

BACKPACK ADVENTURES

Episode 4

“The Kiss of the Assassin”

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

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

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

“No, this is our specimen cataloging room. This is where we use carbon dating and other methods to determine the age of an artifact before displaying it,” answered Robert. “We can also categorize it and record details here. This room can hold many items at once, giving us time to do thorough research and comparisons. I’m thrilled to get to work here as I complete my dissertation. Not many anthropologists get the chance to help open a new museum. Come on, the last room I want to show you is my office.”

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

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

“What’s the Paloma dig?” asked Roman. He shifted his backpack from one shoulder to the other. Roman and his sister had hurried straight from school to meet Robert and to get a

sneak preview tour of the new museum before he left for Peru. Roman's backpack was heavy with books and the BPC, a computer he had developed that allowed communication (and much more) between six friends.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Connie glanced at Roman and shrugged her shoulders, shifting her own heavy backpack as they walked out in silence. She couldn't help thinking that something did not seem right about Mr. Despry. Was he just rude or was it something more than that?

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

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

“Sure, whatever’s quickest. This BPC seems extra heavy today.” She shifted her backpack again, unable to make it feel any lighter.

“We can cut through the alley behind the museum.”

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

“I can assure you, we are moving as speedily as possible to secure the items you requested at our last meeting. I am certain the pieces now being excavated will make the Moche pottery you already possess look positively brand-new. I mean, what is so ancient about a bowl made in 200 AD? Even the Ataura artifacts that were estimated at 800 BC are modern compared to these shards found at Paloma.” He paused abruptly then continued. “Yes, it was unfortunate that some Ataura pieces could not have been sidetracked to your personal collection before they were catalogued into the Lima museum. I could have used that fortune you offered. But make no mistake, I have a fail-safe plan to divert these pieces before they reach this new monstrosity they call a museum. It’s a shame there are not more collectors as discerning and generous as you, my dear colleague.”

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

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

A wicked laugh filled the air and transfixed the two teenagers with dread. “You can be sure the cargo will reach you as soon as you transfer the seven-figure sum we agreed upon into my account in Cayman.”

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

Connie's heart was pounding in her ears as she huddled next to Roman. "What are we going to do?" she whispered. "We can't let Despry destroy Robert's reputation."

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

"The only way is to get to him before Despry arrives. But he's on a plane by now and we don't know where he's going in Peru."

"But we do know where he'll be—where the Paloma dig is. All we need is the coordinates." Roman began to punch buttons on the miniature keypad device attached to his backpack. A tiny display relayed the information from his BPC: the coordinates for Paloma, Peru.

"Roman, shouldn't we tell someone where we're going? Isn't that the Club's rule since K.T. got lost in Ukraine that time?" Connie's concern showed both in her voice and in the way she kept twisting a strand of her long dark hair. While she had been on the first journey using the BPC, she still was not comfortable with the time/place travel capabilities of the BPC. The Backpack Computer was her father's invention that Roman had "borrowed" and improved upon for secret use by their best friends.

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

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

"*Vamos*."

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

Connie squeezed Roman's hand as they stood shivering on a hilltop facing west toward the setting sun. Before them lay a mosaic of contrasting scenes. To the north, rolling hills covered with shantytowns led to the blinking lights and tall buildings of a city. To the south, brilliant white dunes stretched to a deep blue ocean rippled with white-capped waves and dotted with fishing boats.

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you think wild animals made this trail?" asked Connie. She was trying to remember what kind of wild animals were indigenous to Peru, but all she could picture was her guinea pig back home.

"Probably goats or sheep or llamas. Doesn't look like cattle dung. Don't worry, we'll find a place to sleep before any big cats come out to attack us."

"What? What big cats? Are you just teasing me, Roman?"

"Shush! Listen!" commanded Roman. He halted abruptly and grabbed Connie's arm, pulling her close behind him.

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

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

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

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

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

Roman and Connie rounded the trail past the boulder and came upon a boy about their age sitting on a ledge, watching the sunset over the ocean. He had dark skin and round, black eyes. Skinny legs and arms poked out from beneath a brightly colored poncho, woven in a geometric pattern that resembled the mountains. A wool skullcap with a little tassel covered his coarse black hair. If he was surprised to see two strangely dressed people come down the trail, he did not show it. He seemed to be filled with calm as he sang his song to the gorgeous view. He turned to them with a smile as the last notes wavered in the twilight.

“¿Habla espanol?” asked Roman.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Was that a prayer you were singing? It sounded so peaceful.” Connie tried to recall the tune. Something about Miguel inspired confidence and calm. Though his hands and bare feet were covered in dirt, his head was not bowed. His teeth may have been dark with stains, but his smile was wide and friendly. In the distance, thousands of campfires before substandard houses of tin and mud filled the air with smells of hunger. Gray threads of smoke wove a pattern of

poverty across the evening sky. Yet Miguel focused on a brilliant sunset over the Pacific and was thankful even for the beauty of a single day. Connie was glad they had found Miguel.

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

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

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

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

“They are in a hurry to finish before the winter rains set in. They make much more money—250 Sol Nuero each month—than we can make on our mountain farm. So we moved here last year to take the place of the first workers who went back to our village. We were lucky to find an abandoned house with room for our three sheep. They give us milk and wool and lambs to trade. We have it good.”

