



No Harm Intended **By Michael J. McLaughlin**

Book Excerpts

PART 1

“The Earth teeters on life support, HEMORRHAGING resources, CHOKING on mankind’s putrid waste, as her self-proclaimed supporters smother her with good intentions. Peaceful activism is EXTINCT. Those choosing not to stand with The Green Wrath will fall as enemies. How inconvenient is that truth, sunshine?”

- Scorched remnant, Defenders of the Dawn manifesto

1. Whit Newsome

Day 1, Esmeralda Tour Boat, Marañón River, Peru

Out where the river met the horizon, shadowy forms slithered through the crimson glow of a dying sunset. Whit squinted through the lingering burn of sweat, sunscreen, and bug spray, unable to make out what was approaching.

The beast of a river looked tranquil, but nothing in the Amazon was as it seemed. Prowling predators. Poisonous plants. Even the damn insects had names like bullet ant and assassin bug. At least the tour boat crew and passengers seemed benign, and the week would include an excursion to a local village. How scary could that be?

Whit and his girlfriend, Meadow, were seated at the upper deck bar of the Esmeralda, more of a houseboat on steroids than anything he'd call a cruise ship. Grey Goose and tonics were calling, but the cocktail menu was full of tropical drinks with cute names.

He dabbed his forehead with a cocktail napkin. "Odds we get our air conditioning fixed? Sweating isn't vacation."

Meadow sipped ice water through the metal straw she promoted as an ecofriendly brand influencer. "I'm sure Lidia can help with that."

"Really?" Whit waved the menu at the bartender and tapped a picture of a Passion Pisco. "All that tour guide does is count us all day, like she expects us to fly overboard any second. Hey...let's start a pool on who takes the first plunge. My money's on the policewoman's kids."

As Meadow giggled, a few strands of blonde hair swung down and clung to her forehead. "Lidia's on top of things, even though she's obviously new to the job." She glanced out at the river, maybe noticing those dark objects slicing closer along the surface. "Doesn't the Upper East Side feel light years away?"

"True. No bagels." He reached over and gave her hand a quick squeeze. "Actually, I'm glad one of us knows what I need. What a place for an escape. Not that med school was a grind." Far from it, at least the way he'd done it.

"C's get degrees." She chimed in with his mantra.

"Of course, my parents will still be there when we get back. *Helping.*" He sipped his Passion Pisco as soon as it arrived. Man, that thing was good. "They'll never get it. Like I'd ever follow the Newsome men's footsteps through blood and guts. As soon as this graduation trip's over, I'm calling Dad's beloved NYU to say thanks but no thanks for that pity internship he arranged. I'll reapply for a radiology residency spot next year. Second time's a charm, right?"

Not far enough away, the high schoolers were playing Australian-rules beer pong again. Their cheering was louder, and their throws were worse, suggesting the "water" in the cups

was eighty proof. Their botany teacher chaperone would be pissed when he came up and snagged them.

Lidia approached in a multicolored blouse that looked like a Picasso acid trip. The fifty-something tour guide didn't seem rainforest-ready in that bright outfit. She pointed at Meadow, then Whit, while mumbling to herself. Head counting again, no doubt.

"Lidia, do you usually see the pink dolphins on this cruise?" Meadow exuded enthusiasm. No wonder she had millions of followers on social media. She was a born influencer.

The question seemed to disrupt Lidia's count. She tucked her salt-and-pepper hair behind her ears, leaving the gemstones of her corner store sunglasses on full display. "Oh, yes. Delfines rosados. That's Spanish for pink dolphins. We also call them bufeos."

Meadow shot Whit an I-told-you-so smirk. Fine, he'd add that to his growing list of *100 Things to Learn about the Amazon before You Die There*.

He stood and spoke in a stage whisper. "Lidia, listen, between us, are they *real* dolphins?"

"Don't be a wise ass." Meadow swung a playful backhand across her boyfriend's chest.

"What?" He acted offended. "I've never heard of dolphins in a freshwater river, that's all."

Meadow clicked her tongue. "They *are* dolphins. I already posted a video about them, plus they were in the travel brochure. Remember?"

"Hmm. I remember the Aruba brochure." He longed for a resort on a white sand beach.

"My boyfriend hates nature." A patented eye roll followed.

