

Coffee Addict

Chapter 2 – Senora Moura

“No, it’ll get on a file and the next thing I know.....I’ll be seeing a head doctor.” Said Joanna. “Turn off the recorder and the phone. Then I’ll tell you what I saw.”

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Jess Fisher had settled in as well as she was going to settle in. She’d have preferred to be at home in Toronto, but as her dad was fond of saying; you don’t learn anything by sitting at home. She wanted the corner office one day, the fancy car and the huge salary package. You had to get noticed to get that kind of promotion with Tessera Coffee. What was going on at the Yago Plantation would definitely get noticed.....

“I’ll give the cops in Bogotá nine out of ten for speed.” Said Luke. “The special mortuary truck arrived this morning and half of their team. The others are due to arrive tomorrow.”

“They’ll just get under our feet and be an annoyance.” Said Jess.

“For you maybe.....They’re setting up a full mobile forensic unit.” Said Luke. “I might get results to routine tests in a day, rather than a week.”

It had become addictive, everyone was doing it. The scene of Bea’s picnic was now visited so often, that it had been added to their important satnav locations. Not that the few blood stained pebbles would add anything to their knowledge. The picnic hollow, as it was being called, was obviously the epicentre of something, they just didn’t know what.

“Kate is interviewing Bea’s mother today.” Said Jess. “Be nice if Senora Moura can recall something, but she found her daughter’s body in the dark.....And there’ll be a huge stress factor.”

“Kate will be gentle.....If Bea’s mum saw anything worth seeing; Kate will get it out of her.”

Standing there under the Colombian sun, Jess realised why the picnic site had become almost sacred ground to everyone on the team. Chad had seen something and if Chad said he’d seen something, he’d seen it. He’d even fired off his artillery piece of a gun. There had been blood where he claimed to have shot it, blood that had still to be analysed. Everyone now stood just outside the hollow and squinted at the treeline; hoping that they’d be the next Chad, the next to see something.

“There has to be something out there.” Said Jess. “I’d settle for finding a few old, dry mysterious bones. Ideally, bones that aren’t of any known species of varmint.”

“You won’t find any.....Not that I’m calling Chad a liar, I wouldn’t dare.” Said Luke. “It’s just that there are lots of ways of knowing if something exists. I don’t believe in monsters and mysterious lake dwelling beasts, because of three basic criteria.”

“You’re going to tell me Jaws wasn’t real next, aren’t you ?” Asked Jess. “There go my hopes of seeing it washed up on the beach.”

“You never take anything seriously.” Said Luke.

“That.....Sounded just like my dad.” Said Jess. “Alright.....I promise to focus. Tell me why we’re not looking for a huge ravaging beast ?”

“We will find something, but it will be more like mole rats than a surviving predatory megafauna.....Some huge beast.” Said Luke. “There are reasons why it’s obvious the Loch Ness Monster doesn’t really exist.”

“Another dream gone.....I’ll never see Nessie.” Said Jess.

“Well.....There is a lake in the Congo, but I digress.” Said Luke. “Besides, no one believes it exists apart from me. Nessie is supposed to be huge, a really enormous brute. There must be a few of them, or they’d have died out by now. Anything that big would need to eat, a lot. Our first criteria is feeding. Any community of megafauna would decimate the wildlife and the farmers’ livestock. And of course, there’d be heaps of carcasses rotting on the shore of the loch. There is no evidence of such a voracious feeder.”

“Goodbye Nessie.....I read a book once about this.” Said Jess. “Breeding was mentioned and the fact that no one has seen baby Bigfoot, or is that bigfeet ? We see young gorillas, so why no bigfeet ? Young Yeti too....There’d need to lots of them, freezing their wotsits off in the high Himalayas.”

“Yes, you’re getting the idea.” Said Luke. “The last is a bit morbid, but for me at least.....It proves that most of the mythical creatures, really are nothing but myths. Assuming that like currently alive large predators, the megafauna had very little consciousness; I doubt if they understood mortality. No Nessie was going to bury a dead member of its family. No pushing piles of rocks on top of a dead Bigfoot mate. The remains would be there, the dead piled high for everyone to see; like elephant graveyards. As there are no dead littering the places we might look.....”

