



# MAYAN MENDACITY



DR PIMMS, INTERMILLENNIAL SLEUTH



# L.J.M. OWEN



MAYAN  
MENDACITY

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echo



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Echo Publishing

An imprint of Bonnier Publishing Australia

534 Church Street, Richmond

Victoria 3121 Australia

[www.echopublishing.com.au](http://www.echopublishing.com.au)

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First published 2016

Cover design by Design by Committee

Map illustration by Anastacia Thompson and Cordelia Thompson

Page design by Shaun Jury

Typeset in Adobe Caslon and Scala Sans

Printed in Australia at Griffin Press.

Only wood grown from sustainable regrowth forests is used in the manufacture of paper found in this book.

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Creator: Owen, L. J. M., author.

Title: *Mayan mendacity* / L.J.M. Owen.

ISBN: 9781760404574 (paperback)

ISBN: 9781760404581 (epub)

ISBN: 9781760404598 (mobi)


Subjects: Women archaeologists—Fiction.


Women forensic anthropologists—Fiction.


Libraries—Fiction.

Detective and mystery stories.

Dewey Number: A823.4

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## About the series

Dr Pimms, Intermillennial Sleuth is a series of A-B mysteries (archaeo-biblio mysteries).

*Archae·o·bib·li·o·mys·tery* [ahr-kay-oh-bib-lee-oh-mis-tree] {a-b-mystery} – noun.

*A puzzling crime or event that requires the application of both archaeological and philological principles for its explanation.*

*Can involve historic or prehistoric societies, their culture, writing and communication systems, artefacts or skeletal remains.*

## About the author

Like many bookworms, the best parts of my childhood were spent in the story worlds created by others. A bad day saw me escape under the covers, with a torch and an orange, to faraway lands where mysteries were solved, hard work was rewarded, and bad guys got their comeuppance. As an adult I decided to create another place for us all to run away to.

They say you should write what you know. As I'm a trained archaeologist, a qualified librarian, and I have a PhD in palaeogenetics, I thought: archaeological

mystery series, with a librarian protagonist – naturally!

So if you like the idea of curling up in an armchair, tea in hand, fireplace crackling, and immersing yourself in a world of archaeological wonders, forensic science, and really good food, then this might just be your new favourite series.

Welcome to the world of Dr Pimms, Intermillennial Sleuth. *Really* cold cases.

L.J.M. Owen

Website: [www.ljmowen.com](http://www.ljmowen.com)

Book Series Facebook Page: Dr Pimms,

Intermillennial Sleuth

Twitter: @Bleuddyn\_Coll

## **Additional material at the end of the novel**

Recipes: Fish three ways

Historical notes and additional reading

Questions for book club discussions

Glossary of technical terms

Lexicon of foreign language phrases

*To Billy. From the moment you claimed me as  
your human, the world was a brighter place.  
It dimmed the day you departed.*





*The Goatherd threw a stone at Goat and broke its horn.  
He begged Goat not to tell the master. Goat replied,  
'Why, you silly fellow, though I am silent the horn will speak.'*

*'The Goat and the Goatherd', Aesop's Fables*

# MAYA EMPIRE c. 700 CE

Gulf of Honduras

NORTH

YUCCA  
MAYALAN



# Prologue

*Mayan Calendar Date 9.12.2.14.12 8 Eb' 5 Sip  
(4 April 675 CE)*

*Mutul City, Mayan Empire (now Dos Pilas,  
modern Guatemala)*

Lady Six Sky, Princess of Mutul, concentrated on the small black bead hanging between her eyebrows. Her daily practice of ensuring her eyes were perfectly crossed was almost over. She smiled as her hand slid over the warm, wriggling belly of her beloved dog, Red Jaguar.

Nurse was brushing her hair into a style appropriate for this evening's pre-celebration dinner. Soon the laborious but vital task of choosing costumes and jewellery for tomorrow's festivities would begin.

