

Backpack Adventures Series

The Kiss of the Assassin

by

Marguerite Swilling

*Produced through the Partnership for
Environmental Education and Rural Health,
Texas A&M University*



Marguerite Swilling, author of the Backpack Adventure Series, has loved reading, writing and science all her life. From writing and directing an original play in sixth grade, she advanced to essay competitions in high school and published poetry at Texas A & M where she majored in English and minored in Earth Science. Although she is a certified secondary teacher, Mrs. Swilling has spent the past twenty-three years in the business world and has written and presented training seminars on a variety of topics. Mrs. Swilling lives in Georgetown, Texas with her husband and two daughters.

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An Introduction to Backpack Adventures:

Welcome to the coolest club in middle school! Of course, no one outside the club can know just what makes this group so different. The secret is in the backpack.

Roman Castillo, a young teenage technology whiz, developed a powerful mini-computer that can transport people through space and time. He controls the computer with a wireless keypad complete with a screen that displays the co-ordinates for the time and space travel destination. He shared his invention with his best friend, Travis, as well as four others.

Travis Allen, Roman's best friend since kindergarten, is the son of a veterinarian and loves animals, the outdoors and math. He wears western jeans and boots that highlight his long, lanky profile. He has a short temper except with his stepsister, Summer. He's very protective of Summer and doesn't like having her travel with the BPC as the group has nicknamed their awesome device.

Summer Martin, Travis' stepsister, is two years younger than Travis and Roman. Her bright blue eyes are as merry as her laugh and her blonde hair is cut short and sassy. She loves to read and has a great memory for history and geography. She uses a wheelchair due to a terrible, traffic accident when she was five. Travis and his aunt built a motorized chair for Summer, and she can participate in just about everything with her two best friends, Connie and K.T.

Connie Castillo, Roman's sister and Summer's best friend, has long, silky black hair and her dark brown eyes are framed by thick, black lashes. She loves her brother, but sometimes questions the use of the BPC. Quiet and reserved, she is a serious student. Science is her favorite subject and dance is

her favorite pastime. She and Summer have a mutual best friend named K.T.

K.T. Watson, is an only child who loves her best friends, Summer and Connie, like sisters. She wears her curly, jet-black hair in dozens of tiny, tight braids so she'll look more like her favorite athlete, Venus Williams. K.T. is full of energy and courageous. A natural leader, she often instigates the adventures with the BPC. She loves soccer and cheerleading. She helped form the Backpack Club and brought in its newest member: her neighbor, Jace.

Jace Long, classmate and neighbor to K.T., grew up in China and moved first to California and finally to Texas. He loves soccer like K.T., is a whiz at math like Travis, and is especially close to Summer. As the newest member to the Backpack Club, Jace is the most reluctant to use the BPC for travel, but he thinks it's a great tool for communicating between the members and is the first to try the device for help with homework.

1 “Not exactly. It leaves feces in the bite and the
2 T.cruzi is in the fecal matter.”

3 “Oh, you mean... yuck!” Connie shuddered.

4 “What does Chagas disease do to people?”
5 asked Roman.

6 “At first, you might get swelling, fever,
7 vomiting, diarrhea. Fatigue. Some people may not
8 even know they've been bitten. But Chagas lies
9 dormant for up to twenty years with no symptoms.
10 All the while, damage is being done to the heart and
11 other internal organs. You get people who tire
12 easily or seem to have difficulty breathing. There's
13 no cure for it, but there are campaigns to eradicate it
14 in South America. Still, the bugs and the pathogen
15 are part of a very extensive ecosystem.”

16 Connie and Roman had gotten very quiet.
17 Connie looked at the bug in the bottle and
18 remembered Miguel and his sister and his father.
19 Was it coincidence?

20 Roman took the bottle from Robert and stared
21 at the shiny black insect. It was hard to imagine
22 death and disease sitting here in this shiny new
23 museum. But in a hut in the Peruvian hills...

24 “These are not usually found in Texas. Where
25 did you find it? It wasn't in your home, was it?”
26 Robert questioned the pair.

27 Roman swallowed before he answered. “In the
28 home of a good friend.”

1 “It gets stranger. He called back last night and
2 said he was quitting because he had to travel
3 someplace really fast. So, it’s up to me to get the
4 museum ready for opening. How would you like to
5 help me during spring break?”

6 “Cool, that would be great,” answered Roman.

7 “Can we see the relics?” asked Connie. “Oh
8 wait, we had a question for you.” Connie pulled the
9 water bottle with the black bug from her backpack.
10 “I know you’re an anthropologist, not a bug
11 scientist...”

12 “Entomologist,” corrected Robert.