"Nature's okay. But I do hate mosquitos. Oh, and stifling humidity and murky water. But I love you, and this place is eco-influencer paradise. I'll warm up to it." He smiled. "Literally."

Bottles on the bar refracted daggers of sunset at Whit's face as he watched the river shadows turn into boats. *Why so many?*

"Now you're insulting her river, Whit." Meadow shook her head like a reprimanding mom.

"*Her* river?" He turned to Lidia. "Do you really own the Amazon?"

Lidia went into tour guide autopilot. "This river is the Marañón, one of the two large tributaries that form the Amazon. The other is the Ucayali. I don't own them. But maybe if I save enough money..." What sounded like the beginning of a joke cratered. Something about money?

"You're a human Wikipedia, Lidia." Whit tossed his hair back. "Can you help with a couple things? The air conditioning in our stateroom is fried. And the jets on the jacuzzi are lame."

“First world problems, right?” Meadow apologetically rocked her head from side to side.

Lidia looked like she didn’t know what that meant. “Yes. Right. I will let the crew know.”

She offered a polite smile before restarting her headcount.

Something banged alongside the *Esmeralda*, kind of like when the crew had prepped the tenders for today’s excursion. Men’s voices sounded. Footsteps clanged along the gangway below.

The captain made an announcement over the muffled intercom system as the Aussie students started pointing toward the staircase. Meadow stood while staring in the same direction.

“Look, Whit. They’re going to perform.” She pulled out her phone.

Whit turned to see bare-chested men with spears, machetes, and clubs crossing the deck.

They kept coming up the stairs – fifteen, no, at least twenty of them. From the waist up, they were straight out of Meadow’s travel brochures, with war paint, feathered headdresses, shell necklaces, and whatnot. But those beat-up jeans and sneakers cost them style points, and nobody was smiling. Instead of performing, they stationed themselves along the perimeter of the deck.

The young doctor shook his head. “I’m not sure they’re—”

Lidia gasped. Whatever the hell was going on wasn’t on her agenda.

The shirtless men blocked the staircase and corralled the passengers and crew. They coordinated efforts and yelled at the stunned passengers in Spanish. Whit caught the word *silencio* loud and clear a few times, but that was about it. By the looks of the other passengers, they didn’t understand much more than he did. Confusion gave way to panic as the circle of weapons tightened, herding them toward the center of the deck.

A man with graying temples seemed to be leading the attack. He pointed to the bridge and commanded his men in a language that didn’t sound like Spanish. Seconds later, they intercepted the captain’s mayday call and dragged him out on deck.

This wasn’t another performance. It was a goddamn attack.

The first mate grabbed a decorative oar from the lounge and slammed an attacker across his ribcage, doubling him over. A quick elbow to the neck drove the guy to his knees. The first mate raised the oar, ready to deliver a gruesome blow, but the shirtless men overtook him.

Whit wrapped an arm around Meadow and pulled her from the fray. She looked stunned. He scanned the deck for a plan. No chance of reaching the stairs. He tucked her behind the bar.

A high schooler charged an attacker, but the tail end of a spear struck the boy's shoulder, sending him sprawling. He whacked a wooden support post, head-first, and dropped to the deck.

For a second, everyone seemed to wait for a signal. The passengers looked terrified, but a few nodded like *if you're in, I'm in*. The newcomers appeared to be calculating their next move.

They must have been there to rob the passengers or...what?

A muscular attacker no older than twenty approached the bar, spear first. The weapon was a single piece of wood, hand-carved from butt to blade, and sharp enough to do some damage.

Whit stepped between Muscles and Meadow, gulping down hard. "Get the hell away from her." His voice squeaked, so he gritted his teeth to compensate.

The young man raised his spear and said something in Spanish that sounded fierce. So much for talking this out. Whit hadn't gotten into a fight since his prep school days, but he could throw a punch.

Meadow must have read Whit's mind, because she grabbed his arm to hold him back. He shook her loose, eyes fixed on his new enemy.

Whit charged and landed a punch to the guy's jaw, jolting him backwards. A haymaker or an uppercut should have followed, but Whit's entire hand was throbbing.

