

A
GODDESS
AMONG
MEN

DANIEL DAVIDSOHN

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THE KARMA CODE
LEAVE HER OUT

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*“As for me, I want others to have the defects,
rather than share them.”*

— Allan Kardec

PART 1

Julian Welch & Alan Reid
Early 20th Century

1

It wasn't just another country. It was a different planet entirely. Turning his head, Julian saw ships on one side and a myriad of foreign-looking people on the other—brown-skinned, Asian, and Caucasian. He sat up coughing, realizing he was left alone on a stone quay. There was no sight of the RMS *Amazon*.

I've made it!

The fever had gone, but he was still weak.

“American?” said a commanding voice out of nowhere.

He swung his torso back, almost lost his balance while rising, and faced an abnormally tall, 260-pound colossus standing with his hands on his waist looking down at him. The man wore boots, earth-colored pants, a dirty white shirt, and a cowboy hat. And he looked young, approximately the same age as Julian.

There were tales of excesses in the jungle. Fortunes to be made and pleasures to be had that attracted young

dreamers like Julian Welch. He'd said farewell to his parents and headed to the port of Southampton, where he'd boarded the RMS *Amazon*. By his own estimates—and after he'd paid for a second-class passenger fare to Brazil—his savings would last for two months. He hoped to find a job in the rubber industry. His father's last words were inspiring. *We'll be here for you when you fail*. Julian laughed bitterly at the memory.

The weather got warmer as the days went by, indicating that the ship was approaching its destination. He felt his body burning with fever during the nine hundred miles from the Atlantic Ocean up the Amazon River. The destination was the inland Port of Manaus, the largest city on the Amazon. It was a hot and humid trade hub that became prominent along with the rubber boom, bringing luxury to what used to be a small jungle outpost.

The sudden riches of the city were best symbolized by the tales Julian had heard of the construction of an unthinkable opera house in the middle of the forest. The wealthy people would hang Venetian chandeliers on their ceilings and order extravagant velvet-covered mahogany chairs. Laundry was sent to Europe, if you really wanted to get things done properly. Rubber was the fuel that made extravagance possible.

The trip to Brazil had been challenging. Julian had lost considerable weight, ending up skinnier and more fragile than when he'd left his middle-class house in Tottenham.

Now back on solid ground, he found steadiness once more. *Thank God.*

And an incredible mugginess. It was like being in a stew of your own perspiration—sticky and gross. He had no memory of disembarking. *Someone was kind enough to leave me here.*

“English,” Julian finally said.

“Alan Reid. Texas,” the giant said.

“Julian Welch.”

“You leaving?”

“No ... I’ve just arrived, actually.” He glanced around at the port activity. “I mean, this is Manaus, isn’t it?”

Alan nodded, sizing up Julian with his protuberant, street-trained eyes. “Let me guess. Rubber?”

“Yes. What do you know about it?” Julian said.

“Not much ... You got any money?”

Julian shrugged. “A little. I’m looking to get into the business.”

Alan laughed. “Forget it.”

“Well, I need a job. Anything.”

“That makes two of us. I’m kind of broke myself.”

Alan took off his hat and scratched his sweaty blond hair. “What do you know about railways?”

Julian stared at the Texan. He didn’t know what to think of Alan Reid, what he wanted, or how he could be of help. At least they spoke the same language, which was a start.

“I mean construction,” Alan explained.

“Nothing. Why?”

“They gonna build a railway.”

“Who?”

“Some Yankee hired by the Brazilians.”

“In the middle of a bloody forest? Right, then. So, what do *you* know about construction?”

“Not a damn thing. But it ain’t gonna hurt to learn.”

Julian spent a moment evaluating the situation.

“Where do we apply for a job?”

“I know just the place.”

“Good ... I also need to find accommodation,” Julian said as he stood up, but he was so weak he couldn’t lift his bag.

“Gimme that,” the Texan said helpfully.

“Wait. Why are you helping me?”

“I’m glad you asked. I ain’t helping. I’m investing in you.”

Alan moved fast, despite his size. Julian found it hard to keep up with him.

“Five minutes and we’ll be there. Can you make it?” Alan said, looking back at Julian.

“I suppose I can. You were saying—”

“We’re in a tough place, Jules.”

“Julian.”

“Yeah, Jules ... A jungle of heartless men. It makes sense to team up with folks that speak the same language, don’t you think?” Alan looked back again and waited until Julian nodded. “Thought so.”

“Where are”—Julian couldn’t finish; a cough

interrupted him—“we going?”