13 “Right, ento- whatever, but do you know what
14 kind of bug this is? Is it a ‘kissing bug’ or
15 something?” Connie held the bottle out to Robert,
16 who looked closely at the insect.

17 “I was told about these on my first trip to Peru,
18 but I never saw any in Lima. It is commonly called
19 “kissing bug” or “assassin bug,” or the
20 Bloodsucking Conenose. It’s a reduviid and it is a
21 vector for Chagas disease.”

22 “What’s a vector?” asked Connie.

23 “A vector is an organism that transmits a
24 pathogen. For example, in this case, the reduviid
25 bugs have living inside them a parasite called
26 Trypanosoma cruzi, or T. cruzi. This bug bites a
27 mammal – like a human or a dog or a rat – to drink
28 its blood.”

29 Connie grimaced and asked, “Then it leaves the
30 T. cruzi when it bites you?”

“The Kiss of the Assassin”

1 Connie and Roman followed closely behind
2 their friend and neighbor, Robert, as he led them
3 through wide hallways filled with construction
4 workers and museum display designers. Everyone
5 seemed to be working feverishly to complete the
6 massive new building that would soon house the
7 first comprehensive collection of pre-Columbian
8 artifacts from Mexico, Central America and South
9 America.

10 “Only two more stops on this quick tour and
11 we’ll be through,” yelled Robert over the buzz of a
12 saw and the knock-knock-knock of hammers. He
13 gingerly stepped over a pile of boards and into a
14 spacious room lined with shelves from floor to
15 ceiling. His sandy blonde hair was coated with a
16 light dust from the hallways.

17 “Is this a library?” asked Connie. Her dark
18 brown eyes scanned over row upon row of empty
19 shelves. “It would hold a lot of books!”

20 “No, this is our specimen cataloging room.
21 This is where we use carbon dating and other
22 methods to determine the age of an artifact before
23 displaying it,” answered Robert. “We can also
24 categorize it and record details here. This room can
25 hold many items at once, giving us time to do
26 thorough research and comparisons. I’m thrilled to
27 get to work here as I complete my dissertation. Not
28 many anthropologists get the chance to help open a

1 new museum. Come on, the last room I want to
2 show you is my office.”

3 Robert guided the Castillos through a doorway
4 at the back of the room into a tiny office that
5 smelled of new wood and paint. The window was
6 high on the wall and open to let the paint fumes
7 escape.

8 “My office may be at the back by the alleyway,
9 but it’s close to the action!” boasted Robert. He
10 pointed to a partially open door that led to a
11 darkened room. “This connects to the private study
12 of the new curator, Malcolm Despry. He chose me
13 to go to Peru to personally oversee the transfer of the
14 latest finds from the Paloma dig to the museum.”

15 “What’s the Paloma dig?” asked Roman. He
16 shifted his backpack from one shoulder to the other.
17 Roman and his sister had hurried straight from
18 school to meet Robert and to get a sneak preview
19 tour of the new museum before he left for Peru.
20 Roman’s backpack was heavy with books and the
21 BPC, a computer he had developed that allowed
22 communication (and much more) between six
23 friends.

24 “A dig is an archaeological site under
25 excavation. Paloma is the oldest known village with
26 continuous habitation: over 7,700 years old. It’s an
27 awesome discovery!” Robert’s face was animated
28 as he told them about the coastal village in Peru not
29 far from Lima. “There are several world renowned
30 archaeologists working there now.”

1 With a flash of blinding light, they stood in
2 Robert’s tiny office with the relics safely between
3 them.

4
5

6 “You’ll never believe what happened yester-
7 day!” remarked Robert, greeting his two young
8 friends as they entered his new museum office. It
9 was Monday morning during spring break, the day
10 after Robert returned from Peru. He had called them
11 from the museum that morning to invite them over
12 to hear some good news.

13 “What’s up, Robert?” How was your trip?”
14 Roman asked as he and Connie exchanged glances.

15 “Well, first of all, right when I arrived back
16 home, I came by the museum and found that the
17 crate of relics had actually beat me back here. It
18 must have been delivered earlier Sunday morning.
19 It was strange though because all the paperwork and
20 labels had been taken off the crate. It was like it just
21 showed up here. Amazing!”

22 “Wow, that is incredible!” gasped Connie.

23 “Then, I get this call from Despry about having
24 to go back to Peru immediately because the relics
25 were lost, and I told him, no they’re not, I already
26 had them and had started cataloging them and
27 documenting them in the vault. He started shouting
28 something about rocks and sheep dung. Really
29 weird.”

30 “He seems kind of strange to me,” answered
31 Roman, stifling a laugh.