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

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

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

Miguel's two sisters sat silently staring at the strangers. The younger one had been sick with diarrhea and vomiting and looked malnourished. She had a large swelling above her right eye. "Just a bug bite," her mother explained. But Connie had her doubts. The five-year-old felt feverish when Connie stroked her hand. Then the child pulled herself into a little ball and fell asleep on the grass mat that served for a bed. The mother said the bite made her sick and tired, but she would be better in a few days. It was nothing to worry about. There seemed to be little that worried this family. Connie marveled at a culture that could survive in such harsh conditions.

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

"Ah!" Connie uttered a muffled cry and knocked the bug to the dirt floor. She sat up wide awake in an instant.

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

"It's a bug!" hissed Connie. "A bug was crawling on my head." Though her heart was pounding and her breathing rapid, Connie spoke in a low voice—she didn't want to awaken her hosts.

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

"Crybaby yourself, macho man. I think we should keep the bug. Maybe that's what bit Miguel's sister." Connie took the bottle and strained in the dim light to see what had scared her.

A large, black, beetle-like bug sat motionless with its wings folded across a wide back and its long slender antennae quivering. There was no way she could go back to sleep now. “Is Miguel going to help us reach Robert? You know, we can’t let Robert see us.”

“He agreed to get us to the ruins and find Robert. Since we don’t know how Despry plans to divert the shipment, I didn’t ask Miguel for more help yet. We need to scope out the situation in the morning. Which is really not far off. Here, let’s sit back-to-back. We can use my T-shirt from gym to cover our heads. I’ll keep our little friend in my backpack for now,” said Roman, placing the bottle into the backpack. Roman and Connie leaned against each other and managed to sleep sitting up with a t-shirt draped over their heads for the three remaining hours of darkness.

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

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

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

“He’s the overseer from Miraflores. My brothers say he thinks he can boss the country workers just because he lives in a big fancy house. He has never even picked up a rock himself, but he acts like he is doing all the work whenever any of the museum men are at the site. He tells them the workers are just lazy when they are really tired from working twelve hours with no

rest and little water. He's supposed to supply the water from a city well in Miraflores, but that costs money. My brothers have seen him fill the water jugs from the irrigation pipes near the Lima Highway. It is all they have."

"Can't you tell someone? That's not right," interjected Roman.

Miguel just shrugged and changed the subject. "What is it you want me to tell your friend?"

"Well, first we need to know what Robert's doing. Then we can figure out how Despry plans to steal the crate with the artifacts."

Connie looked at Roman as if to ask, "What all did you tell Miguel?"

Roman answered his sister's unspoken question, "I told Miguel everything."

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

"Good luck, be careful..." Roman and Connie called to him. They settled down to wait and watch for Despry.

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

Miguel had not returned though Roman and Connie had seen him all day, traipsing back and forth from the tent to the edges of the site, always keeping his distance from where his brothers and father were working. He was inside the tent when Despry had entered it. Roman and Connie looked on helplessly, debating whether they should confront Despry, contact Robert or stay hidden. All day they had waited patiently, knowing that Miguel would call on them when

the time was right. Now it seemed they would be too late to foil Despry's plans, whatever they might be. As they watched, a Peruvian airlines delivery service truck pulled up beside the tent and Robert carried a small carton to the back of the truck. They watched as Miguel helped Robert load more boxes, laughing with him, seemingly unconcerned about leaving Despry alone in the tent.

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

Connie could feel tears welling up in her eyes as Roman gritted his teeth. Suddenly, there were footsteps approaching, running up the hill to the palm trees.

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

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

"Where have you been? What happened down there? Why didn't you come get us?" Connie and Roman blasted Miguel with questions as they jumped to their feet.

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

"Oh, I forgot, we captured that bug last night. Sorry," explained Roman.

"*Vinchuca*. Kissing bug. They live in walls and come out to kiss people at night. Some call them 'the assassins' because the sting hurts."

"Look, I don't care about the stupid bug. What happened down there today?" Roman could barely contain his anger or anxiety.

"It's good, my friend. Sit and rest and I will tell you all that happened. The treasures are safe. I have seen beauty from the past that touched my soul."

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

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

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

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

Roman and Connie nodded. Miguel continued. “Yes, I knew you were watching, but I had already come up with a plan. Robert kept me busy all day, 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. But we’ll have to wait till dark. And till Robert leaves.”

“Then let us enjoy the view of another sunset over the Pacific,” replied Miguel, turning to watch the sinking sun cast long golden rays across the glittering waves.

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

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

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

Gripping the heavy crate tightly between them, Connie and Roman pressed “Control”, “Alt”, “Delete” and “Home” and were enveloped in swirls of vivid color that instantaneously transported them to the museum. Their knuckles were white with clutching the crate.

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

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

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

“Well, first of all, right when I arrived back home, I came by the museum and found that the crate of relics had actually beat me back here. It must have been delivered earlier Sunday

morning. It was strange though because all the paperwork and labels had been taken off the crate. It was like it just showed up here. Amazing!”

“Wow, that is incredible!” gasped Connie.

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

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

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

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

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

“Entomologist,” corrected Robert.

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

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

“What’s a vector?” asked Connie.

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

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

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

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

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

“At first, you might get swelling, fever, vomiting, diarrhea. Fatigue. Some people may not even know they’ve been bitten. But Chagas lies dormant for up to twenty years with no

symptoms. All the while, damage is being done to the heart and other internal organs. You get people who tire easily or seem to have difficulty breathing. There's no cure for it, but there are campaigns to eradicate it in South America. Still, the bugs and the pathogen are part of a very extensive ecosystem."

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

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

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

Roman swallowed before he answered. "In the home of a good friend."