Other passengers charged the attackers, but the element of surprise was brief. A spear tore into a passenger's leg, leaving him screaming in horror while trying to dam the bleeding with both hands. The rest of the tourists backed off and raised their hands in surrender.

Feet skidding on the bloody deck, fists raised and trembling, Whit braced for an attack.

The shirtless men jumped him as Muscles stalked forward. The guy's cheek was already swollen. His arms tensed, poised to drive the raised spear through anything in its path.

Meadow shrieked in a full panic.

The blade was coming straight at Whit's face.

2. Dee Stone

Day 1, Esmeralda Tour Boat, Marañón River

Where the hell were her kids?

Dropping to all fours on the polished wood floor of her stateroom, Dee checked beneath the bed. Nope. Not there either, which meant they'd snuck out while she was in the bathroom. Again. The Esmeralda was small, but hiding was their superpower. Time for Officer Stone to investigate the whereabouts of her eight-year-old son and six-year-old daughter.

The coiled anaconda towel animal guarded the bed as she stood. Half the room was an arched row of large windows intended to make passengers feel like part of the environment, though Dee felt more like a frog in a terrarium. The last crimson stripe of sunset clung to the Marañón River, which kept widening as they approached the Amazon. It had to be half a mile across. So much water. Lots of other places would have been better to avoid stress while waiting out the department's decision. But Leo loved sloths, Maya loved monkeys, and Dee was desperate to act like a mom again after weeks of hearings and interrogations. So, there they were.

The hide-and-seek pursuit started along the middle deck hallway. The tour boat was, what, maybe fourteen staterooms on the bottom two decks? About twenty passengers. There was also a dining room toward the back – or aft or stern or whatever – of the middle deck. The bar, lounge, and sun terrace were on the open upper deck. She still had no idea where the crew slept.

Though only her daughter would hear, Dee called out both names. “Maya! Leo!”

They probably weren't down on the lower deck. Maybe the dining room up ahead?

Damn, her butt was sore. The seat on the excursion boat had been uncomfortable today, but the spider monkeys were incredible. The crew had a sixth sense for spotting creatures in the trees – unusual movements, shifting shadows – a lot like Dee's cop instincts on the streets. Hell, if you believed all those Internal Affairs investigators, her reaction time back in Chicago was *too* fast. Not so much out here. Street smarts were useless in the jungle. And forget about the water.

She kept trying to forget about the water.

The captain made an announcement over the intercom, but as usual, Dee could barely make out the words. Maybe the boat was setting out.

As she turned the corner to the dining room, footsteps marched along the entrance ramp below. A group of unfamiliar men were boarding. They were shirtless with painted designs on their chests and...shit, that looked like a spear.

The next breath caught in her throat. Her hand automatically reached for her hip, but there was no gun there. Her chief had made sure to take that away.

Okay. Game over. Where were her kids?

Dee wedged behind the dining room door as the men climbed the stairs. Yeah, that was a freaking *spear*. And machetes. And clubs. Most of the men wore colorful headbands with bird feathers and long shell necklaces that crisscrossed down to their waists. And...jeans and sneakers. What the hell?

This game of hide-and-seek had just gotten way less fun.

The rest of the Peruvian tour had been one performance after another. But this felt different. Their expressions were tense. Those weapons were poised to strike.

There were Dee's kids, *finally*, seated on the floor in the far corner of the dining room with a platter of passion fruit. They wore dueling Chicago baseball shirts – Cubs for Leo, White Sox for Maya. Leo was clean, as always, spooning fruit for his younger sister. Still wearing her kiddie backpack, Maya stared up as juice dripped down her face.

Dee shushed them and signed: *get to our room, wait for me*. Before Maya could ask why, Dee added, *Emergency. Do it. Now*. She checked up and down the stairway. A guy with a machete stood guard at the entrance ramp below, his back to the boat.

After shuffling the kids down the hall to their stateroom, Dee doubled back alone to figure out what was going on. She crept up the stairs until her eyes were even with the floor of the upper deck. The assailants looked hesitant, but they were armed, big time. They already controlled the perimeter around the passengers and crew, who exchanged panicked glances.

Her mind raced for an explanation that wasn't terrifying, but there wasn't one. At best, the strangers were there to rob them all. There were more than enough rich tourists on board. But nobody traveled with cash or valuables these days. At worst...her cop imagination ran wild.