1 But we'll have to wait till dark. And till Robert
2 leaves."

3 "Then let us enjoy the view of another sunset
4 over the Pacific," replied Miguel, turning to watch
5 the sinking sun cast long golden rays across the
6 glittering waves.

7 Soon the site had settled into a quiet night
8 rhythm and Roman watched as Robert caught a ride
9 back into Lima with the overseer. Since it was
10 Saturday, the workers left for their homes in the
11 hills. A lone guard was posted near the road.

12 The three friends walked swiftly and silently to
13 the tent. Roman had already explained to Miguel
14 that they could use their backpacks to travel. Like
15 everything else, he accepted this as fact and wished
16 them a safe journey. They entered the tent and
17 Miguel dug the crate out from under the empty
18 cartons. He gently patted the top and offered a quiet
19 prayer for safe travel.

20 Miguel shook Roman's hand and gave Connie a
21 quick hug. Roman punched in the coordinates for
22 the museum. They had decided it was safest to take
23 the crate directly to Robert's office where they could
24 hide it.

25 Gripping the heavy crate tightly between them,
26 Connie and Roman pressed "Control", "Alt",
27 "Delete" and "Home" and were enveloped in swirls
28 of vivid color that instantaneously transported them
29 to the museum. Their knuckles were white with
30 clutching the crate.

1 "Yes, and they are anxiously awaiting your
2 arrival, Mr. Baker." All three jumped as a high-
3 pitched, clipped voice pierced the tiny office like an
4 arrow from out of the dark study. A tall, thin man
5 prodded the door open as if the paint might still be
6 wet. His dark, close set eyes were steely as he
7 looked with obvious disdain at the two teenagers
8 visiting with his employee. A thin mustache above
9 bloodless lips looked like a dark gash across his
10 chalky face. No trace of pleasure eased his features.

11 "Mr. Despry, I didn't know you were in there,"
12 gasped Robert.

13 "Obviously not. It's against policy to allow
14 visitors in the museum at this time."

15 "But these are kids I've known for ten years,
16 my neighbors. They were anxious to see the place
17 before I head off to Peru."

18 "Quite irrelevant. I've had a taxi here waiting
19 to take you to the airport for the last twenty minutes.
20 Please do hurry and show these people to the door
21 on your way out. I'll be anxious to hear from you
22 when you reach Peru. Your trip is of the most
23 serious nature. Do use better judgment than you've
24 shown here." And with that Mr. Despry turned on
25 his heel and withdrew into the shadowy room.

26 "Come on, I'll walk you out," sighed Robert,
27 grabbing a large suitcase and heading quietly out of
28 the room.

29 Connie glanced at Roman and shrugged her
30 shoulders, shifting her own heavy backpack as they
31 walked out in silence. She couldn't help thinking

1 that something did not seem right about Mr. Despry.
2 Was he just rude or was it something more than
3 that?

4 They waved goodbye to Robert as the taxi sped
5 away to the airport. Connie's feeling of foreboding
6 returned as she watched her friend disappear into the
7 traffic.

8 "Want to take a shortcut home?" Roman asked
9 as he turned to face his sister.

10 "Sure, whatever's quickest. This BPC seems
11 extra heavy today." She shifted her backpack again,
12 unable to make it feel any lighter.

13 "We can cut through the alley behind the
14 museum."

15 They turned the corner and headed down the
16 darkening alley, their footsteps muffled by the
17 sawdust that had accumulated from the building of
18 the shelves and the displays. As they walked in
19 silence, they heard a high-pitched voice through an
20 open window high in the wall. Glancing at each
21 other, they stopped to listen. "Despry," mouthed
22 Roman noiselessly.

23 "I can assure you, we are moving as speedily as
24 possible to secure the items you requested at our last
25 meeting. I am certain the pieces now being
26 excavated will make the Moche pottery you already
27 possess look positively brand-new. I mean, what is
28 so ancient about a bowl made in 200 AD? Even the
29 Ataura artifacts that were estimated at 800 BC are
30 modern compared to these shards found at Paloma."
31 He paused abruptly then continued. "Yes, it was

so I had no chance to tell you. I found a third
wooden crate like the others that were already
packed. I filled this crate and put it in the place of
the relic crate. I hid the relic crate behind some
empty boxes at the back of the tent. Robert did not
know I made the change—even he did not notice a
difference. When Mr. Despry came into the tent, he
told Robert he would attach the labels and shipping
records. We kept loading all the boxes. From the
corner of my eye, I saw Despry put the "book"
labels on the crate he thought held the relics. He put
the "relics" label on the other crate. The "book"
crate ships directly to Despry's home. He thinks he
is getting the relics at his home." Miguel finished
with a chuckle.