Tired of staring at the bead, Six tugged it gently from its fastening and scrunched up her face, bringing her eyesight back into focus so that she could continue reading. Her current book was one of her favourites, a history of one of Six's antecedents, the Lady of Tik'al. Six read it several times a month. She was determined to enter the historical plays one day as the next great Tik'al queen, following the path laid down by her famous ancestor.

'Why can't your own mother do these things for you?'

It was Nurse's son, In'laak, who sat in the corner

mouthed his way through a beginner's text. He was often jealous of the time and attention Nurse paid to Six.

'My apologies, Lady Six,' Nurse said. 'In'laak, you mustn't speak to Lady Six in this manner.'

'I'm not offended,' Six reassured her attendant. 'Your mother helps me because my own cannot. I explained to you before, remember? My mother returned to her home city after my birth, as do the mothers of many Rulers' children.'

'Return to your reading,' Nurse told her son firmly.

'This text is difficult.' This was another of In'laak's regular complaints. 'Can I not have an easier one?'

'No. If you're going to be a scribe one day you have to practise,' Nurse said.

'But I'll never be a Great Scribe.'

'Be thankful for that,' Six said. 'You don't want to be.'

'Yes I do,' he whined.

'No, you don't,' Nurse said. 'You will become a scribe for a merchant, be safe and comfortable, and look after me in my dotage. Now, say thank you to Lady Six for teaching you to read.'

'Thank you, Lady Six,' In'laak huffed under his breath, then returned to dragging a finger over the glyphs and slowly piecing the words together.

Nurse finished shaping Six's hair and pushed the last bone pin into place. Carefully patting the elaborate sweeps and swirls Nurse had created, Six was pleased. With her elegantly elongated head and well-crossed eyes, Six was sure to attain the level of beauty required

to rise through the ranks of the Empire. Just one element remained.

Six ran an inquisitive finger over her mouth. She had already secured the best, most attractive rounds of jade for display in her front teeth.

'I believe my teeth are fully formed; the maize is set. Can you transform them now?'

'Soon, Lady Six,' Nurse promised. 'It's best to wait a little longer.'

Once her teeth were filed to sharp points and adorned with fine jewels, Six would be exquisitely beautiful. She would capture the hearts of nobles and courtiers alike, allowing her to secure her rightful place as Lady Ruler, alongside the Ruler of a powerful dynasty.

She tickled the back of Red Jaguar's head, causing him to squirm in delight. Although Six could not afford the luxury of trusting another human, her dear little dog would be by her side through all her triumphs to come.

'Now, Lady Six, which robes would you like to wear to the banquet tomorrow?'



The following day, Six swept as majestically as she could through painted corridors and splendid courtyards to the Ruler's Throne Room. Nurse padded along beside her holding a cloth shield before her face.

Six had been distracted all day by the absence of Red Jaguar. It was unlike him to stray very far from her side.

‘He’ll have found another pup to play with, Lady Six,’ Nurse reassured her. ‘He always finds his way back to you.’

They paused at the entrance to the stately hall to adjust Six’s clothing and ensure her headdress and jewellery were perfectly placed. The noise spilling from the banquet was overwhelming. Six scanned the room for her family’s table, then stepped into the melee of relatives, visiting nobles, courtiers, retainers, and warriors from her father’s recent battles.

One end of the hall was dominated by the Ruler’s dais. There her father, Flint Sky, sat, visible only as an enormous shadow cast onto the magnificent screens that shielded him from unworthy eyes. Six spied the knee of his new Great Scribe peeking out from behind the curtains beside him. Sitting cross-legged behind the Ruler, swathed in a uniform of simple cloth, the Great Scribe’s apparent modesty belied the authority she now wielded with her pens and brushes.

Before ascending to her exalted position, the Great Scribe had been one of Six’s sisters. Six was glad the privilege had fallen to an older sibling. Appointment to the politically dangerous and often fatal position of Keeper of the Royal Library was not part of her plan. Six wondered which story the new Great Scribe’s first official play would present. A fanciful tale of the Ruler’s latest victory on the battlefield? Or, more likely, a safer rendition of exploits from the spirit world.