“There are no mythical beasts.” Said Jess. “I get it and yes, though it hurts to say it.....I accept that Nessie doesn’t exist. I’d like to hear more about the lake in the Congo. Is that the exception that proves the rule ?”

“The one mythical beast that for a few unique local conditions, can pass on all three major criteria of breeding, feeding and dying.” Said Luke. “Not that I’m going into details. There is a reason I’m only ever number two in the labs I work in. I’m not about to ruin my professional reputation for a second time.”

“Chicken.....You have your criteria and I have my intuition.” Said Jess. “The longer I look at a certain group of trees, the more I think there’s something there. I’d like to take a look.”

“Lead on.....But we need to be careful, there have been deaths.” Said Luke.

“No gun, Luke ? I was offered a gun, but they’re not my thing.”

“Yeah.....Not my thing either.” Said Luke. “They might become my thing though, if there are a few more deaths.”

The trees were further away than they’d looked. Jess was feeling more than a little hot and sticky, before the trees were shading them from the sun. She’d been right, there was something there.

“You might have been a drug sniffing dog in a past life.” Said Luke.

A small camp fire hidden in a hollow and surrounded by trees. There were a few empty beer bottles and the remains of several spliffs; marijuana cigarettes. Other rubbish too, it looked to have been a party site for young people.

“They’re still coming out here to chill out.” Said Jess. “It’s not safe.....We need to get Julie Yago to put the fear of God into her workers.”

“Yeah.....I’ll put my head around her door when we get back.” Said Luke.

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Jorge Alvarez liked Kate Doyle, though he was still a little wary of all the recent arrivals from Canada. They all had passable Spanish and went out of their way to treat everyone they met with respect. There was something though. As Jorge had said to his wife, Gabriela over dinner the previous evening....

“I feel like a bug under a microscope with them. I’ll be glad when they’re gone.”

“I saw the one called Kate in town.....Very pretty.” Said Gabriela.

Jorge had smiled at Gabs and she'd smiled back. He'd never strayed in the past and was unlikely to do so in the future. Kate was pretty though and fate seemed to be pairing them up. His wife was just reminding him that she'd seen the pretty red head from Canada and she was keeping an eye on him. Chad was the official driver and bodyguard for the group, but he obviously had someone higher up the food chain to look after that morning. Jorge had picked up Kate and they were driving out to the village, to interview Joanna Moura, mother of the late Bea Moura.

"What's in the bag on the back seat?" Asked Kate.

"Yeah.....That's the oldest tape recorder you're ever likely to see." Said Jorge. "Works well though, even if it is the size of a microwave."

"I was just going to put my phone onto record." Said Kate.

"I still need to use the old recorder.....It's official procedure."

The village was called the town by some and it really had never been officially named. It was where the workers on the plantation usually lived and it had been known as the village for a very long time. There was mail delivered and all the other essential utilities, with bills addressed to the person, the house, the street, in the Yago Plantation. The village had attracted shops and other services and their workers too, tended to live in the village.

"I love the road sign that calls it 'The Village.'" Said Kate.

"No one ever did get around to giving the place a proper name.....I quite like that." Said Jorge.

"So do I, Jorge.....So do I."

Jorge pulled up outside the house where Senora Moura lived with Bea's sister and a much younger brother. From memory, there had been two other daughters, who'd married and moved in with their husband's people. There was a Senor Moura somewhere, but Jorge hadn't seen him in a while. Not that it was his business.....He was paid to uphold the law, not to monitor marital issues. It was a typical village house, a cottage really; built to a design drawn up by one of Julie Yago's long dead ancestors. Not that large, but the houses were cosy and the roofs were waterproof.

"What do I call her? Senora Moura, or Joanna Moura?" Asked Kate.

"She prefers her first name.....But I'll ask her first."

Jorge banged on the door and Bea's younger brother let them in. It seemed they were expected and the boy took them into a room at the back of the house. There was Senora Moura, sat at the large table the family probably only used at Christmas and family gatherings. The room would have been full after Bea Moura's funeral.

"Senora Moura, this is Kate Doyle from the plantation owners in Canada." Said Jorge. "May we call you Joanna today?"

"Yes, Jorge.....Of course you can." Said Joanna. "Please.....Sit with me."