"Well, what is he getting? What did you load
into the crate?" asked Roman, who was now also
smiling broadly.

"A few souvenirs from Peru. Rocks. More
rocks," Miguel snickered. "And sheep dung."

Now, the three teens could no longer hold back
the laughter. The tensions of the day melted into
streams of tears as they laughed till they cried.

"You did great, Miguel, thank you. I apologize
for ever doubting you!" exclaimed Roman.

"Yes, we owe you a great favor, friend," added
Connie.

"Well, the hardest part will be getting the true
relics crate to your new museum."

"I think I have a solution for that. If we can get
into the tent, Connie and I can carry it back with us.

1 “It’s good, my friend. Sit and rest and I will tell
2 you all that happened. The treasures are safe. I
3 have seen beauty from the past that touched my
4 soul.”

5 Connie and Roman slumped back down to the
6 ground like two deflated balloons. They sat
7 mesmerized while Miguel told them what had
8 transpired that day.

9 “When I reached the tent, I introduced myself
10 to Robert and told him I was there to help pack the
11 shipments. He let me see the ancient artifacts that
12 he estimates are almost 6000 years old. He let me
13 touch one.” Miguel’s voice was filled with awe.

14 Connie watched Miguel’s eyes fill with tears as
15 he recalled the delicate patterns etched by an artist
16 thousands of years ago. No wonder he had not
17 journeyed back to them—he was in awe of the
18 discovery and wanted to spend as much time with it
19 as possible.

20 Miguel wiped his eyes and resumed the story.
21 “He was placing the most ancient relics in one crate
22 as Mr. Despry had instructed. He also said Mr.
23 Despry had specifically told him to pack some books
24 and notebooks and maps in another, identical crate.
25 That seemed odd to us. Mr. Despry had told him to
26 wait to attach the shipping labels and documents
27 until he arrived late today. You saw him arrive,
28 didn’t you?”

29 Roman and Connie nodded. Miguel continued.
30 “Yes, I knew you were watching, but I had already
31 come up with a plan. Robert kept me busy all day,

1 unfortunate that some Ataura pieces could not have
2 been sidetracked to your personal collection before
3 they were catalogued into the Lima museum. I
4 could have used that fortune you offered. But make
5 no mistake, I have a fail-safe plan to divert these
6 pieces before they reach this new monstrosity they
7 call a museum. It’s a shame there are not more
8 collectors as discerning and generous as you, my
9 dear colleague.”

10 Connie stared at Roman in wide-eyed disbelief.
11 Despry was a crook! No wonder she had a bad
12 feeling about him. Roman raised his finger to his
13 lips and motioned Connie to stand still. He climbed
14 up on a jumbled pile of limestone blocks that lay
15 beneath the window and strained to hear as Despry
16 began to speak again.

17 “My plan? I’ll be implementing the switch
18 myself this time. I fly to Peru late tomorrow. I’ve
19 just sent a young graduate student to oversee the
20 packing of the artifacts. He’s quite capable. He’ll
21 package the pieces safely in a single box and set up
22 all the requisite manifests for transport. His
23 signature will be on all the documents so there will
24 be no way to trace the ‘loss’ back to me. A pity,
25 really. He’s so eager and enthusiastic. After he
26 ‘loses’ the greatest find in history, he’ll never be
27 hired by another museum again!”

28 A wicked laugh filled the air and transfixed the
29 two teenagers with dread. “You can be sure the
30 cargo will reach you as soon as you transfer the

1 seven-figure sum we agreed upon into my account in
2 Cayman.”

3 Roman lurched with fear and his heavy
4 backpack swung to the side. His foot slipped as a
5 block shifted and he fell to the ground with a thud.
6 Scrambling up, Roman grabbed Connie’s hand and
7 pulled her behind a large dumpster just as a door
8 from the offices swung open into the alley. Despry,
9 cell phone still next to his ear, surveyed the alley
10 then swiftly shut the door.

11 Connie’s heart was pounding in her ears as she
12 huddled next to Roman. “What are we going to
13 do?” she whispered. “We can’t let Despry destroy
14 Robert’s reputation.”

15 “It’s even more serious than that, Connie. We
16 can’t let Despry steal ancient relics and sell them to
17 greedy collectors. These things are worth millions
18 and belong to the museum. We’ve got to warn
19 Robert somehow,” answered Roman in a low voice.

20 “The only way is to get to him before Despry
21 arrives. But he’s on a plane by now and we don’t
22 know where he’s going in Peru.”

23 “But we do know where he’ll be—where the
24 Paloma dig is. All we need is the coordinates.”
25 Roman began to punch buttons on the miniature
26 keypad device attached to his backpack. A tiny
27 display relayed the information from his BPC: the
28 coordinates for Paloma, Peru.