The young doctor she'd met at dinner yesterday was quick to react. He surged forward, sucker-punching one of the armed men. His fist connected, but it looked like he'd learned to fight at golf camp. Another passenger got speared in the leg. Blood was everywhere. The rest of the passengers swung their hands up to surrender.

Dee ducked low, her heart jackhammering in her chest. She wanted to rush in, but the assailants had the numbers and the weapons. Her kids were the priority. Anyone using those weapons would have no qualms about slaughtering women and children.

She tip-toed down the stairs, then back through the hallway to their room. As Maya swung the door open, Dee ducked inside. Hopefully unseen.

The lights went out. The air conditioning stopped blowing. They must have cut the power. This was no hit and run. These guys were here for the boat or...them. What now?

Maya clung to her, whimpering while fighting back tears. "What's happening?"

No need to sugar coat this. Whispering, Dee signed to them. "Scary men. We need to run."

Leo signed. *Why are they after us?*

I don't know.

The ten-yard distance to the jungle felt like a mile.

A fist pounded the door.

The window was their only chance to escape. Dee grabbed a desk chair, leaned back, and slammed the glass. She braced herself for the shatter, but it was the chair that broke on impact, its snapped leg dangling as vibrating pain surged through her arms.

Crack! They were breaking in. *Crack!* Maya shot out a piercing scream.

It wouldn't take long for them to break through that flimsy door.

Leo lunged toward the window and ran a hand along the bottom. There must have been a latch, because the window sprung open. The river outside was about fifteen feet down, and the shore was too far to reach by jumping. A rope drew a taut line from a metal post on the shore to the lower deck, way too far down to reach.

"I can jump...in the water...Mommy," Maya said between snuffles.

Dee leaned out, assessing the catwalk outside the rooms below. So narrow. A tricky shot. Divebombing that wooden railing would hurt worse than hitting the water wrong. "I'll hold your hands to lower you. Kick out hard past the walkway down there. Then swim like hell. Got it?"

Maya bit her lower lip and nodded. "I can do it." She ran to the chair and tucked her stuffed animal, Marvin the Monkey, into her backpack.

Dee signed to Leo. *It's all or none. If she jumps, will you jump?*

His response was a barely convincing nod.

The door yielded to a series of blows, splintering down the center.

Dee opened and closed her fists, trying to stop her hands from trembling. They really had to do this. Nobody was coming to save them. She grabbed Maya around the waist and guided her over the windowsill. Then the tiny girl pivoted as her mother grabbed her hands, which were sticky from the passion fruit. Soon she was hanging from Dee's grasp.

Dee locked eyes with her. "I'll swing you. Let go when I count to three."

Her daughter glanced down. "Uh-huh."

"Okay. One." Dee barely got her swinging. "Two." A little more arc that time, but probably not enough. "Three." Her breath caught in her throat as Maya left her hands.

The girl swung out past the railing and slapped against the water at an odd angle. She reemerged with a sloppy head shake and gasp, then doggie paddled toward the shore.

The repeated assault on the stateroom door grew more violent.

Dee turned to her older child and signed. *Your turn, Leo.*

He started climbing past the windowsill but froze at the sight of the drop. Staring back at her, he shook his head.

You got this. Out of the corner of her eye, Dee saw Maya reach the shore.

Leo climbed out like his sister had done and grabbed his mother's hands. He was heavier, and her palms were sweating. Dee felt him starting to slip away but squeezed tighter.

He looked up, waiting for her signal.

Another slam from the other side of the door cracked the frame.

"One." She tried to swing him, but he barely moved. On the count of "two," he lifted his feet and kicked against the window below. He swung even farther on "three."

They let go. After a free-fall somersault, Leo belly-flopped with a slap. Was he hurt? The thought sickened her.

It took a few seconds for him to pop up from the water. He raised an okay sign before swimming toward his sister.

Looking down at the muddy water sent a stream of acid up into Dee's throat. The kids had made it okay, but she needed another way down. The catwalk was such a narrow target, with no margin for error. But at least if she landed wrong there, she wouldn't have to deal with the water.

Clinging to the sill, she climbed out and pivoted to face the side of the boat.

The stateroom door broke wide open. Men charged at the window.

