
Below the Equator

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DEDICATION

For two of the most influential women in my life

Beverly Antaeus

and

Rachel Romm Gober

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Part One

The Door is Round and Open

Chapter 1

Day 1 — *Hotel Ambassador*

2010

We'd cleared Customs in the middle of the night and, after a few hours of restless sleep, were gathered at the counter of the tiny second floor breakfast room in the *Hotel Ambassador*. Paula and Cheryl sat on either side of me, conversing in Spanish, their unfamiliar words reverberating between the walls like the discordant song of *Below the Equator* (The Hunter Series) exotic birds.

There had been no way for us to identify each other on the plane from Miami to Peru, but later, after landing at the airport in Iquitos, the three of us had congregated around an American man who held a sign in his hands: *Amazonia Wilderness Tours*.

The man said his name was Chris.

Correspondence from *Amazonia Wilderness Tours* had all been signed 'Chris,' and I'd figured Chris was our guide and that the name belonged to a woman. I based this conclusion on the magazine ad that had first caught my *Below the Equator* (The Hunter Series) attention:

'Amazonia! One of the world's greatest adventures! An empowering trip for women led by the mighty Amazon's only female guide! A wilderness experience that will change your life forever!'

Caught off guard by the fact that Chris was a man, I'd wondered briefly what else I might have drawn mistaken conclusions about and what surprises were in store for me here, below the equator.

We'd introduced ourselves as we waited for our luggage.

Paula had been dressed in the vest of a man's charcoal pinstriped suit, tailored to showcase her generous bosom, and loose pleated linen pants. In contrast to my own unsubstantial stringiness, she was voluptuous, a word rarely used, but decidedly accurate.

Cheryl was much shorter than my five feet, ten inches and her figure looked soft and shapeless. I'd always been crazy about red hair — and hers was gorgeous.

Chris told us he'd lived in Peru Below the Equator (The Hunter Series) ever since he finished college and had started *Amazonia Wilderness Tours* fifteen years ago. He pulled out a bandana and polished the lenses of his thick glasses, then mopped up the sweat pouring down his head. "So, you must be Robin Hunter," Below the Equator (The Hunter Series) Chris said, looking at me.

I'd wanted to meet my group with my best foot forward, but it had been a long day of travel and I was wiped-out. The circles under my eyes looked as dark to me as bruises. Below the Equator (The Hunter Series) I was wearing jeans, and the moment I stepped off the plane, I'd begun to sweat.

Introductions completed, we'd located our luggage and carted it to the line waiting to go through Customs. Suddenly determined to test my assumptions about the trip, I asked Chris, "Our guide is a woman, right? And Paula, Cheryl, and I aren't the only women on the trip, are we?"

"You three gals got *Amazonia Wilderness Tours* all to yourselves," Chris had replied as we finished with Customs. "That's me of course, plus Martín and the fabled Peruvian guide, Bernadina. You'll meet them in the morning. Grab your bags, ladies, and follow me," he instructed as he began dragging our overstuffed duffels from the airport lobby to a waiting bus.

At the *Hotel Ambassador*, Paula, Cheryl, and I had been given one large room furnished with three twin-sized beds. I dumped my bags at the foot of the middle bed, stripped down to my t-shirt and underwear, and climbed in.

Cheryl had flopped down on the bed to my left. She emptied her purse, spread its contents around her, then sat, staring into space.

Paula sat on the bed to my right, lifted an old, tobacco-brown felt fedora from her head and let

her platinum-colored hair fall free.

Apparently none of us had the energy or inclination to attempt conversation, so after a couple of minutes of silence, I'd pulled the dingy sheet over me and snapped off the light on the table beside my bed.

Cheryl continued to sit, and if it hadn't been for Paula and the fact that I was completely exhausted, I wouldn't have been able to close my eyes. In spite of the news that there would be men on the trip, and my disappointment over the very abbreviated list of participants, I felt a rush every time I realized that there I was, beginning my adventure below the equator.

Now, the clock on the wall said seven a.m., an hour at which I was normally wearing an expensive Below the Equator (The Hunter Series) suit and comfortably ensconced behind Below the Equator (The Hunter Series) my desk at the prestigious Seattle law firm of Fitzgerald & Fitzgerald. Instead, I was in Iquitos, Peru. Everything I'd brought with me was new and I wasn't sure about the fit of the cargo shorts I was wearing. None Below the Equator (The Hunter Series) of us had gotten up in time to shower and my dark brown hair felt limp. It was a little too short to tie up, but I'd done my best.

