting concoction of protein powder, eggs, and a few other things he’d picked up at the local health food store. “Here. Drink this and pretend it’s a milkshake,” he said, handing one of the tall glasses to Darrell.

Darrell sipped it and made a face. “This is gross!”

“Yeah, I know,” Jon said, drinking a large slug of his own, “but it’ll put us in shape faster than anything, according to the bodybuilding guy at the health store. And we’ll get in shape, starting today. The steps at Palisades will give us both a workout.”

“Tomorrow,” Darrell said as he gagged down the drink. “I can only take one new torture a day, and this drink is torture enough.”

“Today,” Jon said firmly. “There’s no time to waste—we only have eleven weeks left. Best to make the most of it. Besides, what else were you going to do today? Anything important?”

“Well, I was going to...” Darrell’s voice trailed off as he realized he had no palpable excuse.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Jon said. “So, Palisades Park it is. Get into something that will work for working out. Those slacks just aren’t cutting it.”

The steps weren’t as bad as Darrell had claimed, but they weren’t as nice as Jon had claimed, either. Both of them were out of breath by the time they finished one hike up and back down. They had another “energy drink”—Jon had brought a Thermos-full—as they sat on a bench recuperating.

“Where do you get all these ideas, anyway?” Darrell asked. “About the steps and the drinks and stuff?”

“Well, Edwin always wanted to go. So I did the research, and I said just what you did then—it’s too hard, we’re too old, let’s go to Barcelona instead. Which we did. But I think Edwin was always disappointed in me,” Jon said. “So now I have to do it for him, and I can’t think of a better person to go with than you.”

“Seems like a lot of work for one hiking trip. Barcelona sounds easier.” Darrell sniffed.

“It’s not as much work as you think it is. I found a website that suggests specific exercises. We won’t have to go join a gym or anything,” Jon said.

“Well, that’s good, because I know you and your libido, Jon,” Darrell said, finishing his drink and grimacing.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Jon said in mock affront.

“You’d be looking at the eye candy on the bench press and making dates in the showers. I’d never see you again. Hey, that’s an idea. Why don’t we join a gym, Jon?”

Jon shoved his friend and glared, then dissolved into a laugh. “Hey, I wasn’t the guy who ended up with a phone number in my underwear, you know.”

“No, but I do remember the stack of napkins you had with names and numbers scrawled all over them,” Darrell retorted.

“All right. Touché. But that’s another good reason to stay away from the gym. They only have cloth towels, and you can’t write on them very well.”

Chuckling, they headed back to Darrell’s house and the now-always-heated hot tub, where they soaked, groaning in sheer animal pleasure as the heat worked through tired muscles.

“So I found a site where a woman explained what it was like hiking the trail at sixty. I guess she was crazy too, because she said she didn’t have to do it, but she did it anyway,” Darrell said finally.

“You see, Dare? It—”

“Don’t *call* me that,” Darrell retorted. “We don’t have to do this, you know.”

“Yeah, we do,” Jon said. “Mitchell is expecting that book. I sent him some of your old articles and he really likes your stuff, so we have to do it now, Darrell.”

Darrell’s exasperated grunt was answer enough, and talk turned to other things. When they finally hauled themselves out of the hot tub, the sun was going down. “Still want that beer?” Darrell asked around a yawn.

Jon responded with a yawn of his own. “Yeah, but it can wait until tomorrow.”

“Oh, no. Either payment happens on the day, or it’s forfeit,” Darrell said as they dried off.

“Where was *that* written?” Jon asked, but they both grinned. “Just as well. We’ll have to cut back on the beer, anyway. Getting in shape isn’t compatible with drinking a six-pack every night.”

“You’re just out to spoil all my fun, aren’t you?” Darrell complained as they went into the house.

“Yeah, that’s exactly it, my friend,” Jon said as he headed to the bathroom and then the guest room. “See you in the morning.”

“Good night,” Darrell called after him.

“Good night,” Jon said and closed the bathroom door.

Jon was all right until he reached the guest room, where a twin bed awaited him with cool blue sheets and a thin comforter over a thinner blanket. But then his cheerful façade gave way, and he held onto one of the pillows, wishing it

was Edwin. The ache that never left came out in tears. It had always been Ed's dream to go to Machu Picchu, and Edwin had kept pretty fit for his age, but Jon had never been ready. Lying in bed now, Jon reviewed all the things that Edwin had wanted to do, but that Jon had always seen as too strenuous for a man Edwin's age.

Now he was regretting it. "I'm sorry, Ed," he whispered into the pillow. "I'm so sorry. If you were here, I'd be taking you with me. But Dare and I will make it, and we'll bring you with us. I'll sprinkle your ashes there, I promise."

And on the words of the promise he'd said every night for a week, almost like his bedtime prayer, he was finally able to sleep.

The next few weeks were all about preparation: morning walks from one end of Palisades Park to the stairs, then down to Pacific Coast Highway and back up again. They developed a route and followed it until it either got hot, they got hungry, or Darrell began complaining. Jon brought his camera and took hundreds of pictures for the eventual book, which was now a reality—Mitchell had sent on contracts, and offered to pay their expenses, which took away at least one thing Darrell could complain about. They would catch lunch on the Third Street Promenade, and then go to Darrell's to soak their aching bodies in the hot tub or else to Jon's to take a dip in the warm water of Belmont Shore.

In late May, a couple of identical packages arrived at Jon's house. He looked at the label on them, grinned, and pushed one towards Darrell. "Here. I got you a present for the trip."

Darrell took the long box and shook his head. "When did you have time? You've been running us ragged every day."

"I had a few minutes the other night, and I figured we'd need them. Go on. Open it up," Jon said, sitting down on the couch and stretching tired legs.

They'd both become fitter than before. The skin on their bodies no longer sagged, and they were both gaining muscle. *We'll never be Schwarzenegger, but for a couple of near-senior citizens, we're not doing too badly*, Jon mused as Darrell struggled with the packing tape on one end of the box, finally using his house key to rip the tape open.

In the box were two long metal walking sticks. "Canes? We're not old enough for canes!" Darrell said. "Besides, I thought all this getting-in-shape stuff was so we wouldn't need a cane later."

“It’s for the hike, you idiot,” Jon said. “They’re walking sticks. They’re supposed to help us get up that fourteen-thousand-foot trek. Trust me, no matter how in shape we are, all the videos have said the second day is going to feel like the end of the world to your legs. I got a set for me, too.”

Darrell looked at him suspiciously for a minute or so, and then sighed. “Okay. I have to admit I’m relieved to have something that will help with those stupid stairs.”

Jon nodded, flipping through photos he’d taken that day on his computer. “Hey, look. This shot of the stairs could go in the first few pages of the book. You could talk about how we trained for the trip. Have you given any thought to the writing for the book yet?”

“With the way you’ve been running me into the ground? When have I had the energy?” Darrell said, but then smiled a little. “Okay, okay, it hasn’t been that bad. But yeah, I’ve been keeping a journal about this process. No, you can’t read it, so don’t ask me. I said some stuff about you that isn’t very flattering.”

“Like you’ve never done that before,” Jon said. “Eh. As long as I know you’re on it, that’s all that matters.”

As June moved in, Jon began to demand more from both of them. His own house in Belmont Shore remained locked and closed, and he practically moved in with Darrell apart from checking the mailbox every few days to see if his passport had arrived. Their walks shifted from the now-easy Palisade Park steps to the hill between Darrell’s house and the Chateau, where they’d made their original plans. Once they reached the bottom, out came the walking sticks and the hard hike back up to Darrell’s home, accompanied by Darrell’s ongoing complaints.