A small woman, but famous for being a bit fierce. Heaven help any young man who hadn't treated her daughters with respect. Still relatively young, some would call her quite pretty. It wasn't hard to imagine her getting a flashlight and going looking for Bea on a moonless night.

"I was wondering.....Have you identified the other victims of this creature?" Asked Joanna.

"The central police lab haven't reported back to me." Said Jorge. "Remember this is Colombia, not an episode of CSI. DNA testing not only takes time, but few outside of the big cities, will have ever been tested. The victims have poor dental care.....So no hope of identifying them from dental X-rays. We might get lucky, but honestly, Joanna.....It's likely that we'll never have names for them."

"Oh, their poor families." Said Joanna.

"Now the deaths are in the papers and the TV news.....There is a chance." Said Kate.

Faces had been eaten away, but Jorge didn't want to discuss that with a mother still mourning the loss of her daughter. There would be no pictures of the dead and it looked as though they were farm labourers of some kind. They might have been employed by drug cartels; there were still a lot of those in Colombia and it was likely there always would be. If that was the case, their identities would never be known.

"May I record our conversation?" Asked Jorge.

"Yes..... Anything that might help." Said Joanna.

Jorge noticed that Kate put her phone on the table too and set it to record. His box of junk looked like it belonged in a dumpster, but official procedure dictated that he used the piece of elderly technology. Jorge pressed the record button and much to his relief, the recorder didn't chew up the tape. He introduced everyone around the table, which was just the three of them. Whoever had the authority to listen to the recording, would know who they all were.

"Joanna.....Why were you out after dark on that night?" Asked Jorge. "The day your daughter was killed."

"I trusted Alex; I knew he would look after my daughter." Said Joanna. "It was so late though and they never stayed out that late, ever. I put on an overcoat because it was a cool night. A flashlight and I was ready to go out.....I never expected to find, what I found."

"Sorry.....The more you tell us, the more it will help." Said Kate. "If you're able.....Please tell us what you found?"

Joanna looked unhappy and actually began to cry. Jorge had interviewed more crying women than he liked to think about. Usually they were upset by the passing of a loved one in a traffic accident, or simply old age. It was rare to inform loved ones about violent death, but it did happen. Jorge had a small pack of tissues in his pocket. He removed the wrapper and handed them to Senora Moura.

"Thank you, Jorge."

"Kate is right...We need to know everything. The seemingly silliest detail can sometimes solve a case." Said Jorge.

"I found my girl, my child.....All chewed up until.....I didn't recognise her at first. He was there too, the bastard who'd kept her out late and got her killed. I wanted to spit on his grave when his family buried Alex. I didn't then, but I still might."

Jorge had heard it all before, and much worse. Someone she loved was dead and Joanna had to blame someone. Eventually the anger would pass, but not for a while.

"Anything unusual, Joanna?" Asked Jorge. "Did you notice anything that made you think....That's strange? It can be anything.....I'm really sorry if asking upsets you."

"Neither of us wants to cause you pain, Joanna." Said Kate.

Senora Moura was looking furtive, as though she wanted to keep something hidden. Jorge was used to the people in the village looking furtive. Julie Yago had a temper and no one wanted to be the target of that anger.

"There was something, but you'll think I'm crazy." Said Joanna.

"I promise you, we won't think any such thing." Said Jorge.

"We're here to help, not judge." Said Kate.

"No, it'll get on a file and the next thing I know.....I'll be seeing a head doctor." Said Joanna. "Turn off the recorder and the phone. Then I'll tell you what I saw."

"We need the recording." Said Jorge.

"Then you might as well leave, because you won't get another word out of me."

The plantations were tough places to work. They bred tough young women, who became even tougher middle aged women. Jorge knew she meant it, so he turned off his recorder. Kate leant forward and clicked a button on her phone.

"There.....Now tell us ?" Asked Kate.

"No notes either.....Just listen and remember what you can." Said Joanna. "As I said, my child was almost unrecognisable. The only thing to say it was her, was the top she was wearing. I was crying and cursing Alex for getting Beatrice killed. It was then that I saw it, though I think it might not have been there. I was upset and it was dark, with a cold wind right in my eyes. Ten to one I was hallucinating, but you did say I had to tell you everything."