I avoided my reflection in the mirror on the wall I was facing. I preferred Below the Equator (The Hunter Series) to watch the Peruvian woman behind the counter as she made our breakfast. Thin slices of white bread, lined on a cookie sheet, toasted in the oven under a single glowing coil. An egg blistered in a Below the Equator (The Hunter Series) hot plate and she turned it. She made sandwiches one by Below the Equator (The Hunter Series) one, a slice of ham and an egg. Chris came in, stood at the end of the counter, and began speaking in Spanish to our cook.

I rotated my neck, monitoring the precursors of yet another migraine. I chalked up my unsettled stomach to either the stresses of the preceding week or one of the vaccinations I'd gotten before setting out for Peru. I felt waterlogged and badly in need of a shower. And a few hours of sound sleep.

Cheryl was perched on the stool to my left, her elbows on the counter, her fingernails picking at the cellophane on a pack of cigarettes. Her shorts and top were closely matched shades of blue that flattered the color of her hair, but were much too monochrome for me.

Paula was on my right and dressed in the same clothes she'd worn on the plane. She had beautiful gray eyes, which Below the Equator (The Hunter Series) she'd outlined in kohl. Faint creases on her face indicated that she might be a decade — or even two — older than me.

“¿Cómo estás, chica?” Paula said. *“¿Dormiste bien?”*

“English, please,” I sighed.

I'd immediately liked Paula and hated admitting my linguistic inadequacy.

“Oh, no problem,” she smiled. “I was just asking how you slept.”

“Fine, considering it took the air conditioner all night to wring six molecules of water from the air,” I laughed. “I could hardly breathe! And is it my imagination, or was the room totally Below the Equator (The Hunter Series) infested with fleas?”

“I was awake all night,” Cheryl cut in.

“Because...?” I asked.

You have to close your eyes to sleep, I thought, recalling how unnerving I’d found Cheryl last night as she sat staring into space.

“Because of all the noise,” Cheryl answered.

Confused, I glanced at Paula. I had no idea what Cheryl was referring to as the three of us had barely spoken in the room we’d shared.

“I don’t know about you two, but I wasn’t expecting men on the trip,” I said, switching subjects. “I deal with them all day long at work and was really looking forward to a break.”

“Yes,” Paula said with a shrug, “but it’s Chris’s Below the Equator (The Hunter Series) tour company.”

“And, if his company is so well established, why are there only three of us here?” I persisted, shifting my eyes toward the end of the counter where Chris sat, bulky and rectangular as a refrigerator box.

Cheryl interrupted, saying something in Spanish that I found totally unintelligible.

“Are we supposed to be able to speak Spanish?” I demanded before yanking a thick fold of stapled papers from my pocket and rifling through the pages. “Is it someplace here in the paperwork? Did I miss it? I feel like an imbecile.”

“You brought the trip paperwork with you?” Paula laughed as the Peruvian Below the Equator (The Hunter Series) woman shoved a plate of breakfast and a cup two-thirds filled with water toward each of us. “That’s so funny.”

“No, what’s funny is that you and Cheryl woke up speaking Spanish this morning,” I said. “High-school Spanish was a long time ago.”

I dropped a tea Below the Equator (The Hunter Series) bag in my cup and watched it float. The water wasn’t hot enough to leach out any color.

“Don’t worry,” Paula said, adjusting her clothing over her remarkable cleavage. “It will all come rushing back.”

Cheryl ignored the food on the plate in front of her while Paula picked up her breakfast and began to eat.

“But if I can’t understand what everyone’s saying,” I groused, “I’ll feel totally left out.”

I’d bailed on the *español* intensive for two reasons, and both occurred on the same day less than a week earlier. Right before leaving work on Friday, I’d been devastated by the news that my sure-thing promotion had been given to my arch-rival. Then, as I arrived at home and was screwing up the courage to tell my husband, Mike, he handed me the phone. That’s when my mother told me that Phoebe, one of my younger sisters, had tried to kill herself.

Mike stood by, listening to my side of the conversation, then took the phone from my hand and replaced Below the Equator (The Hunter Series) it with a bourbon on the rocks the moment I said “goodbye” to my mother.

“Phoebe swallowed a bunch of pills,” I told my husband, “just like my dad did.”

I tossed Below the Equator (The Hunter Series) back the Marker’s Mark, thinking about the fact that Phoebe and I hadn’t spoken in three years.

“Why did she do it?” Mike asked.

“My mom doesn’t know,” I answered. “Wow. Shit. My head is spinning.”

Below The Equator The Hunter Series

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