“The Hotel Cassina. Best in town.”

“I can’t pay for it.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll stay with me.”

“I thought you were broke.”

“I said *kind* of broke. But not yet.”

“I’ll pay you back when I can.”

“You’d better ... You need to put on some weight. And deal with the damn cough.”

They left the port area and reached the heavily European-influenced city center. Julian was particularly attracted to the mulattas, women with visible European and African descent who were as beautiful as an article he’d read in an English newspaper described them. A mix of rich and poor, locals and foreigners, and the bustle in the streets turned Manaus into an improbably cosmopolitan city.

“Here we are,” Alan announced, warmly greeted by a porter’s handshake at the entrance of the Hotel Cassina. Julian felt like an intruder when the same porter stood in his way. “He’s with me,” Alan yelled from inside.

Julian walked into the lobby, dragging himself as fatigue set in. Alan had apparently already arranged for his stay there. *I need to be careful with this one*, Julian thought.

“Two-story, twenty-five rooms, the meeting point for businessmen, politicians, and intellectuals, my friend. A bohemian man’s favorite place in the whole

jungle!” Alan described the Cassina.

There was a ballroom designed with Oriental motifs, round tables, and chairs brought all the way from Europe, and silk curtains all around. Next to the access staircase was a stage for artistic presentations equipped with electric chandeliers and noble hardwood.

They ascended the staircase.

“The food’s great. Boy, you can have anything you want—Russian caviar, champagne from France, Norwegian codfish, salmon, and sturgeon ... I tell you what, if you fancy a virgin, that could be arranged too. The concierge and I are good friends,” Alan said.

“Right.”

“This is home, Jules,” Alan went on babbling as they got into their room. “Nice Italian furniture, don’t you agree? American spring mattress, goose-down pillows, and Indian satin cushions.”

“I need a bath.”

“Yeah. You go ahead and wash off the jinx. I’ll be downstairs inquiring. Oh, and, uh, you take that bed over there. I’d appreciate it if you kept a distance from my stuff.”

“Of course,” Julian said.

When Alan left him alone, Julian sat on his bed and took in his immediate reality. He was in the fanciest hotel in town, for which he wouldn’t need to pay a penny, and already learning about the city. Other than the unpleasant crossing of the Atlantic, things looked promising. Someone was building a railway in the

forest; a job was on the horizon. It was starting to look like a plan. He would tell all of that to his parents when he got a chance to write them, determined not to be the failure they predicted he would be. A warm bath and a clean bed were all he wished for now.

In a private room behind the stage of the Cassina, the soft, velvet voice of a soprano filled the air with Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. The room was poorly lit, but clear enough for anyone to observe Alan Reid's forehead showing the first signs of extreme overheating. Beads of sweat began to form, accumulate rapidly, and slide down his desperate, rectangular face. A drop of sweat fell into his glass of whiskey.

I'll be damned.

"Do you need some water?" asked the raspy voice of El Pepe Steward, the cause of Alan's perspiration. At a table cluttered with tobacco and alcohol, the offer of a glass of water was an offense.

"No thanks, Pepe." *Go to hell, Pepe. I want you to show your cards. I've got a set of queens. If you got something better than that, I'm screwed.*

"Are you sure?" El Pepe teased as he smiled with all of his disgusting gold teeth.

Alan forced a smile. And as he did, another drop of sweat entertained the other three players who were like jackals waiting for that humongous man to faint at any moment. With them was Commander Sebastião

Alcantara, the chief of the military police of Manaus, and an obstinate bribe taker; Pedro Oliveira, a notary public and dedicated husband with a weakness for prostitutes; and Gustav Keller, a European banker specializing in money laundering. Eight hungry eyes saw when the tiny drop fell into the Texan's mouth, and instinctively, he licked his lips.

Alan was in trouble, suffering his share of bad luck. No amount of muscle would help him there.

“Come on, Pepe ... What've you got there? I bet you ain't got nuttin',” Alan teased with a heavy Texan accent. *For the love of God, hurry up and show me your damn cards!*

El Pepe moved slowly. He seemed to enjoy how a tough-looking guy like Alan was suffering—that loud and young Texan, always bragging about his business but never showing the fruits of it. El Pepe turned over the cards one at a time. Alan's forced smile faded in synchrony with what they revealed, and with the dying pitch of the soprano in the background. By now, Alan was close to crying. It became evident that El Pepe had better cards.