At first, Darrell insisted on doing the hike back to his house without using the walking sticks, but a couple of days later, he took a bad step, slipped, and fell.

“Dammit!” he shouted. “Stupid gravel—I’d never have slipped if this street had been clear...” He struggled to a sitting position, looking down the hill, and drew his right foot up towards him, wincing.

Jon stood over him and tut-tutted, waving the base of one of his own walking sticks like a teacher with a classroom pointer. “See? If you were using yours, this wouldn’t have happened.”

Darrell swatted the stick away. “Really, Jon? That’s all you can say? How about asking me if I need help getting back up? Or here’s a suggestion—how about asking me if I’m all right?”

Jon considered, and then set down his walking sticks on the lawn next to them. “Sorry, Darrell. You’re right. *Are* you all right?”

“I don’t think so,” Darrell said. “My right ankle twisted when I went down.”

“Are you hurt anywhere else?”

“Just my pride,” Darrell said. “Here, give me a hand up and we’ll see how bad it is.”

He grunted as Jon helped him to his feet, but yelped as he tried to put weight on the ankle. “Damn, it hurts.”

“You probably just twisted it,” Jon said, but he hid a worried look with effort. What if it wasn’t just a twisted ankle? Their plane took off in six weeks—would Darrell still be able to train? Or had this just ruined their trip?

“All I know is it hurts. I can’t walk on this, Jon. Now what do we do? You’re the one with all the big ideas.”

Jon considered. “Fine. I’ll go to the house and come back with the car, and we’ll take you to the ER to get it X-rayed. That way we’ll know if it’s worth it to even keep trying.”

Darrell looked at him, eyes narrowed. “Who says I wasn’t going to keep trying?”

“Well, you have an ankle injury—” Jon started, but Darrell cut him off.

“So what? I’m in better shape than I’ve ever been—better shape than you!—and you think I’m going to give up the chance to hike Machu Picchu because of a sprain? It’s not broken or anything. I just need to get it into the hot tub and take some painkillers. I’ll wrap it and we’ll be back training tomorrow.” Darrell sat down on the curb, his lips pressed together. “Go on. Go get the car. Believe me, I’m not going anywhere.”

“I’ll be back as fast as I can,” Jon promised, and went up the hill with his walking sticks at a pace that was nearly a run.

“Don’t kill yourself getting there, either!” Darrell shouted after him.

Jon didn’t slow his pace as he disappeared behind a van parked on the side of the road. Darrell leaned back on his arms and sighed. *How did I get into this, anyway?*

Deep inside, Darrell knew that the trip was going to happen. He still didn't really want to go, but he had run out of ways to stall. He dragged his feet almost every morning but they still ended up doing the workouts and hikes that Jon had planned. He complained about everything, but still Jon kept pushing. On the one hand, he was annoyed that Jon was taking up all his time and almost forcing the trip on him. On the other hand, he hadn't been as preoccupied with Cece's death as before, and he'd begun eating and exercising again instead of just slumping, so Cece probably would have approved.

Even so, he was irritated with Jon. The "journal" he was keeping was mainly a list of "Ways Jon annoyed me today." And the list was getting really long. It was the way he and Cece had dealt with their relationship conflicts so that they wouldn't take it out on each other, and mostly, it had worked.

"Are you all right?" came a voice from behind him. It was one of the local celebrities, looking out from her front door as he sat on her lawn. He turned around carefully, minding his ankle and the curb as he eased it up off the street.

"Oh, I'm fine. Just took a spill here on the gravel. My friend went to get his car, but it's a hike. It's at my place, up thataway," Darrell said and gestured up the hill.

"Oh, all right. Do you need a glass of water or anything?"

"Oh, no thanks," Darrell said, smiling. "I'll be out of your hair as soon as he gets here."

"Okay," came the reply, and the sound of the door closing freed Darrell to untwist and look back up the street for Jon's car. His ankle was already beginning to feel better, and he felt a little foolish. He flexed it experimentally, wincing. It really wasn't hurt much at all.

Just a stupid accident, that's all.

Yeah, because I didn't want to look stupider with those walking sticks.

Well, what's more important? Winning the bet you made with him, or not looking stupid?

"Both," he said out loud. He hated to lose, but he also hated to look stupid.

Well, pick one.

The voice—the exasperated voice—was Cece's.

He sat waiting for Jon to return, thinking about how much like Cece Jon really was. And how much he'd complained at both of them for making him do things he really wanted to do anyway, but couldn't admit he wanted.

Heck, living with him for the last month hasn't been that different from living with her for the last thirty-odd years. Except the essential differences, of course.

He stood up and flexed the ankle, which was hardly twinging at all now. *If Edwin had died longer ago, I might even bring it up. But I don't want him on the rebound from a dead man.*

When Jon arrived back with the MG, Darrell was standing, albeit gingerly, on both feet. "You're on your feet?" Jon asked as Darrell got into the car without help.

"Yeah. It was just a twist, like you said. Let's go back up to the house."

The postal jeep was just leaving as they pulled into the driveway. "Maybe your stickers arrived. I got my passport the other day, did I tell you?" Jon said as he put on the brake. "Do you need help up the driveway?"

"No, I should be okay," Darrell said. "Let's get into the hot tub. That way, this stupid twisted ankle can be a thing of the past." He limped up the driveway. "Whose damn idea was it that we'd live in the hills, anyway?"

"I think it was yours," Jon said. "If I remember right, Cece wanted to live in Beverly Hills, but all you heard was 'hills,' so you suggested this little cottage on its incredibly steep street." Jon walked behind Darrell as they approached the door. "But hey, I know you love this house, right? And this way we can train close by, and the hot tub will always be there."

"There is that," Darrell allowed, as he let them in the door.

After that, there was less trouble from Darrell. He used the walking sticks, built up his endurance, and the complaints dropped to an occasional grumble rather than a constant chatter. They bought clothes, shoes, equipment and backpacks, and started hiking fully loaded down. Both of them were glad of the hot tub after those evenings.

Once the hike up Laurel Canyon began to get easy, they randomized it: Griffith Park, Big Bear, the Santa Monica hills, and even over the 405 freeway to the Skirball Center. The walking sticks began to look like equipment that had been used, instead of something that a couple of inexperienced, aging men might have bought from a sporting goods store.

“We’re going to Echo Park today. It’s the steepest stairway in the area. It’s only 230 steps, but it’s really long and tall.” Jon looked over the phone at Darrell’s grimacing face. “It’s nothing like Dead Woman’s pass, but it’ll be a good test of our abilities, since the plane leaves in three days.”

Darrell suppressed a groan. “Okay. You drive, though. Otherwise I’ll end up taking us somewhere flat.”

Jon snorted as they walked out to his car. “Aren’t you even a little excited about this trip, Darrell?”

“Maybe a little, but only because I want it to be over so I can go back to my nice, quiet life up here in the hills, where I can drive to my home and not have to use walking sticks to get up the street.” Darrell leaned his head back as Jon maneuvered down the hillside. *And I want to give Cece a resting place, somewhere perfect, where she’ll always be young and she’ll always be beautiful.*

And, he admitted to himself, because it meant more time spent with Jon. He wasn’t ready to admit it to Jon, though. Not yet.