Dee dropped toward the catwalk below. She was about to hit the railing!

Her hip grazed the metal, but she somehow landed on the catwalk, feet-first. She tumbled onto the deck, shaken but uninjured.

Above her, an assailant leaned out her window, spear first.

She straddled the railing and lunged for the rope leading to shore. Her aim was perfect, but her hands burned as they stuttered to a stop along the frayed surface. She was beyond a spear's reach, but how far could they throw those things?

Keep moving!

She clutched the rope with both hands, dangling with her feet just above the water. One hand at a time, sometimes grasping, sometimes sliding, she worked her way to shore. Her palms stung. Her arms ached. But desperation to reach her kids drove her forward.

The travel agent had reassured her this river was perfectly safe! A great place to bring her children, for Chrissakes!

The man above called from the window to his accomplices at the boat entrance as Dee released the rope, grabbed her kids, and looked for the best direction to run. There was no obvious clearing or trail along the bank, just the dense, entangled growth. The glow of a sunken sunset lingered on the water, but the jungle just beyond the shoreline already looked dark as hell.

Dee kicked at the brush, trying to force open an escape passage, but none appeared. She leaned into a diving position, breaking branches that clawed her arms, until she managed to wedge open a gap in the jungle. Her kids clung to her hips, heads ducked to follow her frantic charge.

Finally, the jungle relented. Together, they pushed through the brush into the darkness.

3. Dee

Day 1, Amazon Rainforest

The plants closed in on Dee and her kids from every angle as they fled. It was still dusk out on the river a few minutes ago, but night was already devouring the dense jungle. She could barely see where her feet were landing. Sometimes she felt solid ground, other times water. She stumbled every few steps as unseen leaves and twisted vines slapped her face.

They'd outrun the racket from the Esmeralda, but the men were still pursuing them. Dee tried not to imagine what was happening back on that boat, whether the assailants who'd stormed on board were robbing the tourists, taking hostages, or slaughtering everyone. Her first instinct had been to jump into the mix and try to get the situation under control, but she didn't have her department issued handgun, or backup, and she wasn't used to having her kids with her at work.

She had to keep Leo and Maya safe. That's all there was to it.

The last thing Dee needed was more blood on her hands. She shuddered at the thought, trying to suppress the memories that invaded her head. The gun muzzle flash. The sirens.

Not again. Please, not again.

Their initial lead on the pursuers dwindled with every zigzag. Dee had lost track of direction, but those bastards were still on her trail. In police academy training, she'd run the hundred in just over 14 seconds – faster than most of the men – but here it took three or four times as long to cover that distance. She felt like a pinball trying to get through.

She heard them calling. What distance did voices travel through all these trees? Not far.

The humidity was like a steam bath, drenching Dee in sweat as she ran. She trampled short stems and thrust aside football-sized leaves as she blasted through, creating an easier passage for the kids but also a map of their escape route.

Maya and Leo were doing their best to dodge the endless obstacles, but their legs were giving out. They were dragging farther behind by the second. As Dee turned to check on them, Maya tripped and face-planted with a grunt.

Still holding his sister's hand, Leo nearly toppled onto her as she went down. In the darkness, Dee heard him breathing hard. She especially had to keep track of him. If he got lost out there, unable to hear them...

Maya untangled herself from a mesh of weeds and stood. "My legs hurt." Whistling sniffs were a tell-tale sign she was fighting tears. "What will they do when they catch us?"

That's what Dee had been asking herself, but she wasn't about to tell the kids that.

She crouched, brushing dirt and strands of hair from Maya's face while checking for blood. Feeling no tackiness on her fingertips, she held her daughter's shoulders and whispered, "Nobody's gonna catch us." She gave a little shake. "Got it? You can run more. You have to."

Leo tapped Dee's arm.

Though wanting to know what her son needed, Dee worried that any light in the pitch-black jungle might be a beacon to attract the assailants or any four-legged predators nearby. She turned on her cellphone flashlight, shielding it with trembling hands to narrow its beam.

They took turns shining the light on each other as they signed.

Leo looked up. *Who are they?*

I think they live in the jungle. She listened for the assailants through the buzzing of insects. *This may be their land.*

His eyes widened. *Then they'll be able to catch us.*

Wings flapped high above them as branches cascaded to the ground nearby. Attacks were coming from everywhere. She suspected *bat* but whispered "bird" for Maya's benefit.