The massacre started with two aces, and then El Pepe stopped his hands for an instant and looked at Alan. No smiles now. The Mexican wanted to make it clear what the consequences of the game were: El Pepe Steward always came to collect his gambling debts. He'd built a reputation for himself in Manaus and Belém—enchanting, rich, and violent.

The Mexican showed the third card: another ace. It was the end for Alan.

The fourth card just continued the pattern and brought the smile back to El Pepe's face. Another ace. The robust and now red-faced Texan spread his thick lips in a pathetic attempt to smile. But it was game over. He stood up, looking at each of the players, and tipped his hat. Outsmarting them, like he'd promised his mother he would do to rich foreigners, was nothing but a young man's delusion. Those men were not the teenagers of San Antonio.

"Gentlemen, I'm pretty much done," Alan said.

"See you soon," said El Pepe, the rattlesnake. Alan stepped away from the table and left that room knowing he'd made a terrible mistake.

He crossed the corridor behind the stage where the soprano was being applauded. *Hell*. He tensed up, thinking he couldn't pay El Pepe. How long would it take for the Mexican trader to figure out it was up to God and El Pepe himself? Alan was smart enough to know the forest was a big place to hide, but at times, the world seemed too small when it came to troubles.

He got back to his room, letting out a prolonged sigh, his mind running quick calculations. There was no short-term solution. He would have to retreat and find a way to get stronger. He tilted his head to the side. Julian had fallen asleep with his dirty clothes on, leaving a stink in the room. But that was the Englishman's problem. The only reason Julian was enjoying a clean

bed was to make Alan's escape easier in case he lost to El Pepe.

Alan moved with the agility of a lightweight boxer and the soundlessness of a professional thief. He grabbed his stuff, put it in a bag that was half full of clothes, and turned to Julian when he was by the door. *Good luck, my friend*, he wished. Julian would need it.

Down at the lobby, the concierge saw Alan leaving with his bag on his back.

"Taxi, Mr. Reid?"

"Not tonight, Victor. Thanks. I'll just say hello to the girls, bring them some gifts. I'll come back later when my partner wakes up." Alan winked.

Victor smiled. "I'm sure they'll love it."

Alan left the Hotel Cassina on foot and disappeared into the city night.

A few hours after the Texan had left, Julian heard knocks on his door and woke up. He coughed terribly, saw the sun beginning to rise through the window, and realized he was alone. Alan Reid's belongings were gone.

"Just a moment," he said.

But the knocks got louder. Julian was confused, still half lying on his elbows. Next, he heard a loud bang and watched the door violently open all the way, slamming against the wall. Two rough-looking men entered, sending chills up Julian's spine.

“Alan Reid?” one man asked.

“I—I don’t know where he is,” Julian said.

It meant nothing. Before Julian could understand the situation, hands and fists were all over him. “Wait!” he pleaded in vain.

Julian’s eyesight went dark after a punch in his face. A succession of powerful blows made breathing a struggle, sent shock waves across his entire body, and caused him a pain he’d never experienced before. He could do nothing but accept the punishment and hope that it would end soon.

It did when he passed out.

Julian was dragged all the way to the hotel kitchen. There, the two henchmen pulled him by the arms like he was a piece of rag. Next, they emptied a bucket of water on his head. When he opened one of his eyes—barely—he saw a man grinning at him with golden teeth, and another he recognized as the concierge.

“Mr. Welch, can you tell us where Mr. Reid might be?” the concierge said.

Julian shook his head no.

“I’m afraid someone needs to pay for the room.”

“I understand ... but I have no money.”

Julian wanted to explain his situation, but he lacked the strength to do it. He preferred dying to losing the money his father had given him, which was tightly hidden in his underwear.

The concierge and the man with gold teeth briefly exchanged a glance.

“I’ll ask the police to lock him up,” the concierge said.

El Pepe nodded.

2

Julian lost count of the days. The prison floor was putrid. The atmosphere was repellent, filled with cadaverous-looking inmates, making it a true catacomb of living creatures. His scabs bled when he touched them, which left no doubt he looked exactly like the others sharing his cell. It forced his true self to seek comfort in the refuge of the mind, taking turns between his immediate reality, the cozy past, and his desperate fantasies of a better future.

The geometry was oppressively square, made of humid stone. Freedom lay beyond long, rusty bars running from floor to ceiling. When sunlight illuminated his cell, he preferred to keep his eyes closed, as with light came truth: this was the dirtiest, shittiest place he'd ever been.

So far, so good, he thought, poisoning himself with pessimism.

Since he'd been incarcerated, Julian had been visited

by several of nature's more vile creatures, from cockroaches to mice, but none had been as hard on Julian as the fleas that were consuming his skin.