The flights had been crazy, as they always were out of LAX, but their flight was on time and—miracle of miracles—all their luggage made it to the luggage claim in Peru. The hotel had been sedate, but of course a hotel catering to international travelers almost had to be. The heat in Los Angeles had been almost unbearable, but the Peruvian July that greeted them was like the mildest Southern California March spring they’d ever experienced. Jon had his camera out and was snapping photos almost before they’d disembarked, and the hotel in Cusco, while beautiful, just ramped up their anticipation. They had to spend several days there, to adjust to the altitude. As Jon said, “We don’t want to punk out because we were too high up,” and Darrell agreed. It would be embarrassing.

But now, after all the training and all Darrell’s complaining, they had finally arrived.

The van had picked them up at their hotel very early in the morning, and they’d ridden with four others, who were apparently their entire group. Everyone was sleepy and most of them dozed through the ride, except Jon, who was already revved up on Peruvian coffee and snapping photos of everything. When they reached the start of the trail after a drive of about three hours, however, even he had settled down.

The start of the trail was a madhouse scene.

Porters, tour groups, and some locals milled around as color-coded tour leaders attempted to herd their vanloads into separate spaces to give instructions for the initial leg of the trip. Fast-running burros, the water chattering in the river nearby, and the long lines of people lent the very rural place an impression of Disneyland during a summer crowd scene, perhaps in Adventureland waiting for the Jungle Cruise. The tour groups had people of every age and color, from all walks of life, and Darrell wondered what the locals thought of all these crazy tourists getting ready to make a hike that would be brutal, physically draining, and exhausting.

Then he smiled. After all, he was one of those crazy tourists, wasn't he?

Even now, he wondered why he had come along. The book was one reason, but that was Jon's idea, not his. The whole trip had been Jon's idea. And yet, the idea of taking Cece's necklace to the ruins and leaving it there, the way Jon intended to leave Edwin's ashes there, was somehow appealing.

He couldn't figure out why. Cece would not have gone to Machu Picchu. Their visit to Europe had not been about ancient ruins or exercise that tested their endurance; it had been about having a good time and going where they wanted when they wanted to. The Blarney Stone visit had been completely spur of the moment.

Now that he thought about it, his decision to bring her necklace to the ruins of Machu Picchu was the exact opposite.

It had always been that way for him and Cece. Darrell was a planner, pessimistic, cautious. Cece was spontaneous, optimistic, someone who ran headlong to meet the new and play with it. *Opposites attract*, the old saw said, and it had never been truer than with him and with Cece.

And yet they had made it work. Somehow, they had made it work.

He took the necklace out of his pocket and looked at it for a moment. What would his life be like after this trip was over? He had been so tired every night after he and Jon were done training that he hadn't been able to hold on to his pillow and feel the wide expanse of the empty bed where she used to be. But what would it be like when he got back home and he had to deal with her absence all over again?

Would leaving the necklace help him leave her behind? Would leaving the necklace open up his life for someone new? Or not so new?

He didn't know. And it bothered him, not knowing. He put the necklace back in his pocket with a frown and looked around again.

There were more porters than there were tour members, each dressed in a color that matched their tour group. A crowd of porters in blue approached the blue-clad tour guide with whom Jon and Darrell had ridden the van. The chatter of so many voices in so many languages was deafening.

Jon flitted about with his camera, taking pictures of everyone and everything. "Jon! Get back in line, would you?"

Jon came back reluctantly, snapping a few photos of locals at the riverbank as he sauntered over. "Why do I have to be here? You're holding our place in line and I'm getting pictures for the book."

"Because those two are coming over here," Darrell said, pointing at the porters with their tour guide. Two of them had broken from the clump and were approaching them at a fast trot.

Jon patted him on the shoulder. "They don't bite, you know."

"I know. I just—it's really strange, okay?" Darrell said. It was as close as he could come to admitting that it was difficult for him to deal with.

The two porters walked up to Jon and Darrell even as he finished speaking. The older of the two addressed the air between them. "*Sus cosas, señores, por favor.*"

Darrell was at a loss. *Why didn't they say anything about these people not speaking English?* But Jon answered in fluid Spanish that took him by surprise: "*Por supuesto, señores; los que están aquí.*" He pointed to their tightly rolled sleeping bags, sleep mats, and a bag of toiletries, which were leaning on a rickety fence about ten feet away. The rest of their things were already stuffed tightly into the large, heavy hiking packs on his and Darrell's backs.

"*Gracias,*" one of the porters said, and walked to the piles. They made quick work of getting the items organized and onto their own backs, with a fluidity and professionalism that startled Darrell.

"What did they say? What did you say to them?" Darrell demanded, mystified.

"Oh, they just wanted to know where our stuff was so they could take it up for us. Remember the porters? That's them." Jon seemed unconcerned.

"Are you sure?" Darrell frowned.

“Yeah, they’re part of our group. See how they’re all dressed in blue, like our tour guide? That means they’re part of our group. They’ll carry up the stuff we need to sleep in and camp in, and they’ll go ahead of us so that we can take our time.”

“If you say so,” Darrell said.

“I do,” Jon responded. “Look, the tour guide is trying to get us over there. Let’s go, old man.”

“Old man?” Darrell sputtered as he followed Jon. “I’m only three years older than...”

“Yeah, so stop acting like it’s twenty, okay?” Jon shot back as they approached their tour guide.

The guide was a thin, wiry man who spoke in heavily accented but perfectly understandable English. “*Señores, señoras, señoritas*—welcome! Welcome to Machu Picchu. If you have not given your sleeping equipment to these men, please do now so they may go ahead and prepare camp for you all. We will be leaving shortly. As you read in the *instrucciones* we sent you, you must all be wearing hiking boots that will not allow you to twist your ankles or slip. We will start here at the Kilometer eighty-two marker. Some parts of the trail are muddy, and there are also steps. Please stay together as much as possible, but if you must go slowly, we will understand.” White teeth flashed in his dark face. “Camp will be there when you catch up.” The group tittered politely.

The man went on, but Darrell left the listening to Jon, who seemed to understand the man’s accented English better than he did. Then, suddenly, they were crossing a long wooden bridge over the river and were on the first leg of the trail—one that would, at the end of the day, cover eight hours of hiking and about twelve kilometers, which they had already discovered was just under eight miles. The guide announced that their destination was a place called Wayllabamba, which didn’t mean anything to Darrell, but he hoped the first day wouldn’t be too steep.

It was, but not in the way he’d expected. After crossing the river, they hiked up a fairly steep hill through a small village, and then through some ruins (“Hoo-eel-ka Rack-ay,” the guide informed them). By that point, Darrell was already starting to feel the burn of the first sharp ascent and the equally sharp descent that followed. His canteen was half-empty when they reached another river, the “Koo-shee-ak-a” river, and then stopped for a bite to eat.

The porters had already preceded them with a full lunch of Peruvian cuisine: spiced meats and what looked like stuffed potatoes (but weren't), cornmeal *masa* cakes filled with meat and cheese, pasta dishes, breads, vegetables, fruits, and lots of water.

During the meal, they finally had the breath and energy to learn about some of their tour mates: Miche and Ella, who identified themselves as “uni-mates” from New Zealand, and Will and Laurie, a couple from Boulder, Colorado. Miche, a short, solid, vivacious woman with short, dark brown hair and dancing eyes, and her tallish friend Ella with her longish brown hair twisted up in a bun, couldn't stop chattering about the beautiful landscape and the courtesy of the porters. They had been at university together in Christchurch, and were “tramping” this trip as a celebration of their graduations. Will and Laurie were fitness enthusiasts in their midtwenties who had just bought a “tiny house” on a ranch property outside of Boulder, and wanted to have one last travel hurrah before settling down. *Why'd we have to fall in with the young, fit fanatics?* Darrell thought, but did not say. He and Jon introduced themselves as lifelong friends from Los Angeles who were in Machu Picchu to keep an old promise they'd once made. Neither of them mentioned the book.