Seconds later, the men's voices called out again, even closer than before.

Dee whispered while signing. "We need to keep running. Stay close to Mommy. Ready?"

She took the phone back and killed the light.

In the dim glow of the screensaver – a photo of the three of them eating ice cream – she waited until the kids nodded. They were troupers, but this was...well, holy crap!

After tucking the phone in her pocket, Dee took a deep breath. Time to get going.

They climbed over a fallen tree at least three feet in diameter, with mushrooms, lichens, and saplings rising from its rotting bark. As Dee reached the top, she turned in the direction of their pursuers. Her foot sunk into the trunk, releasing the stench of mulch. A flaming torch shone about fifty yards back, catching a machete like a strobe light as it swung against the branches.

She could hear the assailants talking now. They were catching up.

Dee dropped onto the far side of the tree and swung an arm to scoop up her daughter. She took the next several steps carrying her like a running back, but that didn't work. Changing course, she pulled Maya up to her chest. The child swung her arms around her mother's neck.

Carrying Maya slowed Dee a bit, but Leo still couldn't keep up. If only she could carry them both, but even the smaller one was getting heavier by the second. They couldn't all escape this way. A nagging thought clawed at the back of her mind, trying to get in, but she shook it away.

A tree branch seemed to come out of nowhere, slapping Dee across the face. She stopped short, blinking sweat from her eyes and dapping her face against Maya's shirt.

Where was Leo?

Panic stricken, Dee retraced her last steps. As she spread two giant leaves apart, she heard him sobbing. But where the hell was...ah, there! He must have fallen, because he was sprawled on the ground. She freed his feet from a vine and helped him up.

The thought slithered back again. No! She wouldn't. She couldn't.

Dee hugged both kids, desperately kissing their heads to make them feel better, or maybe to make herself feel better. They were running out of energy and time.

She could almost make out the words of the men's conversation. It was only a matter of time before they caught up. They knew this terrain, and they had Dee's beaten trail to follow. They'd catch all three of them if she didn't change strategy.

Leo couldn't keep up anymore. There was no way Dee could hold his hand, carry Maya, *and* push brush out of their path. What if she lost track of him again?

A hot shiver ran through her as the thought she'd been dismissing slithered back into focus. There was only one option left. An awful one she could hardly bear.

Luck had run out. Time was up.

As soon as she spotted an even larger fallen tree, she realized this was her best chance to do what she'd been putting off all along. She stopped and pulled out her cellphone. Her stomach knotted at the thought of what she was about to say.

She and Leo swapped turns with the phone again.

Dee signed the unthinkable. *They're catching up. Hide down here.* She pointed along the tree trunk to a hollow covered by a matt of giant leaves. There was barely enough room for Leo, definitely not both kids. *Be quiet. Don't come out. No matter what.*

He shook his head. *Stay with me.* The baby cub on his shirt caught the cell phone's beam.

As Dee clutched his hands, the light dimmed in their grasp. They needed to hurry. As the pain of loss gutted her, she gulped down hard. *There's not enough room for all of us.*

She lifted a pair of branches and guided him beneath the leaves. When she lowered them, she saw little more than his face looking up. His cheeks were drenched with tears.

Me and Maya need to keep going. But we'll come back for you. She started to lift her daughter, then put her back down. They both signed a one-handed *I love you* to Leo.

Dee lifted Maya again. Leo handed the phone back, and she turned the light off.

The last thing Dee saw in the dim glow of the screensaver before she turned and fled with Maya was Leo's little hand repeating the sign back to her.

4. Lidia Delgado

Day 1, Esmeralda Tour Boat, Marañón River

Lidia wanted to do something, anything, but her feet felt nailed to the deck as the attackers stormed the boat. She never expected anything like this, especially on her first tour. Her group relied on her, so she felt responsible.

She made a shaky sign of the cross and tried to pray to Santa Rosa de Lima.

A young attacker looked like he wanted to spear the doctor in the face, but the others stopped him. Together, they pinned the American to the deck with weapons at his throat.