Lord, have some mercy.

Outside his cell, the monotony of the past days—or was it weeks?—was broken by a sudden intermittent symphony of cursing. He couldn't comprehend Portuguese, but the intensity of it sounded like hell. He heard the groaning and howling, the smacks and punches which reverberated in his own body, reminding him of the severe beating he'd suffered and the generalized pain he felt.

Julian turned his broken body toward the cell bars when the sounds of a brawl intensified. *It's getting closer*, he feared, and waited. But the fighting didn't last long. The prison got quiet an instant later, and steps approached his cell. Keys touched iron. From the corner of his eye, he captured the silhouette of a large man standing outside his cell. Only one of Julian's eyes was functioning—the other severely swollen—but it was enough to recognize the massive human opening the padlock and entering his cell.

"Can you walk?" Alan said.

"No."

Alan grabbed him below his armpits, lifted him in the air like he was a bag of feathers, and put him on his shoulders. "Hang on," Alan said.

"They'll arrest you too!" Julian said, part-relieved, part-panicked.

“This ain’t my first rodeo.”

Before he had time to complain about Alan’s shoulders pressing into his broken ribs, Julian felt the rain wash over his body. *The fleas must be drowning*, he hoped. They were outside, entering a cul-de-sac, getting to a clump of bushes safe from the view of passersby. Julian still couldn’t decide whether the arrival of the Texan was a blessing or a curse. Whenever he was around, Alan brought pain.

He placed Julian on the grass and sat down next to him.

“Damn cowards!” Alan said while inspecting Julian.

“They’re looking for you.”

“I know.”

“Apparently, *you* should have been the one who took the beating.”

“We’ll see . . . Who did that to you?”

Julian took a couple of breaths. “A man with shining teeth and two associates.”

Alan nodded to himself and glanced away. When he looked back at Julian, he had an unshakable resolution in his eyes. “They’ll pay us back.”

“What did you do to them?”

“Nothing. It’s just that some folks want it all for themselves.”

“Forget it, mate . . . I just need that job.”

“Yeah . . . First, you need to heal.”

“What if they find us? You owe money, and I’m a fugitive.”

Alan spat on the ground. “Then you’re gonna have to heal as we go.”

“That’s just brilliant,” Julian said.

“It’s our only option ... We’d better leave town.”

The steamboat took twenty days to reach an old port seven hundred and fifty miles from Manaus down the Madeira River. Julian and Alan slept in hammocks, taking half the journey to get used to it. Julian recovered well from his beating, but not completely. The food onboard was surprisingly healthy and nourishing, which helped. They tried local fruits like acai and cupuaçu, and fresh pirarucu, a four-hundred-pound fish enjoyed by the small riverside communities along the Madeira.

To further cheer themselves up, they shared tales about an American businessman, Percival Farquhar, who was the founder of the Madeira-Mamoré Railway Company, and the stories ranged from stimulating to legendary.

“The man’s building an El Dorado, hiring folks from all over the world. I mean, putting two hundred and fifty miles of rails in the middle of a damn forest?” Alan reported to Julian.

Julian gleamed at the account. “This is our chance!”

“You take your time. Get all the rest you can, Jules. Word is, only the strongest will make it. It’s like the Wild West out there, except you have the gunmen plus

the wild beasts of the Amazon.”

Just when Julian showed clear signs of recovery, he and other passengers faced a silent enemy: bites from infected anopheles mosquitos. It didn't take a specialist to figure out what they were going through. All shared, give or take, the same symptoms—shaking chills, high fevers, and terrible headaches accompanied by nausea and vomiting. One passenger fell into a coma and died the very next day, which turned the initial hope about a job at the Madeira-Mamoré Railway Company into a somber pessimism.

“You've got yourself malaria, Jules,” Alan explained, which prompted Julian to wonder if his friendship still offered any advantage to Alan. Julian was either terribly unlucky or unacceptably fragile for the challenges awaiting them. Probably both.

With every new stop at community ports, they heard further information reinforcing the problematic realities ahead of them. The railway construction workers were facing many health issues. Tropical diseases were killing first and asking questions later. Working conditions were poor, especially in the face of the gargantuan challenge of cutting down centuries-old trees. Alan explained, “We got to flatten the ground, then dig, deposit the ballasts, and lay the tracks. It's as hard as it gets. But that's not all. We need to get along with people from over forty different countries—plus the natives. You know what they're calling it? The Devil's Railway!”