Passing vast tables laden with vats of turkey and dog

stew, whole armadillos, monkeys, turtles and iguanas, Lady Six and Nurse paused to inspect the mountains of green avocado, yellow pineapple, orange papaya, and bowl after bowl of blood-red tomatoes. Finally, Six spotted her favourite sauce, a mix of cacao, tomato and chillies.

‘The illustrious Lady Six Sky,’ a taunting voice called. ‘Join my humble table.’

Six looked around and spotted the source. It was Black Deer, the warrior who had teased her at last year’s banquets that he would marry her. How could he think she would consider sullyng her lineage with the likes of him?

‘Thank you, but no,’ Six responded with open disdain. ‘I am seated with my brothers and sisters.’

‘I’ve captured sacrifices again, Lady Six,’ Black Deer boasted. ‘More than twenty enemies for your father.’

‘And?’

‘One day, I will be in such favour you will have no choice but to marry me.’

Six locked eyes with the unruly lout. ‘While it is true that even you, low-born as you are, might one day reap enough maize to dine with the Hero Twins, you shall never conquer sufficient enemies or capture enough slaves to gain my consent.’

The warrior’s face darkened, his lip curling into a sneer. ‘It’s not *your* consent I need.’

Lady Six turned her head, looked meaningfully at Nurse, and continued on her way to the Ruler’s family tables.



Picking her way through small portions of venison, beans and avocado, Six watched the Great Scribe's play. As Six had suspected she might, the Great Scribe had chosen to recount the story of the creation of the first humans by the spirits: first from wet clay, then from wood, and finally from life-giving maize.

She had added scenes of their father's ascent to the throne, forcing the actors to mime the Ruler cutting down his terrible Tik'al enemies and standing victorious over their slain bodies. All a lie, of course. Six's father, Flint Sky, Ruler of Mutul, had betrayed his hereditary house of Tik'al to form an alliance with the snakes of the north, Calakmul. Ever the opportunist, Flint Sky had been lured from allegiance to his family dynasty, Tik'al, with the promise of a new city-state of his own if he absconded and joined forces with Calakmul.

Six was deeply embarrassed by her father's defection, as well as resentful of how much more difficult it would make her ascent into history as the new Lady of Tik'al. It had forced her to study that much harder, meticulously scouring the laws and rituals of Tik'al and Calakmul to plot her course.

Once the play had concluded, Six rose to return to her chambers. She did not wish to mingle with the rowdy crowd any longer than necessary.

'Lady Six, please grace us with your noble presence.'

It was the presumptuous Black Deer again, gesturing with a greasy bone in his hand for her to join his table.

Six decided not to acknowledge him. She twitched

the side of her gown to indicate to Nurse that they would continue.

‘Here, I’ve saved the best part for you,’ the oaf called.

Six paused. ‘I beg your pardon?’

Black Deer turned to the table to pick something up with his other hand.

‘Just for you.’

Six stared at it in horror, unable to accept what she saw.

It was the head of her treasured Red Jaguar, severed from his tiny furry body, and . . .

Six screamed as she collapsed to the floor, her heart crushed with grief.

Weeping uncontrollably, Lady Six Sky, Princess of Mutul, vowed vengeance on the monster who had killed, cooked and eaten her only friend.



## CHAPTER ONE



*Now*

*Canberra, Australia*

Elizabeth slammed the front door to Canty's behind her, escaping the howling winds of Canberra's high summer. She paused, sinking into the vellichor – that sense of delicate wistfulness found only in secondhand bookshops.

'Come on, shift along,' Tanya said.

'Okay, okay.'

'What are we looking for again?'

'A present for Taid's birthday,' Elizabeth replied.

'Anything in particular?'

'Let's go to the language section. Maybe some Welsh books have turned up.'