After lunch, they were back on the trail, following the river that bubbled along to their right. He and Jon didn't say much to each other, mostly focusing on left foot, right foot and left stick, right stick as the trail went on and on. They stopped twice more for food and water, and the second time, Darrell looked around and then asked, “Is this really what you thought it would be like?”

“No,” Jon admitted, “but I think Ed would have got a kick out of it. Cece, too.”

Darrell had nothing to say to that as they stood up and continued on.

The first day wasn't that hard, but it wasn't easy. They passed many locals on burros, with dogs, with handcarts. Children and chickens ran around on the sides of the road, the children laughing, the chickens clucking and scolding. Darrell pulled out a small notebook at each rest stop to make notes on the trip so far, but the notes were mostly complaints: *Will and Laurie act like they're cheerleaders. That tall guy with the camcorder in the green tour group keeps on missing his footing; he's going to slip over the bank into the river if he doesn't watch himself. Did anyone train for this except me and Jon? I wonder.*

Most of the people on the road with them, apart from Will and Laurie, weren't in the best of shape. An older British man was the slowest, taking a rest break every half hour or so, and a younger man stayed with him, encouraging him to keep going. Will and Laurie led the way, bookending the guide as they went. Other Americans in other groups were grumbling loudly at the humidity and the lack of modern amenities, but mostly, Darrell tuned them out. *What, did you think this would be like Disneyland, where there's a bathroom every fifty yards?* he noted in his notebook at the second break he and Jon took, while they chewed on some trail mix and sipped water. One woman in the yellow group began complaining of a headache and an upset stomach, but for the most part everyone was fine.

They made it to the camp in good time, where the porters had already set up their tents and begun preparing dinner in a larger area under a sunshade. Will and Laurie were first on site, of course, but when Charles, the old Brit, finally limped into camp last, the entire crowd gave a rousing cheer.

At that first dinner, the groups seemed to pull together. Darrell found himself sitting between Jon and Will, the guy from Colorado. Will's girlfriend Laurie and the two New Zealander women occupied the other side of the table.

"You're keeping up really well," Laurie said to Jon. "I'm impressed. Are you guys athletes or in a sport or something?"

Jon was in the middle of a bite of food, so Darrell answered for them. "My buddy Jon here actually insisted we train for this. I think we've walked every hill and outdoor staircase in Los Angeles. But that was all pretty much at sea level. The trail here started at over nine thousand feet—are any of you feeling it?"

Miche swallowed the salad she was chewing and shook her head. "I'm not, but then Ella and I planned for the altitude. We stayed in Cusco for a week to get used to it. Also, we've hiked the Fiordland on South Island a couple of times during uni, so it's not as bad for us. Milford Sound's elevation is about fifteen hundred meters."

Will and Laurie grinned. "We're originally from Denver, so altitude isn't really a problem for us," Will said. "I admit I'm a little worried about that fellow from England, though."

"Who, Charles?" Ella said. "No, he's just slower because of his age."

"How old is he, do you know?" Jon asked.

“I think they said sixty-six earlier. Did you know there is an upper limit for age to go on this trail? They won’t let people over sixty-seven even try it,” Will said.

“Then I’m glad we got here when we did,” Jon said, grinning sidewise at Darrell, who grunted and continued eating.

“Well, you two have ten to fifteen years before you hit sixty-seven, don’t you?” Laurie asked. “Don’t answer that. I want to continue thinking you’re men in your early fifties.”

“You flatter me, madame,” Jon said. “But all right—we won’t spoil it for you.” Darrell opened his mouth to do just that, and Jon elbowed him. “Shh, Darrell. I made a promise. Don’t make me break it.”

“Tomorrow is going to be the worst part, or so I’ve heard,” Miche said.

Most of them nodded. “It’s because it’s the first day you’ve really put yourself through the trail,” Will said. “It’s like any first day of the real thing, even if you train for it.”

“Did you all watch the videos about the hike?” Miche asked.

Heads nodded around the table. “Yeah,” Darrell said. “But none of them had folks as old as Jon and me, so we’re still not sure how bad it’s going to be for us. I mean, I found blogs by people our age, but no videos.”

“You sure look fit enough,” Ella said. “I don’t think either of you even got short of breath.”

Darrell waved away the compliment, but inside, he was startled. They finished their meal and the porters moved to clear away their dishes.

Their tent had been set up six tents away from the kitchen, a bright-yellow dome tent with their sleeping equipment piled inside the door. As they unrolled sleeping mats and sleeping bags, Jon said, “So, what do you think now that we’ve had one day on the trail?”

“I’m really wishing they’d had a hot tub waiting for us,” Darrell said as he pulled off his boots.

Jon snorted, a short laugh. “Yeah, that was one thing we should have trained for—the absence of your hot tub.”

Darrell didn't respond. His feet throbbed, and his back ached. He lay down on top of his sleeping bag and stretched, feeling his spine crackle. *Why did I sign up for this?*

Because you wanted to prove you were more fit than him, Cece's voice whispered in his head.

Yeah, that was stupid, Darrell responded. I'll remember that in future—that feeling stupid and losing aren't as bad as this.

So you say, Cece's voice laughed. But this is who you are, Dare. You won't refuse a bet, and you'll do anything to make sure you're not embarrassed.

"Shut up," Darrell muttered.

"What?" Jon said from the other sleeping bag.

"Nothing. Talking to myself," Darrell said. He got into his sleeping bag and rolled over, trying to ignore the blush that crept up his face.

Jon lay awake listening to Darrell's slow breathing. He'd put his spare camera batteries into the sleeping bag where they wouldn't get drained by the cold, and he'd taken off his boots, but he couldn't sleep. He was too revved up from the first-day experience.

This is tougher than I thought it would be, Ed. I've been everywhere. I've done everything. But I couldn't have done this with you. I'd been to so many places, and with you, I wanted to rest, and I let you down, didn't I? Now the only way you're going to be here are your ashes.

Stop thinking like that, Jon. He'd lived with Ed so long that he already knew what he'd say. He didn't pretend it was actually Ed talking to him, but it was comforting, hearing Ed's voice in his head.

I know, but... we could have been doing this together. We could have been lying beside each other, encouraging each other along this trail. Instead, I suggested Barcelona.

Well, by the time I got Machu Picchu into my head, I was already too old, you know. That was only eight years ago. They would have carded me and said no.

Jon smiled a little at that.

Jon, I'm here with you. I will always be with you. Don't beat yourself up like this.

From the other sleeping bag, a loud, wood-sawing snore arose.

At least you didn't snore or complain about everything. I guess I was your Darrell, Jon thought, a wry smile on his lips.

Edwin's voice didn't answer.

Later that night, Darrell had to get up for the bathroom. Miche had shown them the picture on her phone after she'd visited it—it was nothing more than a squatting hole cut into the rock. But it was use it or explode, so Darrell had to go. He flipped on his headlamp and headed out of the tent.

Jon woke when Darrell got up, and lay in the tent waiting for him to return. He pulled the intricate wood box with Edwin's ashes in it out of his pack and held it for a while, then wrapped it back up in the green-and-black plaid shirt and tucked it back in where it wouldn't open up and spill. "I wish we could have done this together. You would have loved the way the fog rolled in over the mountains and the sun peeking through the trees. I won't forget that you're with me, though. I won't forget again."