“Is th-that a-all?” Julian said during one of his shaking chills. He hoped he wouldn’t continue to be a burden to Alan. “I’ll understand if you choose to go ahead without me.”

“Why would I?” Alan responded.

It had been raining for the past twenty-four hours when they arrived at one of the camps of the future city of Porto Velho. The steamboat docked at an improvised wharf that resembled a war field. There were endless piles of wood scattered around a muddy terrain occupied by precarious accommodations, and all sorts of equipment. Men bustled to put the place in order and resume construction as quickly as the weather allowed. It was chaotic.

Alan disembarked the steamboat to ask for help. Julian needed urgent medical attention.

Someone pointed in the direction of a shack at the American ward, where Alan would find a doctor. The Texan followed with his heavy feet sinking into the mud. On his way, he saw several men lined up side by side holding what looked like a dead boa constrictor.

“I hope dead snakes don’t bite,” he said to himself. Everywhere he turned looked disheartening.

He walked up a short staircase leading to the medical tent.

Inside, he found a middle-aged woman with a short blonde ponytail and freckles. She was busy behind a small desk filing reports and didn’t bother acknowledging his presence. Farther down in the tent, amid two rows of five

beds divided from each other by dirty mosquito nets, he saw a nurse helping a man onto a bed. Alan looked downward and glanced at the face of the man next to her, who was the preamble of certain death. The nurse looked at him sideways. Alan tipped his hat. "I need help for a friend. He's very ill."

"I'm Dr. Miller," the blonde at the desk answered before the nurse did. "What's he got?" she said with an American accent.

"Malaria, I think. He's got every symptom you can think of."

Dr. Miller resumed her report filing, not at all impressed. "Jandira, will you handle this?" she asked the nurse and then briefly glanced at Alan. "You're in good hands."

"Yeah. Thanks."

Jandira stood up from her chair and walked toward Alan. She was a mulatta with beautiful brown skin and long, honeyed dark hair with light hazel eyes and thick lips. The sight of her was a relief in the middle of that green hell.

"Now, let's get your friend," Jandira said in Brazilian Portuguese-accented English.

Alan took a moment to compose himself.

Jandira passed by Alan, and he followed right after. "We've just arrived. He's in the steamer."

Outside the tent, she ordered two natives in Portuguese, "*Venham comigo*"—*come with me*. They picked up a stretcher and joined her.

On his way back to the steamboat, he saw hunched

over men whose spirits appeared broken after days of strenuous work, small gatherings of foreigners with desperate looks on their faces trying to communicate with each other in odd languages, and a long line of men waiting for their payments.

“Shit,” Alan uttered to himself. All those miserable men were barely making it through the day.

Alan pointed as they boarded the steamboat. “That’s my friend over there.” He led Jandira to the hammock. Others in a deplorable state caught her attention, but Alan didn’t want to wait in line. “He’s over there.” He almost pushed her forward. “That’s him.”

Julian opened his eyes and saw Jandira filling his entire field of vision.

From his low angle, he saw more than the person who had come to help him. The nurse’s head was blocking the rays of the sun that was setting in the west and piercing through the dissipating clouds of the torrential storm that had ended earlier. The light formed a shining halo around her hair. It could be that his illness was making Julian delirious, but to him, it was the most beautiful sight he’d ever seen. Those few seconds stuck with him, fascinated him, and had an immediate positive effect on his helpless state of mind.

Jandira signaled to the two men that came with her on the steamboat. They swiftly transferred Julian from the hammock to the stretcher.

During the four hundred yards’ distance between the wharf and the medical tent, Jandira checked on

Julian a few times. He counted three instances. Each time, their eyes would lock for a bit.

That frail Englishman had an intense gaze that emanated purity. His aura was different than that of the rude men populating the camp.

Before he realized it, Julian found himself shirtless on a clean—and steady—bed, and Jandira was gently cleaning him with a wet towel. He immediately felt at home, like he'd been magically transported back to England. Time flew faster, and in a better direction. *She has the hands of an angel*, he was sure.

He tilted his head sideways, searching for the Texan, but Alan wasn't there. When he got better, Julian thought, he would find a way to show how grateful he was for Alan's help.

He asked the nurse, "What's your name?"

"Jandira."

The sound of her name was like a balm. "What does it mean?"

"Why?"

"Names matter," he said and gasped for air.

"Don't speak," she ordered. "You have a serious condition."

"I thought so."

"I'll do my best to help you."

Julian nodded, and when the hand holding the towel reached his chest, he made an effort and clutched it delicately. Looking into her eyes, he whispered, "I know you will."