

THE TRAVELERS WITHIN
INTO THE UNKNOWN

A NOVEL BY

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“I soon realized that no journey carries one far unless, as it extends into the world around us, it goes an equal distance into the world within.”

- Lillian Smith

Chapter 1

April watched quietly from her desk. Across the room, the uniformed *SENAFRONT* officer escorted the strange man through the front door and into the central office.

Well, there he is... she thought. Though she'd been made aware of the stranger's forthcoming arrival, the circumstances which had brought him here still left so many questions unanswered.

Earlier that morning, the Panamanian paramilitary group tasked with patrolling the wild, war-torn border between Panama and Colombia, the *Servicio Nacional de Fronteras*, had picked the man up on a country road along the smuggler's jungle's edge.

April gazed on as the soldier reluctantly handed over his captive to the awaiting U.S. security personnel and then stormed from the building in a bluster. April's jaw tensed.

The disheveled stranger, a caucasian man in his late thirties, carried with him a black duffel bag, and appeared both feral and tamed to her in the same thought. His pleated slacks and button-up shirt were heavily soiled, stained and tattered, and seemed oversized for his stature,

hanging and drooping from his frame like a carnival barker. His matted hair and beard were long and bedraggled, and his skin was dark and leathery from the sun. He looked like he'd been raised by wolves, yet there was something noticeably civilized, almost dignified in his mannerisms.

Who the hell is this guy?

As the peculiar man's inspection concluded, the security officer raised a pointed finger towards April's desk. The stranger turned to face her across the busy room.

Air trickled through April's teeth.

The young consulate clerk straightened in her chair in preparation for their impending meeting, pausing as the two's eyes suddenly locked. Though she'd been expecting him all day, now that he was finally here, she found herself unexpectedly beguiled by his appearance.

The man took a seat across from her, and an odorous waft of sweat and Right Guard floated into April's nostrils. In the three-plus years she'd endured at the U.S. Consulate in Panama City, two distinct types of men typically came to her desk. Hungover American businessmen who'd lost their passports in nightclubs or taxis during the previous night's company card fueled bender. Or, U.S. contract workers from the Canal Zone who'd found themselves in trouble with local authorities due to overzealous partaking of the rampant drugs and prostitution in the area. These were the men she knew from her time here. The men she "understood" and, more importantly, could easily handle.

The gentleman now sitting across from her, however... April wasn't sure just what he was.

A courteous smile curled from her lips as her thin, toned hand extended across the desk. "May I please see your passport, Mr. Hill?" she asked.

A simple request, yet the man's unflinching gaze remained on April. His hazel-green

eyes peering below a dusty brow, transfixed on her in a trancelike state.

April began to fidget in her seat. “Excuse me, sir, can I please see your passport?” she insisted yet again, raising her voice a notch to feign increased authority.

Again, the stranger offered neither response nor reaction.

A lengthy silence and the distant clatter of office sounds filled the void between them.

April settled back into her seat. *What the hell?* She mulled.

The young woman from Virginia was no stranger to self-reflection and deemed herself in possession of a great many positive traits, patience indeed being one of them. But patience in the face of being ignored was something altogether different.

Before she had a chance to bite her lip, a frustrated yawp suddenly burst from April’s lips. “Hello! Mr. Hill!” she barked. Her loud bellow wrenching the mysterious man from his catatonic gaze and attracting more than a few glares from the surrounding office clerks.

The man jolted upright in his chair as if struck by lightning. Pigpen-esque micro clouds of dust springing from his shoulders. “What?!... What’s that now?” he stammered.

“Your passport?!” she demanded again.

The man’s eyes followed April’s glaring pupils downward to find her palm outstretched on the desk before him. “Oh yes, of course,” he mumbled, fumbling through his pockets and handing April the passport. “Sorry about that.”

Grasping it from his fingers, April opened the worn blue booklet and proceeded to commence her inquiry. “Mr. Hill, where exactly have you been for the last—”

Suddenly, April’s voice faltered. Her eyes lingered, transfixed, on an oddity immediately visible in the glossy booklet in her hand. In the next few prolonged seconds, her face gradually transformed. Annoyance... Shock... Puzzlement.

What the hell? She thought yet again.

April raised her gaze back to the man and squinted. “Mr. Hill...is this...is this an old picture?” she muttered.

“No... not really. Why do you ask?” he replied.

April contemplated his response but was incapable of articulating a polite retort. Instead, she continued to survey the man from beard to belt. “No reason,” she answered.

Turning her eyes back down to the passport in her hands, the clean-cut man in the photograph stared up from the lustrous page, challenging her to recognize him. His round face was pale, chubby and clean-shaven. He smiled awkwardly and toothily from below a humdrum ten-dollar haircut, and his double chin poked out above his buttoned collar. His cherubic cheeks were rosy and bulbous. He was average looking in nearly every way.

April glanced back up at the rugged man across the desk from her, his hair hanging to his bearded chin, his arms dark and sinewy. He bore a marginal, but unmistakable resemblance to the person in the picture, but April couldn't fathom that they were one and the same. She glimpsed at the Date of Issue on the passport, and her stomach sank.

It's only seven months old. What in the world happened to this guy?

April felt dazed. “Mr. Hill...” was all she could muster. Words which had always been there for her, now felt lost beneath a sea of questions and theories sloshing around in her head. “I just... I just need to know two things from you right now,” she began. “Do you think you can help me understand some things here?”

“I can certainly try,” he replied.

The young woman slid her brown hair behind her ears, squared her shoulders and straightened in her seat. *Get it together, April.*

She placed the passport on the desk and eyed the man with newfound earnestness. “Well, Mr. Hill... the first thing I need to know, really, is... how did you end up way down here at the Colombian border in the first place? This is a long way from Texas,” she finished with a sigh.

The man offered a half-grin of understanding. “It is now, isn’t it,” he muttered.

April took a sip of water from the glass on her desk. Though she was relieved she’d been able to vaguely articulate the first of her two pressing questions, she was well aware that the next was far more significant

And carried vastly darker implications.

She braced herself and began. “Also, Mr. Hill ...” she faltered, “and more importantly... Can you please tell me anything about a missing young man from the U.S. named Jonah Shaughnessy? From what I gather, you were the last known person to be seen traveling with him. But that was nearly a month ago.”

April watched her interviewee closely. Time seemed unmoving, anxiously anticipating his reaction. Barely breathing.

The man casually slumped back in his chair and locked eyes with the young woman. His lips formed into an unexpected grin. “Well, April, do you want the long version or the short?”