

Prologue

The Spanish Invasion of the Yucatan began in the 1520's but was not successful for many years. The invaders lost their enthusiasm after finding little of what they valued and encountering fierce resistance from the Mayan population. It was not until the 1600's that a combination of assimilation and coercion allowed the Spanish to overrun the last of the Mayan strongholds.

However, not every Mayan group was subdued. One group escaped to live traditional lives in inhospitable jungles and were rarely visited by others until the 20th Century. The escapees were the KulWinik. They had not been a distinct Mayan grouping before the Spanish Conquest but had formed from disparate people that came together as they fled, over a hundred years, the advancing influence of the Spanish. Their cohesion was due to the determination of their leader, the t'ó'ohil, and his family. He kept alive the stories of the Mayan ancestors. He performed the religious ceremonies and rites and he led their prayers to the pantheon of Mayan gods. But not all gods were revered equally, above all others the KulWinik venerated the god who had created the Mayan people and the place where they lived. That god's name was Hachakyum.

The violent resistance of the Mayans ended in the late 1600's with the burning of their last library of books, called codices, in the final major Mayan city to fall to Spanish assault. The t'ó'ohil of the KulWinik fought the Spanish as they attacked that last Mayan holdout, as his ancestors had fought the Spanish since their first arrival. He had remained undaunted by the Mayan's systematic losses, over many generations, until that wilful burning of the last repository of Mayan knowledge broke his spirit of resistance.

He took his family, and the mixture of people from different Mayan groups, south from the Yucatan and into the inhospitable jungles of the Southern Highlands of modern Mexico. The t'ó'ohil had not randomly chosen his place of escape. He returned to where his ancestors had lived, more than a thousand years before.

The KulWinik people's escape was successful and they were forgotten. Unfortunately, over a few hundred years, they forgot all but the basic Mayan rituals and worship. They forgot how to read the ancient writing. They barely remembered the Mayan creation stories that were written in the movement of the Milky Way and the stars.

However, the t'ó'ohil's did not forget everything. The secret stories of Hachakyum's life among the Mayans were remembered as they were passed down from one t'ó'ohil to the next. Those tales had a purpose. Hachakyum had foretold that he would return to the Mayans, at the end of the world.

Part I

Chapter 1

'You're going to New York?' Hamish asked.

He looked up from reading the newspaper, while seated at the kitchen table, and asked the same question again, as if he had not heard or not believed what Kate had said.

'New York?' he repeated incredulously. His New Zealand accent remained strong and broad despite living the majority of his life in the USA. He watched her over the top of his reading glasses, his eyes tight and critical.

Kate stood nearby but did not look at him. She knew how his face would have been transformed by the tone of his question. There was little that was new after forty years together. She held her head high with her body at right angles to the kitchen table that she lightly touched with her hip, as if she intended to rest against it. She swayed away slightly and then re-touched the table's edge as if she was unsure of it's strength. Hamish watched the gentle dance of her hip as it repeatedly touched the table's edge and withdrew.

'Yes,' Kate said forcefully, without looking at her husband.

'Why?' he asked.

'I want to see her.'

Kate's mother lived in New York.

'No you don't. You can't stand her.'

'Hamish!'

'Well, it's true. You see my family in New Zealand more often than you see her and she's just in New York. You can drive there,' he said.

'Yes. Thank you,' she said angrily. 'I know that, Hamish.' She emphasised each word, saying his name like it was an insult. Her voice changed. She was exasperated. 'It shouldn't bother you. It won't change anything you're doing if I'm here or not.'

Kate moved, just her head, to stare at him.

'No, it won't,' he said. 'I'm just interested in why the change of heart. Why now?'

She waited as if she was flicking through a range of possible answers before she chose one.

Her eyes were dark.

'We're all getting old.'

Kate looked away. Her hip resumed its nervous bounce against the table's edge. She was determined that approval was irrelevant.

Hamish looked away from Kate's hip. He still found it attractive, and arousing, although it was twenty years too old to be sexually exciting in its own right.

Hamish was happy with his life, he was unprepared for the sadness he was about to suffer. He had recently retired from full-time work as an academic geologist. He dabbled, although he hated that word as a description of activity, in consultancy, offering his advice and services to Universities and private companies. He was not upset if his expertise was unused for extended periods of time.

He and Kate had settled in Boston, for the second time, not far from their son and his family. That second Boston home contained the kitchen table against which Kate's hip hesitantly bounced.

She stopped the nervous movement of her hip. She turned her head and stared at Hamish as if to confirm a decision she had already made.

'I'm driving down today and I'll be staying. For a few days. At least.' She sounded angry as if allowing her to leave was his fault.

After decades together a few days or a few weeks apart from Kate did not upset Hamish. Of course, that was when he thought she would return.