Jorge listened and occasionally looked across at Kate. It was a tale beyond simple crazy. No wonder Bea's mother hadn't wanted it to be on the record. It was a recounting of an impossible experience, coupled with a genuine feel that Joanna Moura was telling the truth. Kate stopped rolling her eyes at him, when Joanna described the creature who, as she put it.

"The monster will be in my nightmares, forever."

There was an authenticity in her words, a sound of truth about something that sounded like a weird fantasy. Jorge held Joanna's hand for a few minutes, while she cried for her dead daughter.

"I'll ask the police from Bogotá to leave you alone." Said Jorge. "Eventually though, they will arrive at your door."

"I know you Jorge; your family knows my family." Said Joanna. "The people from Bogotá are strangers. They'll get nothing out of me."

Kate hugged Senora Moura, while he put his large recorder into its bag. The house seemed so normal, so cosy, compared to the wild story they'd just heard. All of it gone of course, no record of it existed, not even a few handwritten notes. Jorge waited until they were in the car, before pulling his notebook out of a pocket.

"Here, Kate.....Write as I drive." Said Jorge. "Everything you remember about that bizarre story she told us. Do it now, before all memory of it fades away."

"No need." Said Kate, while waving her phone at him. "I pressed a button, but it wasn't the one to turn off the recorder. We have it all, every word she uttered."

Bad in so many ways, they had just betrayed the trust of a grieving mother. On the other hand, they now had a complete and detailed description of what Joanna Moura claimed to have seen that night. It might sound crazy, but it was still eyewitness testimony.

"Poor Joanna, she may never talk to me again." Said Jorge. "Everyone needs to hear it of course, especially Julie Yago. If there is anything a bit bizarre going on in the plantation, she will have had her suspicions about it."

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Michelle Thorpe was settling in nicely at Julie Yago's hacienda. The family seemed pretty dysfunctional, but she could cope with that. Her own father had waived a gun around inside the family home, on a few occasions. Once he'd been drunk enough, or stupid enough, to put a nine millimetre round into a wall. Luckily, none of the neighbours had called the cops. That had been when they'd lived in Saint Paul, Minnesota. After her dad had drunk himself into a very early grave, her mum had taken them home, as she put it. Her mum was a Kanuck, descended from a family of Dutch Canadians. The Thorpe family had gone home, to Ottawa.

"The firepower keeps arriving, Julie." Said Michelle. "We now seem to have enough weapons to fight a minor war. Is it alright to put them in the store room with the others ?"

"Who sends them ?" Asked Julie Yago.

Breakfast with Julie and again it only ever seemed to be the two of them, having breakfast at a civilised hour. Julie's husband was up and out at a ridiculously early hour; he probably woke up the dawn chorus as he left. Julie's daughter was at the other extreme and ate breakfast around midmorning.

"Officially I don't know and never ask." Said Michelle. "I suspect a friendly government agency sends them. Not my government of your government.....Probably the guys in Langley. We have....Common interests in the region. Of course.....I never said any of that."

"I have no problem with them being here." Said Julie. "Just keep them locked away from Teresa, my daughter. She may look like a grown woman, but inside.....She really is a wild teenage hellion."

"Don't worry, the lock on the door is strong and I keep the key on me." Said Michelle.

In truth, Teresa had already asked to be trained up on using a handgun. Not that Michelle would ever train her in using anything remotely dangerous. Julie's daughter was crazy and one day, all the lunacy would go off, and the girl would mentally detonate. God help anyone near her at the time.

"You must have heard the recording of Bea's mother." Said Julie. "What do you think? She sounds so plausible."

Julie was looking around, probably making sure there were no kitchen staff around. There had been no oath taken, but everyone knew the recording had to be kept secret from those employed by the plantation.

"I think she believes she saw something, but that doesn't make it true." Said Michelle. "I was once under fire, in the same foxhole as a veteran of many wars and skirmishes. Trauma can have weird effects. He told me he could see about half a dozen enemy fighters coming at us. I could see no one, but he might not have heard me above the noise of his weapon firing. That very experienced soldier wiped out a whole row of waving banana palms. As I said.....Trauma and stress can make people believe they see things that aren't there."

Julie Yago did another sort of head bob, as she looked around for anyone else within hearing distance. They were all doing it.....No one wanted the blame when bits of Senora Moura's testimony hit the major newspapers and then the TV. They would of course; the recording was too inflammatory to simply go away.