29 “Roman, shouldn’t we tell someone where
30 we’re going? Isn’t that the Club’s rule since K.T.
31 got lost in Ukraine that time?” Connie’s concern

1 footsteps approaching, running up the hill to the
2 palm trees.

3 “Hello, my friends. Sorry to be so long in
4 returning,” Miguel greeted them with a smile. “Your
5 friend, Robert, is very nice. Much nicer than the
6 overseer or that Despry man. It was hard not to go
7 visit my father and brothers, but I will see them soon
8 enough.”

9 Miguel’s tired face, streaked with sweat and
10 smudged with dust, was illuminated by a broad
11 smile. Tranquility radiated from his wiry body like
12 a soothing aura.

13 “Where have you been? What happened down
14 there? Why didn’t you come get us?” Connie and
15 Roman blasted Miguel with questions as they
16 jumped to their feet.

17 Miguel calmly sat down and leaned back
18 against the palm tree. “Do you have any water in
19 your packs?” was all he asked. They both took out
20 their water bottles and offered them impatiently to
21 Miguel. He took Connie’s and drank a long gulp,
22 but held Roman’s at arm’s length.

23 “Oh, I forgot, we captured that bug last night.
24 Sorry,” explained Roman.

25 “*Vinchuca*. Kissing bug. They live in walls
26 and come out to kiss people at night. Some call
27 them ‘the assassins’ because the sting hurts.”

28 “Look, I don’t care about the stupid bug. What
29 happened down there today?” Roman could barely
30 contain his anger or anxiety.

1 Miguel had not returned though Roman and
2 Connie had seen him all day, traipsing back and
3 forth from the tent to the edges of the site, always
4 keeping his distance from where his brothers and
5 father were working. He was inside the tent when
6 Despry had entered it. Roman and Connie looked
7 on helplessly, debating whether they should confront
8 Despry, contact Robert or stay hidden. All day they
9 had waited patiently, knowing that Miguel would
10 call on them when the time was right. Now it
11 seemed they would be too late to foil Despry's
12 plans, whatever they might be. As they watched, a
13 Peruvian airlines delivery service truck pulled up
14 beside the tent and Robert carried a small carton to
15 the back of the truck. They watched as Miguel
16 helped Robert load more boxes, laughing with him,
17 seemingly unconcerned about leaving Despry alone
18 in the tent.

19 Finally, Despry himself carried a large wooden
20 crate with labels that said "Fragile" to the delivery
21 truck and placed it carefully in the back. He then
22 sent Robert inside to get one last wooden crate, very
23 similar to the one he had just loaded except it had
24 labels that said "Books." This one was placed in the
25 front of the truck. Despry spoke privately with the
26 driver and then climbed in the truck to escort the
27 shipment to the airport. In a cloud of dust, the truck
28 roared away to the airport.

29 Connie could feel tears welling up in her eyes
30 as Roman gritted his teeth. Suddenly, there were

1 showed both in her voice and in the way she kept
2 twisting a strand of her long dark hair. While she
3 had been on the first journey using the BPC, she still
4 was not comfortable with its time/place travel
5 capabilities. The Backpack Computer was her
6 father's invention that Roman had "borrowed" and
7 improved upon for secret use by their best friends.

8 "Look. It's the start of spring break. Summer
9 and Travis have gone to the coast. K.T. is skiing
10 and Jace's family is at Disney World. That leaves
11 us. I was bummed about not doing anything for
12 spring break, but maybe there was a reason. Maybe
13 we're supposed to go to Peru." His dark eyes
14 flashed with excitement at the thought of an
15 adventure.

16 "One thing's for sure. We can't be seen here,"
17 replied Connie taking her brother's hand. "Lead the
18 way, *hermano*."

19 "*Vamanos*."

20 A swirl of color sent the siblings out of the
21 alley in an instant. Despry opened the alley door
22 again, this time without the cell phone. But all he
23 saw was sawdust, lifted like a sail by a puff of wind,
24 scuttling along the debris.

25
26

27 Connie squeezed Roman's hand as they stood
28 shivering on a hilltop facing west toward the setting
29 sun. Before them lay a mosaic of contrasting
30 scenes. To the north, rolling hills covered with
31 shantytowns led to the blinking lights and tall

1 buildings of a city. To the south, brilliant white
2 dunes stretched to a deep blue ocean rippled with
3 white-capped waves and dotted with fishing boats.

4 Directly in front of them was an archaeological
5 site that looked like an anthill that had lost its top
6 layer. Like swarms of tiny dark insects, people
7 scurried from point to point and ever deeper into the
8 mound.