Kate didn't come back from New York.

Chapter 2

The telephone rang while Kate was busy packing and Hamish was in his study. He waited for her to answer it but she called his name angrily as the telephone continued to ring.

Hamish reluctantly answered the telephone. The call was for him and the reception was bad. The sound crackled like broken, sparking wires and the sound of a voice drifted like it was riding ocean waves up and down. Hamish eventually recognised the voice of a friend.

Arthur Dawkins was an American archaeologist at the Museum in Mexico City. Hamish had first met Arthur when they worked at the same U.S. University. Arthur had returned from Southern Mexico to publish the definitive anthropological text on the KulWinik. He had lived with the Mayans, adopted their customs, learnt their language, worked their gardens and shared their ceremonies and religious rites. But Arthur had abruptly changed

careers from anthropology to archaeology. He abandoned the research that had made him famous. Hamish never understood why his friend had done that.

Hamish learned, after asking Arthur to repeat himself a number of times, that he was being invited to join an archaeological team, the next year, in Southern Mexico. It was to do more research on the Kulwinik.

Hamish thought he heard more in Arthur's voice, through the crackles in the telephone connection, like he was pleading for Hamish to come.

'You don't need me anyway,' Hamish said, honestly to his friend. 'It's pretty much all limestone. That's basically what's down there.'

'True,' Arthur replied. 'But we'll need you to do a little mapping in the exact area. It shouldn't take too long.'

'I could go down now if you like? I'm not that busy and Kate's going to New York. You don't have to wait until next year. If that's easier for you,' Hamish said.

'Kate's going to New York? Really?' Arthur said and then added something Hamish could not hear through the noisy telephone connection.

'Why is the line so bad, Arthur? Why don't you call me back.' Hamish hung up the telephone. He thought he heard the sound of the front door closing and was sure it had been the door when he heard Kate's car start. Hamish wondered why she had not waited to say goodbye. He did not know how he had upset her.

The telephone rang again. The line from Mexico City was not much better.

'Anyway, Hamish,' Arthur continued. 'No, you can't go down there now.' Arthur's voice stopped and the line crackled it's noisy silence. Hamish wondered if the line had dropped out. He did not understand why he could call New Zealand, the other side of the world, and talk to his relatives like they were on an extension in another room of his house but to call Mexico City sounded like he was calling someone from thirty years ago.

'I don't know where,' Arthur's indistinct voice continued. 'Exactly where we'll end up.' Arthur hesitated. 'Actually.' He sounded nervous.

Hamish did not reply.

'There's something the KulWinik want me to look at,' Arthur said, speaking quickly as if he was embarrassed.

'Is it that definite, is it?' Hamish said. He added extra irony to his voice over the top of the line noise.

Hamish heard Arthur laugh. It sounded thin, raspy and distant. 'They've been asking for quite some time. I've avoided commitment for years.'

'It must be hard to get funding to send a team to work on something a few villagers want to show you.' Hamish laughed at Arthur.

'That's why I've done nothing. I've been polite and not refused outright. However, a few months ago Yax K'in, the t'o'ohil, came all the way to Mexico City. He lobbed outside my office. The leader of the KulWinik never leaves the village. Not that far, at least. It is really important that I come, and come soon.'

'So, does that mean I won't get paid? Is this one for friendship?' Hamish asked, adding exaggerated resignation to his voice. He knew Arthur's passion for the KulWinik and would not expect payment if his friend wanted help.

Arthur laughed. 'No. You'll get paid. There's an interesting site near the village and I've based funding on that. Next year has freed up for a few people, so I can get a small team together. Although it could be problematic if we have to wander all over the countryside. Can you come? Please?'

Hamish asked for the dates. He said he'd get back to Arthur and confirm but told him he would come.

'Michelle's coming,' Arthur added, as if he had just remembered an interesting, but largely irrelevant, conversation item. 'She thinks it might be fun. Going back to the village for awhile.'

Michelle Bayles was an epigrapher, well known for her research in decoding ancient Mayan glyphs. Hamish did not understand why a busy and important person like her would come on the small expedition Arthur suggested. However, Hamish thought, Arthur had started her career. But, on the other hand, a relationship that looked permanent had ended disastrously ten years before.

The telephone receiver fizzed and Hamish understood that Arthur was talking again.

'It would be best if you had a knowledge of the KulWinik. And the Mayan stories. And their language. I'll send you some books,' Arthur said quickly.

'Why? What are you not telling me?' Hamish was worried about Arthur's enthusiasm for the KulWinik. Hamish did not want to be stuck in a Southern Mexican jungle village.