Darrell slipped back into the tent. "Who were you talking to?"

"Edwin. I still do that sometimes. Don't you still talk to Cece every now and then?"

Darrell closed the tent and sat down heavily. "Yeah. A lot, just lately. All the way up the trail, and even tonight before I went to sleep." He got into his sleeping bag again. "Hell, for a week I was furious with her for dying, because if she was still around, I wouldn't be taking this merry trip up the Inca Trail with you right now, would I?"

"I'll bet she had something to say about that," Jon said. "At least, if I remember Cece."

"Oh, yeah. She pointed out that this was all my fault, for taking your bet," Darrell said as he settled back down.

Jon snorted laughter. "Well, it is, you know."

"Oh, shut up," Darrell said. "What, are you going to rub it in?"

"No, of course not," Jon said. "But we still haven't even agreed what 'more fit' means, you know. How do we know who's won the bet?"

Darrell considered as the cold air nipped at his nose. "First one to get to the Sun Gate wins?"

“I’m good with that,” Jon said. He was beginning to drift again.

“And the prize?” Darrell said.

“Knowing that you won, and that I won’t argue with you about it,” Jon said. “Deal?”

“Deal,” Darrell said after a moment. “Yeah. Deal.”

The next day was harder than the first. Everyone at breakfast groaned about their aching legs and sore feet as they wolfed down the food the porters provided. On the trail, people began to spread apart, not walking together as they had the day before. Will and Laurie formed a two-person vanguard just behind the guide, and once again Charles fell far behind. Rain fell softly for an hour or so, and the trail became more slippery and treacherous as a result. Ella went down hard on one knee once, but shrugged it off with some choice language in the New Zealand dialect that nobody but Miche could understand.

Jon and Darrell, however, found themselves walking together more often than not, and after they exhausted the topics of landscape and weather, found themselves moving towards the harder topics that they’d managed to avoid even as they trained for this massive endurance fest.

“If Edwin hadn’t wanted you to do this, would you have wanted to?” Darrell asked as they sat on the damp ground and passed a canteen back and forth.

“I don’t know, honestly,” Jon said. “He started harping on it eight or nine years ago, but I’d been all over South America on photography trips, so I wasn’t really interested. Of course, I promised him I would go the last time he and I got to talk before he died, so there’s that.”

“Deathbed promise, huh?” Darrell asked.

“Well... yes and no. I don’t think either of us really realized it’d be the last time we’d get to talk. He had... had rallied, you know? I guess part of me hoped that it meant he was going to get better after all.” Jon tried to smile, but the smile didn’t work very well.

“That didn’t happen with Cece,” Darrell said. “She went into a coma just a few days before she died, and then she was gone, but she hadn’t made a lot of sense for a couple weeks before that. She just kept saying ‘oh no’ over and over again for a day or two. They said it was normal for what was happening to her. But she never really came back from that.”

“I’m sorry, Darrell. I wish I had been there for you when it happened.”

“Eh,” Darrell said. “I didn’t let anyone know until it was almost too late anyway. Not your fault. They had a sort of support group at the hospital, but it felt too much like a guilt trip. I didn’t go very often.”

They sat listening to the rain patter on the jungle around them for a few minutes.

“I’m glad you came with me,” Jon said abruptly. “And I’m glad Edwin didn’t. He wouldn’t have made it to the first campsite.”

Darrell nodded, then looked at him directly. “Thanks for bugging me to come with you. I really was in bad shape over Cece, and you know me. I wouldn’t have left my house without you pulling me out of it. Remember that time in college when I failed that trig final?”

Jon remembered. It had been a bad two weeks getting Darrell to even get out of bed and eat, let alone take care of himself. And now that he thought about it, what had cured Darrell of his malaise was going out and getting plastered enough to talk about how much it had hurt.

And of course we didn’t bring any beer with us on this hike. Dammit.

“I needed someone too,” Jon said after a minute. “I was pretending I was okay, but Edwin’s stuff... well, you know. He collected everything, and what he collected seemed to collect stuff too. I’m still dreading emptying out all of his things and organizing that place when we get back later this week.”

“I can help you,” Darrell offered. “And if it gets too much, you can come back up and visit the hot tub for a while.”

“What about Cece’s things?” Jon said as they got to their feet and began to follow the long string of people up the trail. “Don’t you need help sorting through those?”

“Yeah, eventually, I suppose. But she and I kept our stuff pretty compartmentalized anyway. I was thinking about having a service come in and take most of her stuff away. I mean, when would I ever wear her clothes, you know?”

They both chuckled a little at that.

“I’ve got some ideas for the book,” Darrell said as they ducked under a low-hanging plant on the pathway.

“Yeah?”

“The original book was just going to be about us hiking Machu Picchu, and maybe why. But wouldn’t it be more interesting if we got the stories of the other people on the way with us? They’ve all got stories to tell. I can feel it. Maybe it’s just the nature of this kind of thing, but I want to know more about them.”

“That sounds great, if you can get them to agree.”

Darrell’s grin flashed out suddenly. “You’re talking to a man who convinced senior editors to run risky stories,” he said. “They won’t know what hit them.”

A little later, they arrived at a set of steep steps, and the walking sticks came out again. “So you’re using them?” Jon asked.

“I have been since the middle of our training in June,” Darrell retorted, and then realized Jon was teasing. “And hey, thanks for getting them. I don’t think I could have done this without them.”

“That’s what I figured,” Jon said, and looked down to focus on his feet again. “Don’t trip—there’s a loose stone in that one.”

Darrell stepped over the stone that threatened to trip him, and watched as Jon pulled a little ahead as the steps narrowed. Then he looked down at his own feet and focused on the climb, which was making his muscles sing and protest.

When they finally reached the end of the long staircase, both of them were puffing and sweating. They stripped off sweatshirts and rolled them back into their packs, relishing the cooling breeze. Darrell looked at Jon and then looked away. *He’d never want that again. That was years—decades ago! And now is not the time. We’re both sweaty and we’re in the middle of a damn hike up the middle of nowhere.*

“What is it?” Jon asked.

“What?” Darrell responded, pulling his pack back on.

“I don’t know. You looked like you wanted to say something.”

“Ah, no. Just thinking.”

“A penny for your thoughts,” Jon said. Then he grinned. “A quarter to act them out.”

Darrell blinked, and then grinned, a beat late. *If only you knew.*

“Hey, Darrell. Want to know a secret?” Jon said in a stage whisper.

Darrell looked around and saw that they were mostly alone; the people on the trail behind them and in front of them were a good thirty yards away, and out of hearing distance, in either direction. “Sure.”

“I hate stairs more than anything in the world, but I knew I could do this if I had you by my side.” Jon hugged Darrell and Darrell, surprised, hugged back. Then he started as Jon kissed his ear. “Thank you, man.”

Without another word, Jon turned and trudged away. Darrell stood frozen for a moment, staring after Jon, fingertips touching where Jon had kissed him, and then hurried to catch up.

At the next rest stop, their tour guide pointed out the peak between two mountaintops. “That is where we are headed. If you have a camera, you might be able to see the groups ahead of us.”

Jon brought out his camera and put on the long-distance lens. Even through the lens, the groups looked like ants on an anthill. He snapped a few shots, but figured they’d be useless.

Charles spoke up. “Oh, Lord. How high up is that spot?”

The tour guide smiled. “That is the top of Dead Woman’s Pass. It is forty-two hundred meters from sea level.”