The internet girl screamed in terror, pleading for them to let her boyfriend go. She turned to Lidia with mascara-smudged cheeks and mouthed *What's happening?*

Lidia shook her head. *I don't know.*

The armed men must have been from a river community, maybe the one they were scheduled to visit. The tour company orientation leader had said they were friendly. They made money from social turismo – selling crafts to visitors. Why would they be attacking?

Shoeprints spread out from the pooled blood on deck, shining in shades of red in the twilight. One tourist had a large spear hole in his thigh, but he wasn't the only one bleeding. Some surrendered by raising their hands, while others dropped to their knees. The few still resisting were no match for all those weapons. Reluctantly, they gave up.

The attackers yelled at the passengers and crew in Spanish, telling them to be quiet and move to the center of the deck. The commotion continued, maybe because of the language barrier, until threats with weapons got the message across.

A man around her age with gray hair on the sides seemed to be leading the attackers. His voice was surprisingly calm, almost soothing, as he instructed his men in one of the local languages. A few of them banged around below deck. Others loaded food and drinks into wicker boxes and carried them down the staircase.

Men carrying machetes reappeared at the top of the staircase with a high school boy and girl who looked terrified. The students searched Lidia's face for answers she didn't have. Did they think she was involved in this attack? The thought made her stomach sink.

With everyone finally still, Lidia tried to count her tour group again, but she was one of the shortest people there, and everyone was crowded together.

Most of the passengers seemed to be on the upper deck, but the pretty police lady and her kids were missing. Probably not for long. There were few places to hide on the small boat. What if the men punished Dee's family for trying to escape, maybe make an example of them? *Don't harm the children.* She almost cried those words as she silently prayed for their safety.

As the attackers separated crew from passengers, the music stopped, and the boat lights went out. The Amazon night rushed in with an army of creeping shadows. The rumbling beneath Lidia's feet was gone, which meant the engine was dead. So, no communication. No calls for help. No way to let loved ones know what was happening. Or say goodbye.

Who would Lidia call anyway – her freeloading ex-husband? Hector had squandered their savings, sold off her grandmother's jewelry, and left her with a mountain of debt, struggling to start her life over again. He hadn't even gotten along with her rescued pet cockatoo, Godzilla.

Attackers walked among the prisoners, collecting cell phones in burlap sacks. Money and jewelry would probably be next. Would the men kill them all after that? Even worse, what would they do with the women?

With his back to the empty bow, the leader spoke in Spanish. "We live in a nearby community. We will hold you there as prisoners. Everything will be okay if you do as we say." He scanned the fearful eyes of his audience. "But if you try to escape, we will kill you."

The boat crew became restless, exchanging glances as Lidia gasped. She might have been the only passenger fluent in Spanish. The rest were waiting for an explanation in English, possibly some assurance from their tour guide.

Before Lidia could get her voice to work, the captain translated the leader's words into English, sounding panicked and short of breath. Instead of repeating the part about killing anyone who tried to escape, he finished by saying, "Please be peaceful, for everyone's sake."

Whispers rose to a general murmur, then prisoners called out to the captain: "Why are they taking us?" "What will they do with us?" "I need my medications."

The attackers slammed the butts of their spears against the wooden deck until the prisoners were silent. A hand grabbed the back of Lidia's favorite kindergarten blouse and thrust her forward. Bodies bumped against each other until they ended up in a tight group. Lidia was jammed against one of the male passengers, her face pressing his back. Coconut sunscreen and bug spray scents filled her nose.

The police lady's family still wasn't there. Was that good news or bad?

Lidia would never forgive herself if something happened to them. She was the worst tour guide ever. The company would fire her for sure, assuming she lived long enough. She'd have to go back to teaching in Lima to pay off Hector's debts, assuming the school would let her return.

Why was this was happening? Peru had a long history of violence, most recently related to the drug trade, but that didn't explain why these local people would be taking them all prisoner.

The attackers guided them all in a single file down two flights of stairs. Lidia was somewhere toward the middle, behind the captain and crew, grasping the railing with trembling hands. On the gangway, the armed men blind-folded the first few passengers and duct taped their hands behind their backs before they stepped onto a narrow, wooden boat.

The first motorboat knocked against Esmeralda until loaded with prisoners, then splashed toward deeper water. Others creaked closer, swallowed more blind-folded and bound victims, and faded out onto the dark river, one at a time.