Brushing past the shop's brilliant-blue, hand-sewn TARDIS kitchenette curtain, Elizabeth and Tanya squeezed through the narrow maze of floor-to-ceiling shelves in an attempt to reach the back of the shop.

'What are the stuffed ceiling apes about?'

Elizabeth looked up at the book-wrangling orang-utans that swung through the shop's upper reaches. 'An homage to Terry Pratchett's Librarian I'd say, come to visit us via L-space.'

'Awesome! Okay, which way?'

Elizabeth pointed beyond Tanya. 'In the last section.'

As they shuffled past the children's reading area, Elizabeth ran a covetous hand over the shop's most desirable item: a full-sized replica of Tut-Ankh-Amun's sarcophagus with a secret internal bookcase.

'Come on, bonesy girl. There's a bath at home with my name on it.'

Picking through piles of foreign-language books revealed some interesting finds.

'Your grandfather into Estonian?' Tanya asked.

'Nope.'

'Quechua?'

'Nope.'

'Yucatec?'

'No,' Elizabeth laughed. 'Be serious!'

'Well, maybe it's not Welsh, but it is Mayan,' Tanya nudged her. 'As in Mexico. As in Luke?'

After two years of intermittent separation, Elizabeth's boyfriend was finally coming home. Elizabeth ducked her head, then answered Tanya's grin with one of her own. 'I'm trying not to think about it.'

'When does he arrive?'

'In a week.'

'So exciting!'

'He wants to meet at the skeletal-analysis lab. He said he's bringing me something special from his dig.'

'That's, um, romantic?'

'Of course it is. That's where he first asked me out, so it makes sense that that's where he'd. . .'

'Propose!'

‘Don’t say it aloud. I don’t want to jinx it.’

‘Oh, come on. . . why else would his mum have his gran’s engagement ring polished just before he gets back?’

‘Maybe. Do you mind if we don’t talk about it?’

Tanya smirked impishly at Elizabeth. ‘Okay, but I’ll be thinking about him down on one knee right when I’m landing in Ulaanbaatar.’

‘Deal.’

Elizabeth returned to browsing the shelves. ‘I can’t see anything here.’

‘What about this?’

Tanya was holding up a volume on Welsh clothing through the ages, written in English.

‘Hmm. Maybe. I was hoping to find something in Welsh, but I’m sure Taid doesn’t have this one.’

‘Excellent, done. How about a cuppa next door before I hit the suds?’

Tanya’s visits cost her parents dearly in additional electricity for her daily hot baths in air-conditioned comfort. But it was a price they were happy to pay to entice their daughter home from the austere conditions of her excavation camp in Mongolia.

‘What’s the bill going to be like this time?’

‘Pretty high.’

Tanya wasn’t the least repentant.

After paying for the book at Canty’s front counter, Elizabeth and Tanya dashed through the blustery carpark into Le Café des Introvertis. Wending their

way through coffee-sipping patrons, they converged on the only unoccupied table. Elizabeth sank gratefully into a plush red chair.

‘Tea?’ Tanya asked.

‘Absolutely.’

As the background strains of Mozart washed over her, Elizabeth’s thoughts drifted to Luke’s promise of bringing her a gift from his excavation in Mexico. She hoped it was a symbol of their future together as a dynamic archaeological duo. Just imagine. . . Elizabeth and Luke traipsing from dig to dig like a modern-day Mary and Louis Leakey. Or perhaps Tessa Vernye and Mortimer Wheeler. Or even Agatha Christie and Max Mallowan – though preferably without the romantic scandals.

She couldn’t wait!

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Two days later, Elizabeth gathered with her three grandparents, her sister and her brother beneath festive blue-and-white bunting in the conservatory. The dining table was strewn from one end to the other in an excess of white linen, silver cutlery and crystal goblets to celebrate Taid’s birthday. Placing herself beneath the room’s sun-lit chandelier, Elizabeth was in a particularly buoyant mood. Not only had Taid seemed to like his present from her, but Luke had emailed overnight to set a time for their reunion at the lab.