Charles shook his head. Will said, “What’s that in feet?”

“Thirteen thousand, seven hundred feet, more or less,” the guide responded.

All the Americans in the group groaned. “Forty-two hundred meters sounds better,” Darrell complained.

“Which is why I would have kept it to myself, but your friend asked,” the guide returned. “Take your time, everyone; go at a steady pace. But please—do not kill yourselves trying to hurry. Camp will be there when you arrive.”

The group began to trickle up the hill, with Will and Laurie once again bracketing their guide like a guard detail. Jon and Darrell checked each other’s packs, and Ella and Miche plotted their own trek upwards.

But Charles sat with his head drooping. “I don’t know what made me think I could do this. I’m holding everyone up.”

The others who were still at the rest stop turned to him. “No, you’re not, Charles! You made it into camp only twenty minutes after we did!” Ella said. Others nodded, but Charles simply drooped more.

He doesn’t look all that great, Darrell thought.

But then, as if a signal had been given, every single person still remaining moved to Charles and hugged him, one by one, as they headed up the trail. “You can do this, man,” Darrell found himself saying as his turn to hug came. Charles looked quite startled, but decidedly less droopy, and the younger man, Trevor, walked with him as they continued along the trail.

I wonder what his story is. I’ll get it tonight when we make camp.

Darrell caught up with Ella and Miche. After they’d exchanged greetings, he said, “Jon and I are actually working on a book about this trip. I was wondering if you’d mind me telling your story too. What do you say?”

They looked at each other and then back at him. “I don’t see a problem with that,” Ella said.

“Me either,” Miche put in.

“So then...” Darrell said in an encouraging tone.

“Well...” Ella looked as if she were approaching a much more difficult topic than “How I Spent My Summer Vacation.”

“Miche and I had a good friend in uni who was Peruvian. Vanda, her name was. We talked about coming on this trek after graduation. You know, as a group,” she added as Darrell nodded. “And Vanda told us of the ruins, and this wild trek that people took. So we studied on it, and we all banded together to tramp everywhere and do this hike.”

“But we used to party really hard, and at one point we’d all almost been kicked out of uni for it,” Miche said. “And we... well...”

They both looked suddenly sorrowful. Ella hung her head and gripped her wooden walking stick. Miche hugged her one-armed while balancing with her own walking stick on the other side.

“What happened?” Darrell asked.

“She was killed by a drunk driver right before we finished uni. It was a horrid shock. After the funeral, and after we finished school, the two of us decided to do this for her.” Ella chuckled back a sob. “It’s far more miserable

than she ever made it out to be. I've been wondering if the reason it's so hard is so that we remember her with a loving heart when we get to the top."

"That's hard," Darrell said, not knowing what else to say. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Somewhere, Vanda is laughing at us," Miche said. She wiped one eye that twitched suspiciously.

"Yeah, that was what she did, all right," Ella added.

They had slowed down so they could talk while they walked, and behind them, Trevor and Charles were catching up to them. "Sharing stories of 'why are we here'?" Trevor asked as he came abreast of Miche and Ella.

"Sort of, yeah," Darrell said. He went through the same explanation he'd given Miche and Ella about the book, and Trevor brightened.

"Sure, you can use my story. I came here on a dare."

"A dare?" Darrell asked. "What kind of dare?"

"One I refused to take lying down," Trevor said, and his eyes hardened a little. "I made a deal with my father. He told me I was a slacker and couldn't finish anything I started. I said I could hike Machu Picchu, and he laughed. For my birthday, he gave me the plane ticket and this tour. His last words were 'I dare you'.

"But he was right. I'm such a slacker that I'm having a horrible time, really. I've brought nothing essential, my shoes were the only things I bought before I left, my backpack was something I used at school, and my clothes are barely warm enough. But dammit, I'm going to do this, if it's the last thing I do. And when I get back I'm headed to Oxford, and I will never talk to that bastard again in my life."

Silence fell across the group as they walked along. The pain in Trevor's voice had hit all of them like a hammer. Darrell was uncomfortable, too. Their stories were too close to his and Jon's, in too many ways. *Maybe it takes something like that to make people want to do this. Maybe the people who climb a mountain 'because it's there' are actually few and far between.*

"What brings you and your friend there on this trek?" Charles finally spoke up.

"My wife died last year," Darrell said, his hand touching the necklace in his pocket. "I want to release something of hers, and let her live forever here. Jon

lost his husband a few months before my Cece died, and he wants to sprinkle Edwin's ashes here somewhere. I wouldn't be here except that he insisted. He decided we needed to get out and be one with the world. You know, we have to start working on our bucket list." He chuckled.

"But you're not that old," Miche said. "Are you?"

"I'm sixty-two," Darrell said. It didn't embarrass him like he thought it would, because a chorus of "No!" rang out around him in tones of disbelief and shock.

"Just don't tell Laurie. We promised to let her keep her illusions, remember?"

The others laughed and promised to keep the secret.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Darrell," Miche said. "Maybe sometime we could talk about it, if you want a listening ear."

Listening ears. He hadn't had many of those since Cece died, and he'd damn near worn out the one pair that was willing to listen.

"Yes," he said finally. "I'd like that. Now get on with you—most of you all walk faster than I can. I'll see you up at camp."

When they reached the camp, almost all of them were exhausted. The rain had left and then come back, and the porters' sunshade had turned into a rain shade. Will and Laurie were standing at the entrance, looking out over the valley as others straggled in.

Darrell and Jon had walked most of the way together once they'd found each other on the trail, and they were almost the last ones to arrive. Charles and Trevor came in last, just as the sun was dipping down behind the mountains. Charles looked wiped out, but a new determination had set into his features.

"Is that Charles?" Will called, and at Darrell's affirmative nod, he suddenly looked a little more alert. "Everyone? Can you all come over here for a minute? Please?"

Eyebrows went up all over camp, but the groups crowded around Will and Laurie near the entrance. Laurie looked mystified, and Will looked suddenly, boyishly nervous. "Um... Jon, could you take a few photos of us over here?"

Jon nodded and pulled out his camera, snapping photos as Will turned to Laurie and spoke.

“Laurie, I... I was going to wait until the Sun Gate to do this. But today was the hardest hike we’ve ever had, and I know that if we can make it through that and still love each other, we can make it through anything together.” Will fumbled in his pocket and drew out a small, velvet-covered box, incongruous in the jungle setting. A gasp rippled through the crowd as smiles lit faces, and Laurie’s eyes widened as Will opened the box, dropped to one knee, and held it out to her.

“Laurie, we’ve done it all, except this. Will you—will you marry me?”

Laurie looked at the others, then at Will. The surprise on her face quickly became a grin as she said, “Yes! Oh, yes!”

Will offered the ring and she held out her hand. He slid it onto her finger, where it fit exactly. “You’re all my witnesses,” he said as he got up and caught Laurie in his arms. “She said yes!”

As she kissed him soundly, the crowd broke into cheers and applause. The mood around the table as they filed into the dining tents was considerably lifted, and groups mixed and mingled, everyone wanting to get a look at Laurie’s ring.

Later, when Jon and Darrell finally got into their tent, they were both still chuckling. “I didn’t expect to go to an engagement party during this trip,” Jon said as he turned on one of the small LED lanterns and set it on the floor. “But I’m glad I got good pictures of them. Did you see the looks on their faces?”