9 Behind them towered mountains—dry, brown
10 peaks pointing barren fingers to snow-capped peaks
11 higher above them, as if imploring them for
12 moisture.

13 Indeed, a river threaded down the precipices,
14 widening gently with the slopes till it fanned out at
15 the shore, spilling its fresh water into the salty
16 depths. Along the edges of the river, Connie could
17 see the green fringes of fields growing with the help
18 of irrigation in what seemed to be a coastal desert.

19 “I thought South America was supposed to be
20 hot! Why am I cold?” queried Connie out loud. She
21 checked the temperature gauge on her keypad: 18
22 degrees Celsius.

23 “Altitude. And it’s almost dark on an autumn
24 evening near the Pacific coast. March might be
25 spring in Texas, but it’s fall in Peru. Come on,
26 we’ve got to find shelter for the night.” Roman
27 began to hike down a path that looked like an animal
28 trail. Droppings speckled the rocks and short
29 grasses.

30 “Do you think wild animals made this trail?”
31 asked Connie. She was trying to remember what

1 Roman answered his sister’s unspoken
2 question, “I told Miguel everything.”

3 Miguel flashed that calming smile at Connie,
4 “Don’t worry. I don’t want my ancestors’ treasures
5 sold to the highest bidder. I want your friend Robert
6 and the museum men to study them and share them
7 with the whole world. Like the Pachacamac
8 museum over there,” he added, pointing to a flat-
9 topped pyramid just visible in the distance, nearer
10 the city. I heard my brothers tell about a trip they
11 made to visit Pachacamac. Even the ‘poor, lazy
12 country folk’ can visit the museum for free and see
13 wonders and beauty. Pachacamac was once a
14 spiritual temple for my ancestors. Again, it lifts the
15 spirit of Peru. That is why I agreed to help you.”
16 With that, he set off toward the tent into which
17 Robert had disappeared.

18 “Good luck, be careful...,” Roman and Connie
19 called to him. They settled down to wait and watch
20 for Despry.

21 The sun had risen overhead and was headed
22 toward the horizon when Connie and Roman saw
23 another taxi pull up at the site. Despry seemed to
24 unfold his long legs and arms from the taxi like a
25 spider. He scanned over the site, ignoring the
26 workers and the fawning overseer alike. His gaze
27 came to rest on the tent where Robert had spent the
28 day packing and completing the paperwork for the
29 shipment. He strode to the tent and they could hear
30 his high-pitched voice bark out a command before
31 he vanished inside.

1 “But didn’t you say they work hard? That
2 could explain the tiredness,” offered Connie. She
3 could hear a man shouting and looked to see who it
4 was. A young man with a clipboard was yelling at
5 the workers as a taxi pulled up to the site. Robert
6 Baker, their friend, emerged from the taxi looking as
7 tired as Miguel’s father. “Look, Roman, it’s Robert.
8 He looks like he slept about like we did. Hey,
9 Miguel, who’s the guy with the clipboard?”

10 “He’s the overseer from Miraflores. My
11 brothers say he thinks he can boss the country
12 workers just because he lives in a big fancy house.
13 He has never even picked up a rock himself, but he
14 acts like he is doing all the work whenever any of
15 the museum men are at the site. He tells them the
16 workers are just lazy when they are really tired from
17 working twelve hours with no rest and little water.
18 He’s supposed to supply the water from a city well
19 in Miraflores, but that costs money. My brothers
20 have seen him fill the water jugs from the irrigation
21 pipes near the Lima Highway. It is all they have.”

22 “Can’t you tell someone? That’s not right,”
23 interjected Roman.

24 Miguel just shrugged and changed the subject.
25 “What is it you want me to tell your friend?”

26 “Well, first we need to know what Robert’s
27 doing. Then we can figure out how Despry plans to
28 steal the crate with the artifacts.”

29 Connie looked at Roman as if to ask, “What all
30 did you tell Miguel?”

1 kind of wild animals were indigenous to Peru, but all
2 she could picture was her guinea pig back home.

3 “Probably goats or sheep or llamas. Doesn’t
4 look like cattle dung. Don’t worry, we’ll find a
5 place to sleep before any big cats come out to attack
6 us.”

7 “What? What big cats? Are you just teasing
8 me, Roman?”

9 “Shush! Listen!” commanded Roman. He
10 halted abruptly and grabbed Connie’s arm, pulling
11 her close behind him.

12 “Oh, stop it, Roman. Stop trying to scare me!”
13 protested Connie, jerking her arm free and sliding a
14 little on the loose gravel of the trail.