Lidia was next. A cloth covered her eyes. Her arms yanked backwards as duct tape wrapped her wrists. She twisted her hands, unable to open even a slight space in between.

The men guided her by the shoulders as she shuffled along the gangway. Their touch made her shiver. As she stepped down, wide planks lining the narrow boat creaked. Her leg slipped forward, crashing her backside onto the wooden seat and nearly tipping the boat. A warm splash of the river soaked her pants.

The old British couple boarded, then one of the high school students. She couldn't tell who else. A few attackers joined them and pushed off, making room for the next boat to load.

The prisoners sat in silence as the motor whined and the bow split the water. Lidia couldn't see a thing through the blindfold. She tried to commit their route to memory, in case they had to find their way back, but her mind was racing. They started toward the middle of the river, then turned left. Downstream. The river was almost a kilometer wide, with few sounds from the shore to gauge their speed. Tracking their route was proving hopeless.

All she could do was wait. And worry. And pray.

After a few minutes, they turned left again. The motor strained, but their progress slowed, suggesting they were fighting the current, maybe on a smaller river feeding the Marañón.

The warm breeze died, and the humidity lapped at Lidia's skin. A high-pitched buzz of insects and frogs surrounded them. A mosquito found her ankle, bit her three times, then crawled to the other side to attack again. With her hands behind her back, she could do little more than wiggle her foot, trying to loosen the blood sucker's grip. The bug soon grew tired of the rocky ride, or drained her leg dry, and disappeared into the night.

Something large splashed along the shore. *Please, not a caiman.* But even the fish around here were tough. Hungry pirañas. Enormous paiches. Some of those river monsters grew three meters in length, two hundred kilograms in weight.

From up ahead, a flickering glow snuck through Lidia's blindfold. As the motor eased, she heard whispers, high-pitched giggles of children, and adults shushing them.

If they were going to kill the prisoners, it would probably happen now on familiar, solid ground. Then they could go back to finish looting the boat, if that was the plan.

But maybe this wasn't about the boat. What if they wanted money in exchange for the prisoners' freedom? Nobody carried a lot of cash on vacation anymore. Could the attackers tap into everyone's bank accounts back home? Lidia was already drowning in debt. There was no way she could afford her release. The thought left her gnawing on her lower lip.

The armed men guided them across a wobbly dock. A crackling fire up ahead occasionally interrupted the whispers and murmurs of onlookers. As the prisoners shuffled along a dirt path, single file, the strong scent of cooked fish gagged Lidia. Smelly chickens clucked.

Some of the prisoners at the front continued forward, but the guards steered the rest to the right. Hands on Lidia's shoulders pivoted her toward a creaking gate and forced her through.

Her blindfold was pulled off, revealing the dark field where she'd been standing. Chickens strutted along the beaten grass. Her tour group was turning in all directions, taking in the boundaries of their prison. Where was the boat crew?

Some of the high school students were crying. Lidia was still too petrified to cry.

A knife cut her wrists free. Her skin stung as they yanked the tape off.

A fence twice Lidia's height surrounded them. Outside the gate they'd entered was a small community. Going from the Esmeralda to this place was like time traveling into the past. There was a campfire toward the center of the village and a few torches along the paths, though some wires on poles suggested there might be electricity somewhere, maybe from a generator. The field was darker, lit mainly with the campfire glow and the starlight coming down.

Across the center path were two structures with open, wooden frames and thatched roofs. Women cooked on wooden stoves by one of them. Smaller huts built from plywood and scrap metal farther from the dock must have been homes or sheds or both.

She spotted the boat crew as the armed men led them into one of the huts.

Every time she counted her tour group, she got a different number, but there were definitely a few missing. Hopefully not injured or...worse. She still didn't see the police lady or her kids.

Faces appeared along partially open doors and window holes of the other huts, watching the prisoners like animals in a zoo. Unlike the shirtless attackers, they were fully clothed in threadbare outfits. Toddlers ran barefoot, but the older children had flip-flops or rubber sandals.

The guards fastened the padlock on the large gate and pulled out the key. The prisoners here were still alive, so far. But what did these attackers have in store for them, now that they had taken everyone from their fancy boat?

Lidia had led her first tour group ever into the worst nightmare imaginable.

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