Grandmère, Elizabeth's proudly Berber and fiercely French grandmother, had prepared a feast of Taid's Welsh favourites, insisting the meal be served in the French manner of four courses. 'It is the only civilised way, *non?*'

While Nainai Cho and Matty had helped Grandmère in the kitchen, Elizabeth and Sam had chosen to decorate the conservatory and serve the food, preferring the safety of these less-important tasks.

'Samantha, please bring in the entrée.'

'Yes, Grandmère.'

As Sam set down the first course on gleaming white plates, Taid asked Matty about the siblings' counselling. Elizabeth, Sam and Matty had completed their first thought-provoking session with Dr Strzelecki the previous day.

'How did you three go?'

Matty's eyes flicked to Elizabeth for reassurance. She nodded encouragingly. 'Good. It was good, Taid.'

'What did you discuss?'

'What each of us wants from the sessions.'

'That sounds like a good start.'

With four sets of feline eyes monitoring their every move, the family tucked into a rich first course of *brithyll a chig moch* – baked trout wrapped in bacon – with a tangy witlof salad for vegetarian Sam.

'Delicious, Madeleine,' Taid said. Grandmère smiled fondly at her husband and smoothed a hand over the dome of his head.



Loki, ever alert, darted under the table to retrieve a morsel that had fallen from Matty's fork.

'Mathieu,' Grandmère admonished.

'It was an accident,' Matty protested.

Grandmère harrumphed. 'No-one believes this.'

'Dr Strzelecki said we should have both group and individual sessions,' Matty said, attempting to distract attention from Paris, who had joined Loki to vacuum up the flakes of fish from around his feet.

A keen amateur cook, Elizabeth's beloved younger brother Matty had been injured in the car accident that had killed their mother. Just four years old at the time, he was left with severely damaged growth plates in his hips that required regular surgery to correct the resultant uneven growth in his legs. Matty's main concerns in the session with Dr Strzelecki had been how to handle his fear of his impending surgery, and how to stay focused on his dream of becoming a chef.

Taid looked at Elizabeth questioningly.

'The issues that affect me aren't the same as for Matty or Sam, and vice versa,' Elizabeth explained. 'Her suggestion made sense to me.'

'Do you agree?' Taid asked Sam.

'Yes. I'm most concerned about my degree,' Sam said.

While Sam had struggled in the past with both alcohol and a sense of life purpose, she was keen to return to her studies and to become an ardent defender of animals.

It was Elizabeth's turn. Oh well, honesty was supposedly the best policy. 'And I have a large mess to clean up after blaming my sister for something that wasn't her fault, and hurting everyone else in the process.' Elizabeth felt her cheeks burn as the words emerged from her mouth. 'I'm really sorry,' she said for the umpteenth time.

'We agreed no more apologies, remember?' Sam replied. 'It's getting kind of annoying. All I ask is that you pay attention in the sessions.'

Elizabeth had noticeably drifted off during one of Dr Strzelecki's monologues, daydreaming about Luke's impending return. Sam had taken it as a personal affront.

'And on that note,' Nainai Cho cut in, 'it's time for the next course.' She pushed her chair back and headed to the kitchen.

Such assertiveness was unusual for Elizabeth's reserved Chinese grandmother. Nainai had never fully recovered from the untimely death of her only son, Elizabeth's father, William, two short years ago. If Nainai showed any signs of distress it was best to accommodate her immediately, so Elizabeth jumped up to help clear away the entrée and serve the main course of *cig oen Cymreig â mêl* – honeyed Welsh lamb – accompanied by *stwnch*, potato and onion cake, peas, and cider gravy, and Sam's individual nut roast. The rich aromas of sweet baked meat, melted butter, and alcoholic gravy were mouth-watering, though Elizabeth

was grateful they had set up an air-conditioner for the day as a buffer against the heat outside.