Arthur ignored Hamish's question. 'Do you think you could bring your twin grandsons with you? It would be a great learning experience. To spend time living in a Mayan village. I know the KulWinik would appreciate it,' Arthur said.

'I don't believe you. Do you want to pay me to come on a holiday with you?' Hamish laughed. 'A KulWinik village is the last place I'd go. I couldn't take Kate. She would hate it.'

'Actually,' Arthur hesitated then tried to command his friend. 'The twins have to come. Yax K'in has insisted on it. He wants them with us.'

'How does he know about me? I've never met him.'

'He was fascinated by that picture I took of you and Jim and Harry after I left Michelle. Do you remember?'

Hamish said that he did.

'You've got to come Hamish. Please?' Arthur resorted to pleading. 'Strange as it may sound, this expedition depends on you and the twins. Somehow. Whatever the case, Michelle has already agreed and has set aside the time. I don't want to disappoint her,' Arthur said.

Hamish listened to the white noise as it twisted and whistled on the telephone line. He thought he heard Arthur say, 'Not again.'

Chapter 3

Arthur's books on the Maya arrived. Hamish turned the package over and back again when it was delivered in to his hands. Arthur was too keen, Hamish worried, as he stared at the expensive, express air freight packaging.

Hamish had not heard from Kate, although it had been a few days since she had left for New York. He didn't call. He knew he would aggravate her annoyance if he hounded her by asking what was wrong.

Hamish began reading the books he had been sent. The first one he chose was a history of the Mayan civilisation and how it flourished in the first millennium A.D. but arose out of older civilisations, thousands of years earlier. The Mayan cities were inexplicably abandoned around the end of the first millennium. Hamish read how the Spanish Invasion, begun in the sixteenth century, destroyed most of the native culture but how the KulWinik, who lived in an inhospitable location in the mountains and rain forests of Southern Mexico remained relatively undisturbed until modern times. Missionaries and anthropologists, in their misguided zeal, had almost destroyed the KulWinik and their way of life, nearly losing the last unblemished culture of the ancient Mayans.

Hamish read some of Arthur's critiques of the modern KulWinik. How they had survived the Western onslaught but were losing the longer term battle to survive as the younger ones left to find work away from the village. Only a few kept to the old rituals and customs, so their ancient way of life was in danger of being forgotten and the loss of their

rain-forest, to the illegal harvesting of mahogany, made their economic future uncertain as well.

Hamish read of confrontations with government officials and logging companies. Arthur included dramatic, dangerous images, from more than ten years ago, of Arthur and Michelle in their efforts to stop forestry machinery in the KulWinik jungle. There was an old National Geographic cover of a fierce looking Michelle, dressed as a traditional KulWinik. She was grubby and determined, defiantly standing in the jungle as if ready to do battle like she was an ancient warrior.

In other books Hamish read that the Mayans believed the world had been created and destroyed many times. Each time the gods had been dissatisfied with their handiwork and had started again. Twins were fundamental in the Mayan creation myths. Hamish thought that must be why the KulWinik wanted his twin grandsons to visit their village. It would be a great opportunity, Hamish agreed as he looked away from the book, for teenagers to live a village life. There would be few chances left, anywhere in the world, in the years to come. However, convincing his son and two teenage boys, who had opposite expectations to their father, that it could be both fun and not dangerous would be difficult. Hamish did not know how he would convince Kate.

Hamish read of the Hero Twins, the grandsons of Hachakyum and a human woman. The Twins outwitted and defeated the Lords of Xibalba (the home of the gods and Mayan ancestors). The gods were severely embarrassed by their defeat at the hands of part-humans and were imprisoned when the Twins caused the destruction of the world. It was

a catastrophic end as the old world was destroyed and that world's inhabitants erased and a new world begun.

Mayan astronomy was extraordinarily complex. Their creation myths were re-enacted in the rotation of the Milky Way. Hamish read that the defeat of the gods, the revenge of Hachakyum for the death of his son and his wife was re-enacted as the night sky rotated and the year progressed. Michelle had recently made most of those amazing discoveries. He read with surprise that the ancient Mayans could reconstruct the night sky back to the beginning of the Mayan counting of time in 3114BC.

However, the books on ancient Mayan glyphic writing were his favourites. He stared at the images of the glyphs like they were works of art, quite apart from their sound when spoken and their meaning. Their compounded construction was complex and Hamish tried to imagine writing a sentence but knew he would not have the skill and patience required to do so.

He understood why Michelle loved her work and, for the first time, Hamish realised how much she had loved Arthur. She had given up her life's work to live with him in the KulWinik village, to help him fight the loss of their culture, to fight the bureaucrats and to stop the plundering of their rainforest. Then Arthur had inexplicably left her there.

Hamish also wondered how the KulWinik could lose the art of something so beautiful and vital.