"But something so huge, Michelle." Said Julie. "She said it was twice the size of buffaloes, she'd seen on TV. I can maybe accept something huge might be hiding out there, in the thousands of acres of swamp, forest and jungle. But she said it appeared from nowhere.....And it didn't hurt her. That can't be right.....Maybe Senora Moura is crazy?"

One of the young women who ran the hacienda's kitchen, entered the dining area. She smiled and removed their dirty plates on a large tray. It gave Michelle a moment to think. David Sullivan was her boss while in Colombia; he was even Julie's boss for the duration of the investigation into the deaths. He'd asked his team from Canada, to discourage speculation and wild rumours.

"Give them an inch and.....The local population will claim to be under attack from little green men."

David had told her, when she'd bumped into him at Jorge's office, in the small building that was the only police presence in a very large province.

"Personally, I'm taking Joanna Moura's statement at face value." Said Michelle. "If it later turns out to be nonsense, fair enough. For now though, I'm treating it as the gospel truth."

"The gospel according to David Sullivan?" Asked Julie.

He was her boss and if Michelle was being honest with herself, he was known to usually be right. Not always of course, no one was always right. He did all that any boss can hope to do, he batted a

damned good average. Michelle shrugged at Julie. Shrugging had become her version of 'no comment,' lately.

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Chad Hudson now had his gun which took high velocity rounds and an assault rifle on a strap over his shoulder. He was happy that he could deal with anything huge that might leap out of the surrounding forest. He was a little annoyed that he'd described the creature they were looking for, in much the same terms as Bea's mum. Yet, everyone was taking Senora Moura seriously and treating his words as, at best, a steaming pile of nonsense.

"I'll just have to kill one and drag it into town." Chad muttered.

"Kill what?" Asked Julian, or it might have been Oliver, who everyone called Olie.

Jorge had lent his two junior officers to Chad, for a deep search of the swampy area to the south of the plantation. Chad had never been good with names and the two local guys looked fairly identical. Chad had noticed that if he shouted guys, both of them looked at him. So, the name problem was solved.

"The beast, the monster.....I intend to drag its carcass along Main Street." Said Chad.

"I spoke to Julie's husband, Gustavo." Said Olie, or maybe Julian. "He said searching the swamp is a good idea, but it's easy to drown in places. If Gustavo says be careful.....We need to be careful."

"Amen to that." Said the other one.

The swamp wasn't really a swamp, but there were a lot of small streams that had debris capable of making crossing them, very dangerous. Snakes in the swamp too, or so he'd been told. Locals always seemed to have nasty predators in their area, that no scientist would agree were there. Had the local young people been killed by a large snake? It might have happened, but it would be disappointing. Chad was hoping to find something huge, something bizarre. Something to end up on the front cover of National Geographic. So far, they'd found the remains of a few small mammals, which the two trainee cops, were calling Water opossums. The trouble was, they were calling everything a Water opossum. Chad was taking pictures on his phone and leaving the remains where they'd been found. Of course, the two cops wanted to cart everything back to town.

"Guys." Shouted Chad. "No picking at the dead possums. Taking back pictures is good enough."

"They're Opossums, Boss.....Possums are different."

"Fine, just leave the dead ones alone." Said Chad.

Both Julian and Oliver were armed with military shotguns, courtesy of Tessera Coffee head office. Chad was beginning to wonder if that had been a mistake. They meant well, but the road to hell was said to be paved with good intentions. It was better than patrolling alone, or with civilian volunteers. At least the two trainee cops were used to handling weapons.

"If we go further south, the ground gets really nasty.....Sucks you down." Said Olie.

"Something as big as the brute we're looking for." Said Julian. "It couldn't make it over ground that soft."

Chad had given up on getting names right and had decided to guess who was talking to him. As he rarely addressed them by their names anyway.....It seemed a sensible way to handle things. A military therapist had put anomia on a report once, the inability to remember names. Only a mild version, but Chad had never accepted the diagnosis. He had no problem remembering girls' names, or people who interested him.

"Go north and we'll end up back at the Yago Plantation." Said Chad. "How about going due west guys? Come on, you know the area. Where will going west take us?"