As Elizabeth spooned a mound of *stwnch*, an addictive cream-laden carrot and parsnip mash, onto her plate, she marvelled at how quickly life could change. Less than a year ago she had sat at this table, miserable at the loss of her budding career in archaeology, resentful of having to support her family, and aching to be reunited with Luke. Now, despite the ongoing need to make reparations to her siblings, she felt good about being with them, okay about working at the Library, and eager to see Luke again. And – most importantly – her work last year on the fascinating Olmec ballplayer and her family had proved Elizabeth’s hiatus from archaeology was only temporary.

At this point in the celebration, Grandmère broke with all tradition and insisted that the table be cleared for Taid to open his main present before the next course – and with good reason. Grandmère had enlisted her grandchildren’s help on an internet shopping spree, enabling her to collect a wide range of Welsh goodies including pickled cockles, Halen Môn salt, sachets of Welsh iron water and many cans of Taid’s much-loved laverbread – boiled Welsh seaweed.

‘Everything from the hills of your home,’ Grandmère said in her warm Gallic accent.

‘*Diolch yn fawr, cariad,*’ Taid kissed Grandmère’s hand. ‘Thank you.’

‘*Et voilà!*’ Grandmère replied, lifting a cloth cover

from the next course's cheese platter.

'Oh, Madeline,' Taid exclaimed as he dove for the tray. Grandmère had scoured local markets until she found some genuine crumbling Caerphilly and a block of Collier's cheddar. Elizabeth was particularly happy about the second find. She loved crunching on the tiny pockets of calcium speckled through the Collier's.

The final course of dessert was a succulent Llandudno fruitcake, plump with raisins, sultanas and currants, accompanied by Grandmère's last present to Taid – a bottle of prized Welsh Penderyn whisky.

'Just one small nip each,' Taid suggested.

'Small,' Grandmère agreed.

Elizabeth smiled as the wash of alcohol burned the inside of her lower lip. By this time next week her life would have changed significantly again. She would be permanently reunited with Luke and could concentrate on doing an excellent job of helping her family for as long as required. Beyond that she could look forward to the day that she and Luke would be free to restart their life of adventure.



Elizabeth hummed with anticipation as she readied herself to meet Luke in the skeletal-analysis laboratory in just a few hours. Unable to sleep past the sun's first rays, she had already worked her unruly mop of hair into an attempted chignon. Next, she applied a light

layer of makeup in front of a fan, blotting beads of sweat as they appeared on her nose and cheeks. The solar passive design of the house worked well except for times like this – the fifth blisteringly hot day in a row.

Elizabeth crinkled her nose with concentration as she painted mascara onto her eyelashes. She stepped back to check her progress in the mirror. Elizabeth was slightly smug that only she had inherited her dear grandfather's Welsh-green eyes. Would her own children, Luke's children, have them too?

As Elizabeth stepped into her aqua dress with its thin red belt and matching flat red shoes, her excitement spiked. After frustrating years of waiting for Luke to notice her, then being patient through his often onerous requests, *then* being separated for almost two years, Elizabeth had been beyond surprised when it appeared he had decided to commit permanently. Men and their mysterious ways!

Just before midday, Elizabeth pulled into a parking spot near the laboratory. Her legs trembled as she collected a ticket, put it on her dashboard, checked her makeup once more in the side mirror, then walked towards the archaeology building.

She thought she spied Luke's silhouette inside as she made her way around to the entrance. She unlocked the external door and made her way down the hall, heart thumping loudly in her ears. She slid her key into the laboratory lock. This was it!

Walking into the beloved space, Elizabeth breathed

in its fusty air, looked to the left and there he was. Her Luke. Elizabeth covered the distance between them in the blink of an eye and launched herself into his arms. She looked up into his face, smiling madly at the wonderful sight of his startling light green eyes, thick golden hair, and beautifully tanned skin. 'Hello!'