“Yeah, I did. I want to see the pictures. I’m going to give them a chapter in the book—they earned it,” Darrell said, pulling off his muddy boots and setting them as far away from him as he could. “Everyone was caught totally by surprise.”

“No one more than Laurie, I think,” Jon said from inside his sweatshirt as he pulled it on over his head again. “It’s going to be cold tonight. Whew!”

“It made me think of the day I proposed to Cece, actually,” Darrell said as he pulled on new socks and got his sweatshirt out of his pack. “We went walking all over Central Park—this was probably two years after we started dating—and we got to the end of this really long pathway and there was a bench. So we sat down, and then, like the doofus I am, I started stammering out my proposal because it was such a pretty place and I wanted her to always have the memory of it. Then I realized I’d left the ring back in the apartment, so I didn’t even have it with me.”

“Ouch,” Jon said. “And she still married you?”

“Crazy, isn’t it? She actually said ‘I’ve been waiting for you to ask for six months, fool. It’s about damn time!’ and *then* she said yes.” Darrell smiled at the memory.

“That sounds like Cece, all right,” Jon said as he slid into his sleeping bag.

“How about you and Edwin? When you got married, who proposed?”

“Oh, neither of us proposed. Ed just insisted. We got up that morning, we saw the news, and Ed said to me ‘Cancel today’s plans. We’re going to City Hall.’” Jon zipped up the sleeping bag against the chilly air.

“Really? He didn’t even ask?” Darrell said as he sat down on the sleeping bag on his side of the tent.

“Yeah. But he knew I wanted to. We’d talked about it already. And come on—we’d been together for years and years.” Jon looked at Darrell in the light of the little lantern.

“Mm-hmm,” Darrell allowed.

Silence stretched out between them for a moment.

“What are you thinking?” Jon asked.

“Do you have a penny?” Darrell said.

“Uh... in my pack, sure, but I’d have to dig...”

“No, no,” Darrell said. “You can just owe me the twenty-six cents.”

“What are you talking about, Darrell?” Jon asked. “What twenty-six cents?”

“Do you remember how we were in college?” Darrell asked. “Do you remember how we were before I went back to New York?”

“Yes... but why?” Jon said, his forehead creasing in a frown.

“Remember how you offered me a penny for my thoughts back on the trail today?” Darrell continued.

He waited for the memory to rise on Jon’s face. “Um... yeah?”

“Well, this is me acting it out.” Darrell crossed the tent on hands and knees, caught Jon’s face in his hands, and kissed him soundly.

The kiss was everything that he’d been dreaming of but hadn’t been able to have. The last time he’d kissed anyone, it had been Cece, and kissing Jon was nothing like kissing Cece. *Those essential differences...*

He broke the kiss and looked at Jon, suddenly nervous. Jon's eyes had closed during the kiss, and now they fluttered open again, catching Darrell's and not letting go.

"That... *that* was what you were thinking about?"

"Among other things," Darrell admitted. "But you're less than a year out from Edwin dying. I didn't feel right about pushing. And I didn't know if you still wanted me or not, after all this time." He looked suddenly anxious, like Will had just before he proposed to Laurie. "You... you do want me, don't you? Or have I been imagining things?"

Jon took a long moment to respond, giving Darrell's mind plenty of time to gibber *dammit you ruined the friendship and he's the best friend you've ever—*

"No." It was a single word, but it could change everything.

"No... what?" Darrell asked.

"You haven't been imagining things," Jon said. "But if I'm less than a year out from Edwin's death, you're even closer to Cece's. No way was I going to try to compete with her. I was thinking about asking you to go on a real date maybe when we got back home, but this? I never expected this."

"Neither did I," Darrell said. "I just hoped for it."

They reached for each other as Jon clicked off the little lantern.

The third day started out like a celebration. Between Will and Laurie's public commitment and Jon and Darrell's private one, the entire trail seemed easier and the burdens lighter. Jon commented on it as the group began to spread out and find their own paces up the trail. "It's like we're all dancing up the trail this morning, isn't it?"

Darrell couldn't help but agree. Their night together had pushed aside the barriers for him—he still complained, of course, that was part of who he was; but now the complaints were fewer and farther between. Cece's necklace was in his pocket and today he felt stronger and lighter than he had ever felt before.

Maybe because Jon's with me now, he mused.

The two of them were trailing the rest of the group today. Even Charles and Trevor were ahead of them. It didn't matter. The hike would be eight hours, but they were going to take their time. For some reason, it suddenly felt like there

was nothing left to prove. They were here, and they were together; that proved everything.

They were in one of those thirty-yard gaps when Jon stopped them for a minute. “I have to confess something.”

Darrell stopped, concerned. “Confess? What’s going on?”

“I had an ulterior motive bringing you on this trip. I didn’t start out having one, but I didn’t want to go alone, and I’d promised Edwin that I’d find someone to go with me. And you were so broken up over Cece’s death—understandably!—and I just wanted to get your head up into the clouds for a little while. I wanted to prove to both of us that we aren’t dead yet. I miss Edwin terribly, as much as you miss Cece, but I needed you to see that life is worth it—that *you* are worth it.”

Darrell looked at him, and then smiled wryly. “Well, you’ve done it. I believe you. Do you believe that I believe you?”

Jon looked at him carefully, and then nodded. “Yes. I do.”

Darrell leaned forward and kissed Jon. “I’m glad we did this. I can’t imagine doing it with anyone else.”

“Neither can I,” Jon said as they started moving again. “Come on, let’s tackle this.”

The path wasn’t as bad as the day before. They moved at a leisurely pace. No other hikers passed them, but they didn’t overtake their own group, either. They moved as though they were the only two men on the path.

“This reminds me of the Echo Park stairs,” Darrell mused a couple hours later. “All this overgrowth. And look at that—see those ruins? Probably not where we’re going to, but still! You should get some photos of that.”

Jon leaned out from the trail and saw terraced ruins stepping down the side of the mountain. Ant-like figures covered the bottom steps of the ruins, and Jon pointed. “More hikers. Probably a different tour group with a different route.”

“Yeah. Hey, do you want to just stop here for our rest break?” Darrell said.

“Sounds like a plan,” Jon said, already snapping photos of the ruins. They sat and drank from their canteens, but the sun grew warmer and they didn’t stay for long.

A few hours later, they found the camp, where lunch was already in progress. Charles met each of them with a hug and a grin, and they sat down to

a quick meal before the porters shooed them out. “Laurie and Will already headed out. They say the next part is the worst. They call it the Gringo Killer. I think I’m... what did you call it, Trev?” Charles asked.

“You’re fucked,” Trevor responded, and the two men laughed.

“Royally fucked, more like,” Charles responded. “I’ll be lucky if I make it to camp by nightfall.”

“You’ll do fine,” Jon said. “You have until now, right?”

Charles nodded.

“And you have Trevor with you, right?” Darrell pointed out.

Charles nodded again.

“So then you’re fine, right?” Jon said.

“Fine and fucked,” Charles said, and Trevor grinned at him as they headed towards the trail.

“That’s the spirit,” Jon said as he and Darrell headed for the exit of the lunch camp.

Ella and Miche were nowhere to be seen; the only people left of their group were the porters. “We should get going—we are seriously lagging,” Jon said.

“Do you want your sweatshirt? Those clouds are coming in.”

“Nah, it’ll just end up tied around my waist. This is going to be a hell of a hike,” Jon said, looking at the clouds and the arduous path ahead.

“All right,” Darrell said doubtfully, “but I’m going to put on my jacket. I don’t trust those clouds.”

They set out.