Chad had a map, but that was showing just acres of hatched lines, which meant trees, rocks, or maybe even another swampy area. He'd noticed before that map makers were rarely good at detailing large open spaces.

"West will get us to Godfrey's Rocks, but it's a long walk." Said Julian.

"What are Godfrey's Rocks?" Asked Chad.

"A local landmark and a good high vantage point." Said Olie. "You can see for miles from up there." Once he was back in town, with a decent internet connection, Chad would look up Godfrey's Rocks. For now he was just pleased to hear of somewhere he could look over the terrain.

"Great, I brought my binoculars.....Godfrey's rocks it is." Said Chad. "Who was Godfrey?"

"A missionary I think." Said Olie.

Yes, Chad would definitely look it up as soon as they were back in what passed for civilisation. Olie went in front, as he seemed confident about knowing the straightest route to the rocks named after a missionary. It was obvious they were going the right way, when the cliffs appeared on the far side of a narrow stream. The water in the stream had a reddish tinge.

"No one drinks the water, not even the animals." Said Olie. "Iron salts wash out of the rocks."

"There's a steep path up the cliff." Said Julian. "Then an even tougher clamber up to the top. It's a tough climb, but the view from the top.....You can see everywhere."

Chad didn't even like getting the red water on his boots. He'd heard of red water in South America before, but had never actually seen it. Olie knew where a path wound its way up the cliff, but there was something close to where the path began.

"A white-tailed deer. A big one too." Said Olie. "You rarely see them this far north."

"Something ate most of its innards." Said Julian. "Something with large, wide jaws.....Might have been killed by the beast we're looking for."

Or it might have been killed by one of the big cats Jorge seemed to love reminding him about. There were several kinds of big cats in Colombia, all of them capable of killing and devouring a large deer. The jaws of whatever had bitten into the deer's guts, had left a large open wound. Chad was beginning to hope they were chasing the right creature.

"Lots of pictures guys." Said Chad. "Use your own phones, just in case mine gets damaged."

"This is important, isn't it?" Asked Julian.

"It might be, it just might be.....Lots of pictures, guys. Flip it over to get the other side."

Messy work and the deer had been dead for a while. Turning it over revealed hundreds of bugs, all trying to consume what was left of the white-tailed deer. There were more deep and wide bites at the top of the deer's thighs. There was a lot of good meat left. The varmint they were looking for either had plenty to eat, or it had been disturbed.

"I know what predators hunt around here." Said Olie. "These bites are not known to me.....The creature is new to the province, I'd swear to it."

Tempting to try to get the carcass back to Luke and his microscopes, but the dead deer was bloody, gooey and beginning to smell bad. They'd have to make do with the pictures. The climb up the cliff path was steep and tough. Chad was glad he still exercised every morning and went to the gym at least twice a week. At the top of the cliff was about fifty yards of open ground and then.....Another cliff.

"I get it now, it's a plateau." Said Chad. "A high and very steep plateau."

"Yeah, my dad always called it Godfrey's Plateau." Said Julian.

The path up the second cliff was steeper and there was a lot of loose rubble to contend with. Definitely not the sort of place to take the kids for a Sunday picnic.

“Do many people come here ?” Asked Chad.

“No, it’s too steep and the polluted river worries them.” Said Olie.

Someone had worn a path into the rock, but that might have been animals. A place not visited that often, with a dead deer close to the one and only path to the top. Chad had never been into conspiracy theories and weird stuff on social media, but he was beginning to wonder if the plateau might be home to the creature they were looking for. He checked his assault rifle while he walked and had the two cops check over each other’s kit.

“No messing around.” Said Chad. “.....Something big comes at you.....Shoot it.”

The top of the plateau was beautiful, like something out of a travel brochure. A jungle high in the air, with plants they hadn’t seen anywhere near the plantation. A few large trees, but mainly the undergrowth yelled jungle at them. Beautiful, but getting through it would require a team of people with machetes. Julian found an animal trail, but it didn’t take them far. It was all so beautiful, like finding a little bit of heaven. Sadly, most of it was too overgrown to be accessible. As for being a wonderful vantage point to look out over the surrounding countryside ? They were so high, that they seemed to be inside the clouds, or a permanent mist.