15 “No, for real, Connie, I hear someone singing.
16 Listen!” Roman said through clenched teeth. A look
17 of intense concentration furrowed his brow as he
18 leaned forward ever so slightly.

19 Connie froze, trying to peer past a boulder that
20 hid the trail in front of them. The sound of a boy
21 singing softly seemed to come from the other side of
22 the huge rock.

23 “What’s he saying? That’s not Spanish, is it?”
24 whispered Connie.

25 “No. Must be a native Indian language. I
26 wonder if the BPC translator will be able to decode
27 it. We’ll have to chance it. We need to find
28 someone to help us.”

29 Roman and Connie rounded the trail past the
30 boulder and came upon a boy about their age sitting
31 on a ledge, watching the sunset over the ocean. He

1 had dark skin and round, black eyes. Skinny legs
2 and arms poked out from beneath a brightly colored
3 poncho, woven in a geometric pattern that resembled
4 the mountains. A wool skullcap with a little tassel
5 covered his coarse black hair. If he was surprised to
6 see two strangely dressed people come down the
7 trail, he did not show it. He seemed to be filled with
8 calm as he sang his song to the gorgeous view. He
9 turned to them with a smile as the last notes wavered
10 in the twilight.

11 “¿Habla espanol?” asked Roman.

12 “Si.” answered the boy. “But I speak Quechua
13 at home.”

14 Roman looked at Connie and nodded, “It
15 works.” It seemed the translator program could
16 handle both of the major languages of Peru.

17 “Hi, I’m Connie. What’s your name?” asked
18 Connie, extending a handshake.

19 The boy gave her hand a quick pump and said,
20 Miguel Quespe. Are you with the Americans at
21 Paloma? Or are you lost?”

22 Roman gave a quick laugh. “Do we look that
23 out of place? My name is Roman. I’m Connie’s
24 older brother. We *are* lost and we need a place to
25 stay tonight. Can you help us?”

26 “With pleasure. My home is not far. I have
27 just finished gathering some dry dung for the fire. I
28 stopped to offer a prayer for the beautiful day. I
29 love the ocean at sunset.”

30 “Was that a prayer you were singing? It
31 sounded so peaceful.” Connie tried to recall the

1 morning. Which is really not far off. Here, let’s sit
2 back-to-back. We can use my T-shirt from gym to
3 cover our heads. I’ll keep our little friend in my
4 backpack for now,” said Roman, placing the bottle
5 into his pack. Roman and Connie leaned against
6 each other and managed to sleep sitting up with a t-
7 shirt draped over their heads for the three remaining
8 hours of darkness.

9
10

11 After an hour of walking downhill along a
12 circuitous path, Roman, Connie and Miguel reached
13 the Paloma ruins. The three teenagers squatted
14 behind a clump of palm trees. The sound of the
15 nearby ocean washed over them, carried by a cool,
16 misty breeze.

17 Miguel pointed out his father sitting in the
18 shade of a tree. “He is always tired now and his
19 breathing is not good. We thought maybe it was the
20 mountains and he would get better here at the coast.
21 But it is only worse. My brothers say he cannot
22 keep up with the city workers. Some of the diggers
23 from Lima call him “abuelo” and “viejo.” But he is
24 not an old man. Four others from our village came
25 to work at the dig before us. Two of them could not
26 breathe here either and they went back to the village.
27 I think it is the salt air. They are all too tired each
28 day to make the long walk back to our homes in the
29 barrios. They camp here and come home only on
30 Sunday. My father is always tired.”

1 “Ah!” Connie uttered a muffled cry and
2 knocked the bug to the dirt floor. She sat up wide
3 awake in an instant.

4 “What is it?” Roman had been lying awake
5 listening to the night sounds of scurrying rodents
6 and chirping bugs. The hut was alive with noise and
7 movement.

8 “It’s a bug!” hissed Connie. “A bug was
9 crawling on my head.” Though her heart was
10 pounding and her breathing rapid, Connie spoke in a
11 low voice—she didn’t want to awaken her hosts.

12 Roman crawled across the hut dragging his
13 backpack with him. He quickly opened his water
14 bottle and drank the last few drops. Carefully
15 scooping the black bug into the bottle, he twisted the
16 cap back on tightly. “There. He can’t get you now.
17 Try to get some sleep, crybaby. I’ll protect you.”

18 “Crybaby yourself, macho man. I think we
19 should keep the bug. Maybe that’s what bit
20 Miguel’s sister.” Connie took the bottle and strained
21 in the dim light to see what had scared her. A large,
22 black, beetle-like bug sat motionless with its wings
23 folded across a wide back and its long slender
24 antennae quivering. There was no way she could go
25 back to sleep now. “Is Miguel going to help us
26 reach Robert? You know, we can’t let Robert see
27 us.”