The descent got more and more precipitous. The sky grew dark, and the rain came down—but Jon refused to put on a jacket or a sweatshirt. He turned his face up to the rain, tasting it, reveling in it. The steps got taller and narrower, and the wind blew fiercely through the greenery around them, lashing it with ripples of rain.

They stopped once for a quick rest, but the rain propelled them on, until finally they were at it. The Gringo Killer stood before them in all its deadly glory—stone steps descending a steep hillside, with a tilt that felt almost vertical. Their walking sticks were no longer optional; several people slipped

and cursed, and as the rain fell harder, Darrell wondered out loud if it was even safe to be on this stairway.

Jon shrugged. “We still have to get to the other end of it, right? They aren’t going to shut off the rain just to make it easy for us.”

“True,” Darrell said. “Another thing we didn’t plan for.”

The rain pelted them, stinging, no longer refreshing. “It’s like an El Niño storm at home,” Jon shouted back, and Darrell nodded, wiping rain from his face.

*Who ordered this shit anyway? I didn’t sign up for rain, or slippery steps, or this steep pitch that makes me feel like I’m going to fall forward on my—
Jon? JON!*

Jon had taken a bad step, and his pack overbalanced him off the stepped trail and down along the side of the stairway. He screamed as his right hand gripped the stair with all his might, while the momentum carried his pack right off his left arm and jerked his body against the hillside. “Darrell!!” Jon screamed, trying to manage pack and grip and mud, and slipping further, his boot toes pressing into the muddy hillside and not finding purchase.

“JON!” Darrell shouted. In one smooth move he was lying prone on the step that Jon was grabbing and gripping both his friend’s arms above the wrists. “I’ve got you! Hold on!”

The pack swung from Jon’s right arm, pulling his hand out of Darrell’s grip. His rain-slick arms were impossible to grab. “Stop twisting! Hold still!” he barked. “Otherwise I’ll drop you!”

Jon instantly stopped thrashing, and Darrell shouted again. “Grab my arm with your left hand! Do it now, Jon!”

Jon’s hand gripped around his lower arm, around his jacket, which was far less slick than Jon’s bare arm. “Can you brace your feet?”

Jon carefully put his foot forward and found a stone in the hillside. “Ye—yes.” His teeth chattered. “I’ve got my right foot braced on a rock.”

“Okay. Let’s get that pack off your arm so it doesn’t pull you down. I’m going to let go of your right hand and catch the pack. When I do, pull your arm out of the strap, and grab the step with your right hand.”

Darrell slid his arm up Jon’s to the pack strap and grabbed it as Jon pulled his arm out and gripped the step-side in a death grip. Darrell dragged the pack

up and pushed it behind him, not caring if it rolled down the steps. “We’ll get that in a minute, okay?”

Jon nodded, one sharp jerk. His eyes were staring and terrified.

“And don’t panic,” Darrell said. “Climb with your feet. I’m going to pull you up but you have to help me. Ready?”

“Ye-heh-hes,” Jon panted. “Don’t drop me.”

“Never,” Darrell said, pushing his voice to sound much more confident than he felt. “And one, two... now!”

He pulled smoothly and Jon climbed up the side, getting a knee on the step below and rolling over on his back, not caring that the steps bit into his back and neck. His front was covered in mud, but he was alive and safe. Darrell turned to sit on the step with him. “Are you hurt? Anything broken?”

“Only my pride,” Jon said. His chest hitched with what might have been laughter or—possibly—tears. “God, Dare, if you hadn’t been there, I might have...” He closed his eyes against the words. “You saved my life.”

“You’d have done the same for me,” Darrell said. “I’m just glad you’re okay. *Are you okay?*”

“Yeah, I am, I am.” Jon sat up and brushed muddy dirt from his jacket and his knees. “Just shaken. I guess we get to follow my pack down the stairs. Did you see my walking sticks anywhere?”

One of them was lying on the steps a few yards away, just below where Jon’s pack had finally rolled to a stop. The other one was nowhere to be seen.

“You can use one of mine,” Darrell said. “Don’t argue with me. You will need it more than I will after that tumble.”

Jon didn’t argue.

“You sit here for a minute. I’ll go get your pack and that stick.” Darrell moved down the steps as Jon sat, getting his breath back. Something glittered in the splatter of mud on the step he was sitting on. Jon picked it up. It was Cece’s necklace, the one that Darrell had given her after one of her operatic triumphs. She had worn it several times at dinners he and Edwin had attended at Darrell and Cece’s house, and he knew the story of it well enough that he could tell it by heart, because Cece told it at every single dinner.

He slipped the necklace into his pocket. *I’ll give it to him when we get to camp. No point in worrying about it right now,* he thought.

Darrell came back up the steps with his pack and the one stick he'd managed to save. "Here. Put this on, and then take this and one of mine. They're up on the step above you."

Jon got the pack on, and then stood with Darrell's help. He was careful to stay far away from the edge of the steps as they made their way down the rest of the Gringo Killer. At the end of that long, treacherous stairway they found camp set up, and dinner being prepared.

He didn't talk much that night. He was just glad to be alive.

On the final morning, the porters woke them up early. "Sun Gate, *señores!* Sun Gate, *señoritas,*" they called as they walked through the camp. "*El desayuno después de la salida del sol!*"

Darrell sat up and rubbed sleep from his eyes. The dome tent over their heads was still dark, as was the interior. "I forgot this was a three a.m. wake-up call. What did they say?"

"Breakfast will be after sunrise. Come on," Jon said, sitting up stiffly. "We don't want to miss this, do we?"

Darrell's answer was a quick kiss before he got up and hurried into his hiking clothes for the last day. Jon was slower, but eventually both of them were following the group out of the tent and up the last hillside towards the Sun Gate.

"It's been amazing," Darrell said as he walked with Jon. "I found so much here I didn't know I needed."

"The exercise?" Jon teased. "The early mornings and the interesting food?"

"You," Darrell said. "I just wish we hadn't had to come so far to do it. The Palisades would have been more than enough."

"I found something, too. Besides you, I mean. I figured you might want to have it back," Jon said, and held out Cece's necklace.

Darrell's hand went involuntarily to his pocket. "Where did you—I didn't even know I'd lost this!" He took it and looked at it. "It's muddy. Did you see me drop it?"

"No," Jon said. "But I found it on the step back where you saved my life."

Darrell looked at the necklace, and then put it in his pocket again. "If I had lost it to save you, it would have been worth it."

They clasped hands for a heartbeat before pushing ahead to catch up with their group.

“Didn’t we have a bet, once upon a time?” Jon asked as they got close to their group, who were crowding around the Sun Gate and waiting for the sun to rise over it.

“We did. But I think we’ll have to call it off,” Darrell said.

“Oh? Why?” Jon asked. He gripped his one walking stick tighter as they climbed the final steps toward the great stone pillars at the top, where the sun was just peeping through.

“Because I don’t want to hear you rubbing it in how you got to the Sun Gate first,” Darrell said. “We got here together, and that’s how it should be.”

Jon looked at Darrell and then kissed him, not caring who saw. The group behind them cheered and clapped, and the sunlight bathed them all in the first rays of morning.

The End

Author Bio

Caraway Carter has worn numerous hats. He's been a furniture salesman, a dresser, a costumer, an actor/waiter, a rabble-rouser, a poet and most recently a writer. He married his husband on Halloween and they are the loving parents of two rambunctious cats. He loves words and stringing them together, he loves sex and sexy men, he loves seeing how far his muse will take him and he's looking forward to entertaining you.

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