Luke smiled a rather serious smile, gave her a squeeze and let his arms drop back to his sides.

'Hi.'

There were shadows in his expression that Elizabeth hadn't seen before. Poor thing, he must be terribly jetlagged.

'You look so tired. Did you come here straight from the airport?' Elizabeth asked, looking around the room for his bags. There weren't any in sight. 'Did your parents drop you off? Not to worry, I'll get you home soon enough and you can sleep for as long as you like. It's so wonderful to see you!'

Elizabeth reached out to touch Luke's face. He put his hand over hers and brought it back down to rest between them.

'It's good to see you too,' he said slowly. 'I have something to show you.'

Luke didn't seem his normal self. But then, they hadn't seen each other for over a year and perhaps he was nervous about proposing. Elizabeth assumed he had picked the ring up from his mother when she met him at the airport.

'Bet I can guess what it is!'

Luke didn't answer, but instead moved to the back wall of the lab that was lined with cupboards containing specimens. He laid out a mat on a nearby bench and pulled on a pair of gloves, then took a box out of the cupboards, opened it, and carefully laid an intriguing skull on the blue felt.

'It's from Nojpetén, the very last Maya city,' Luke said.

Displaying the now-familiar long, high forehead of Mesoamerican artificial cranial deformation, this skull also had two rows of sharply carved, highly decorated teeth inlaid with darkest green jade.

'Fantastic!'

'There are over sixty sets of remains here, Lizzy. I've organised for you to be the one who analyses them as a thank you for all your help over the years. I know how much you love this kind of thing.'

Awesome! Elizabeth quashed a desire to drag the remains of the entire site out of the cupboards and start going through them right now. That wasn't why she was here; she had to focus.

'It's a wonderful gift Luke. Thank you; you know me so well.'

'They're from a dig on Flores Island in Lake Petén Itzá in Guatemala,' Luke continued. 'From the bottom of a sacrificial cenote. We had to abseil twenty metres down into the well every morning.'

Prickles of uncertainty swirled beneath Elizabeth's skin.

‘What do you mean, Guatemala? You were in Mexico.’

Luke focused his attention on the skull. ‘Back in September, after I interviewed for the jobs here, my site closed due to flooding. Some of the team moved on to this dig, so I followed them.’

‘I don’t understand. You’ve been in Guatemala for months?’

Luke was fidgeting with something in the box. ‘I just. . . it was a good opportunity for more experience, to help me find an ongoing job.’

None of this was making sense. ‘But you’d already done the interviews.’

‘For here, yes. I did other interviews, though, in the US.’

Elizabeth was becoming annoyed. She had put so much effort into helping Luke get his tutoring position here so he could return to Canberra to be with her. Why had he applied for jobs in America? And they had spoken every fortnight on Skype for the past few months – why hadn’t Luke mentioned he was in Guatemala?

‘Luke, none of this is adding up. I can understand if you’re nervous, but what you’re about to ask me doesn’t explain why you didn’t tell me where you were.’

Luke looked at her in confusion. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I ran into your mum and Sophie in the mall last year. She was getting an engagement ring polished. I know what you’re doing, it’s okay.’



Luke dropped something and bent down to pick it up.

Ah-ha! Elizabeth relaxed completely. This was all a trick to distract her, albeit a fairly annoying one. He was getting down on one knee. Here it comes, she thought.

Luke stood up. Between his hands was . . . a tag from a specimen. Not a little velvet-covered box. Not a ring. Luke was staring at her with dread on his face.

'I'm sorry Lizzy,' Luke's voice was anguished.

What on earth was going on?

'I di-didn't expect her to get pregnant,' he stuttered, stumbling over the words.

The world retreated. The only thing Elizabeth could see was Luke's mouth, his lips moving. His words reached her ears as though from a great distance.

'I was careful, I swear, I never thought you'd find out. But my mum knows, and she insists I do the right thing. So I proposed to Kaitlyn yesterday. We're getting married as soon as the baby's born. . . '