28 “He agreed to get us to the ruins and find
29 Robert. Since we don’t know how Despry plans to
30 divert the shipment, I didn’t ask Miguel for more
31 help yet. We need to scope out the situation in the

1 tune. Something about Miguel inspired confidence
2 and calm. Though his hands and bare feet were
3 covered in dirt, his head was not bowed. His teeth
4 may have been dark with stains, but his smile was
5 wide and friendly. In the distance, thousands of
6 campfires before substandard houses of tin and mud
7 filled the air with smells of hunger. Gray threads of
8 smoke wove a pattern of poverty across the evening
9 sky. Yet Miguel focused on a brilliant sunset over
10 the Pacific and was thankful even for the beauty of a
11 single day. Connie was glad they had found Miguel.

12 “A prayer, a song. In my village they are the
13 same. But my village is far away, so I dream instead
14 of the ocean. Someday I will taste the cold waters.
15 My father says it is salty and not good to drink like
16 the rivers and snows of my mountain village.”

17 “You mean you’ve never traveled all the way
18 down to the coast? It’s not that far. Why not go?”
19 Roman could not believe Miguel had not ventured
20 past the foothills.

21 “I have to tend the sheep and protect my mother
22 and sisters while my father and two brothers work
23 for the Americans at Paloma. They are diggers and
24 they must work long hours. No one gets to rest at
25 Paloma. So, I have no chance to travel. Yet.”

26 “Why do they work so hard?” Roman
27 wondered. He could see lights flickering over the
28 ruins as the men continued to work into the night.

29 “They are in a hurry to finish before the winter
30 rains set in. They make much more money—250
31 Sol Nuero each month—than we can make on our

1 mountain farm. So we moved here last year to take
2 the place of the first workers who went back to our
3 village. We were lucky to find an abandoned house
4 with room for our three sheep. They give us milk
5 and wool and lambs to trade. We have it good.”

6 Miguel talked as he led them down the trail to
7 his home several hundred yards from the edge of a
8 shantytown. A little fenced in area served as a sheep
9 hold beside a hut of adobe bricks with a thatched
10 roof of palm fronds. Chunks had broken from the
11 walls at the corners and lower edges and straw was
12 stuck in at odd places to close the gaps.

13 Connie turned to Roman and muttered under
14 her breath, “How poor can the rural people be if this
15 is an improvement?”

16 Roman shrugged and followed Miguel to his
17 home. Miguel introduced them to his mother, a tiny
18 woman with strong hands who sat stirring barley
19 meal in a pot over a sputtering fire. She added a
20 little water from a copper jug that hung by the door,
21 swishing away flies that hovered in the doorway.
22 Miguel added the dung to the coals and stoked the
23 fire to a higher flame. Connie thought of how hard
24 it would be to cook meats over the fire. Barley soup
25 was all the family had for supper, but they offered
26 full portions to their guests. Miguel’s mother served
27 Roman and Connie first, then Miguel, then the two
28 little girls. Only after everyone had been fed did she
29 scrape the pot for her own meal.

30 Miguel’s two sisters sat silently staring at the
31 strangers. The younger one had been sick with

1 diarrhea and vomiting and looked malnourished.
2 She had a large swelling above her right eye. “Just a
3 bug bite,” her mother explained. But Connie had
4 her doubts. The five-year-old felt feverish when
5 Connie stroked her hand. Then the child pulled
6 herself into a little ball and fell asleep on the grass
7 mat that served for a bed. The mother said the bite
8 made her sick and tired, but she would be better in a
9 few days. It was nothing to worry about. There
10 seemed to be little that worried this family. Connie
11 marveled at a culture that could survive in such
12 harsh conditions.

13 She wasn’t sure if she would be able to sleep on
14 a grass mat, but exhaustion was overcoming her.
15 Roman walked outside but rushed back inside,
16 complaining of the mosquitoes in the tall grasses.
17 Connie wondered if the little girl’s bite had been
18 from a mosquito. She tried to use her backpack as a
19 pillow, but the books and the computer offered no
20 comfort. She thought of the hotels and houses in the
21 city not far away. As she drifted to sleep, she could
22 hear Roman and Miguel talking softly at the other
23 side of the hut. Roman was trying to convince
24 Miguel to journey with them to Paloma. They
25 would need a messenger to warn Robert when he
26 arrived at the site. Connie hoped they could count
27 on the tough, steady Miguel to help foil Despry’s
28 plan. Thinking of Despry made her scalp crawl. In
29 her half-sleep state, Connie could actually feel a
30 tickling in her hair. She brushed her hand across her
31 head and felt the flutter of antennae!