

One

Jade French stepped from the cab transfixed by the tangled mass of vines nearly obliterating the hotel's wide front porch. The web seemed even more overgrown than when she was here two months ago. But it sent a heady aroma—not too sweet, not too herbal—into the mid-morning air and helped erase some of the uncertainty rolling through her. No.

No hesitation—this was the exact right thing to do.

As she wandered toward the front steps something squawked on the far end of the porch and she moved in for a better view. Two gorgeous macaws—one red and one blue—in an immense brass cage, sat on thick pieces of a tree branch watching her. One tilted its head and squawked. The sound was harsh in the soundless neighborhood.

Best friend Mari wrestled her backpack from the taxi, walked a few steps toward the house, then dropped the pack on the driveway. Dust puffed into the air and she coughed.

Jade laughed. "Some crushed oyster shells would really help keep down the dust."

"Ya think?"

Jade walked toward Mari to gather her things, pointing over her shoulder. "Aren't they beautiful?"

"What?" Mari frowned.

"The birds." Jade gestured again. "I wonder if they talk. And who's been taking care of them."

Mari Anderson, tall, thin and high-maintenance, approached the porch, went up two stairs, held onto the post, and peered left. Then she returned, her lips in the familiar flat line that never boded well for what she was about to say. "Jade." Mari's voice was low yet full of warning. "There are no birds on that porch."

Jade retraced her steps to the porch; the birds, and the big heavy cage, were gone. O-kay. Further thoughts of the birds were interrupted by the cabbie's chuckle as he thumped her things on top of each other in front of the steps: eight suitcases and a cosmetic bag—everything she owned. Well, everything she hadn't sold to make this move.

"Why are you laughing?" Jade asked the driver.

"You will find out," he said in a heavily accented voice.

"Jade."

The renewed plea laced with warning in her friend's voice came through loud and clear. And so did the implication from the cabbie. But Jade would not be dissuaded from this mission. *Could not* leave here even if she tried. Some things in life were, to use her father's expression, predestined. On top of that, she was just too exhausted to think about any of it right now.

She moved once again onto the steps. A squawk came from the end of the porch. The red bird shoved its curved beak through the bars, and held on with sharp looking talons. No birds? How could Mari not see birds? They were as solid and alive as Jade herself.

Well, one of them must be *really* tired. She really hoped it was her friend.

Jade paid the cab driver and gathered a carton of groceries and two paper bags from the backseat. Then she climbed onto the porch, sparing one more sidelong glance at

the parrots. The blue one opened its mouth and let loose a squawk that stood every arm-hair on end. Mari waited beside her with a suitcase in each hand. She gave no reaction at all to the noise coming from the end of the porch.

The key, on a simple keychain—real Mexican gold—had come in the mail along with a letter postmarked here in Tulum—the location of the lawyer’s office. Jade had memorized the letter’s words. Easy to do since it was only four words. Key to front door.

Juggling groceries with one arm, she opened the front door. It moved on silent hinges. A burst of stale air nearly knocked her back outside. But Jade continued into the two-story foyer with the dark-gray painted walls that soon would glow in fresh color, with bright sun shooting through the triangular windows above the front door and lighting up everything in its path. She dropped the key on a console table against the stairway wall. Fake flowers, covered with dust, sat in a handmade vase in the center.

She shuffled along the dingy wood floor past a long narrow dining room. The teak table, with a dozen chairs pushed up tight, looked handmade. In spite of the accumulated dust from the year it had been empty, it was easy to imagine people laughing and talking as they loaded their plates from the matching buffet table against the half-wall shared with the kitchen.

From there, a wide archway gave access into the enormous cooking room that spanned the entire back of the building. Late afternoon light streamed through wall-to-wall windows illuminating elderly appliances and timeworn cabinets. Jade slid the box onto the counter and eased the bags up beside it. She stopped a moment to peer outside. The backyard lay in a jumbled panorama, a veritable twist of vegetation bent under the breeze coming off the Caribbean. Even so, it was clear the area had been designated for hotel guests, with meandering brickways and well-placed landscaping. Someday it would look pristine once again.

A hundred feet along one path, an elderly man with his back to her, sat cross-legged on the ground. He wore long gray hair tied in a ponytail with a leather strap. The top of his head was bald and very tan. Forearms, extending from wide shoulders, lay on his thighs; his hands—at least the left one—were open. From his body language, she guessed his eyes were closed. Something about him seemed—

“This place is fabulous!” Mari deposited a box of groceries beside Jade’s with a thump.

Jade flung open the back door and ran outside hoping to speak to the gentleman.

“Where are you going?” Mari called.

She wanted to introduce herself, welcome the man to her home, and invite him to visit anytime. She stopped twenty paces from the house. Where on earth did he go? He couldn’t have fit between the thick-packed jungle of trees and vines, so how did he get past without her seeing him?

Chapter one, from *Zipacna’s Legacy*. Click [here](#) to buy the ebook, paperback, or large print versions.

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