“We need to come back.....Armed with something to cut a way into this place.” Said Chad.

“No, that would be bad luck.” Said Julian.

“What do you mean ?” Asked Chad. “Why would it be bad luck ?”

“My parents told me....Everyone knows.” Said Olie. “The people in the village go to church on Sunday, but they also kept the ways of the old religion.”

“Just in case.....My grandmother used to say.” Said Julian.

“Yes, just in case.” Said Olie. “Most in the village still practise Muisca, the old religion from before the Spanish arrived. No offence to Jesus and the saints, but our people have known Muisca for a very long time.”

“And according to Muisca, the centre of the plateau is bad luck ?” Asked Chad.

“Yes, the place of old worship is there.....It is forbidden to us.” Said Julian.

“Fine.....We might as well head back to town.” Said Chad.

Chad took pictures of the jungle until his phone was full, though he noticed the two cops didn’t take any pictures of what was probably a holy place to them. The place of old worship sounded like a temple deep in the jungle. Chad was determined to find a few others who didn’t believe in Muisca. Then he’d return with equipment capable of cutting through the thick undergrowth. He was even wondering about spraying with defoliant, maybe from a hired helicopter. One way or another, he was going to see what was deep inside the jungle at the top of the plateau. When they reached the foot of the first cliff, the carcass of the white-tailed deer, was gone.

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Joanna Moura had lied to just about everyone, including her surviving children. She hadn’t been attacked; the huge beast had left her unharmed. All a lie, the creature had left a mark on her. Joanna’s description of the monster sounded fantastical, like something out of a horror story. That though.....That had all been true. Like something sent by a witch’s curse, or brujas as they were known in Colombia. The massive brute had scraped her side with its claws, leaving a shallow but painful wound.

“Marked me.....Though marked for what ?” Joanna muttered.

Joanna believed in brujas and their curses, with the same certainty that she believed the words of the priest when he said mass. There had been nothing normal about the monster which had killed her daughter and left its mark on her. It had to be the servant of a powerful bruja. Either that or

Joanna was losing her mind, which she was willing to accept as a possibility. Night and she couldn't sleep, even though she felt very tired. The wound in her side was throbbing, but seemed to be healing. She turned on a bedside lamp and pulled aside the gauze bandage.

"Still weeping, but not as bad." She muttered. "Maybe the bruja bitch has removed her curse?"

Joanna hadn't upset anyone recently, as far as she could remember. Neighbours could get upset by some minor imagined insults. Sometimes it didn't take much provocation for someone to buy a curse from a bruja. Of course, the curses didn't always work. Joanna was still certain that a curse had ended her marriage. Her husband had never looked at a woman before not once, Joanna was sure of it.

"Damned dog." She muttered.

One of her neighbours had a dog, which seemed to get noisy in the early hours of the morning. The brainless thing barked for hours some nights. If someone had paid for a curse, why not kill that dog? Joanna was sure she'd offended no one, for quite some time.

"You can never be certain though.....That is the worrying thing, not knowing." She mumbled.

Doc Perez had given her medicine to help her sleep, after the death of her daughter. Powerful stuff, he'd told her to only take it if she was desperate for a good night's sleep. It was in a cabinet in the kitchen. Still only dressed in a nightgown, Joanna turned on the kitchen light.

"Damned dog.....It never stops and always at night." Joanna muttered.

Her mind, her dreadful memory lately.....The dog had been old, not a puppy. It had died; the neighbour had told her the bad nights for barking were over. What was making all the noise outside? More of a snarl than a bark, now she was listening properly. It sounded as though it was right outside her back door. The truth came to Joanna.

"The damned thing marked me.....Now it's come to claim me." She mumbled.

Silly to open her back door, or maybe it wasn't. No door could stop what had come her, she knew that. Joanna took two steps into her garden and there it was. All teeth, claws and black fur, like some kind of beast from hell itself.

"Come on then.....Take what you came for." Said Joanna.

The old religion had a hell, though it was called El Infiernito, the Little Hell. Someone had bought a curse, maybe against her entire family. Joanna had no idea why anyone would have spent that much, such a curse would have been very expensive. The beast was there though, waiting to take her. There was no use in fighting it.

"Get it done, but spare my other children." Shouted Joanna.

Joanna wasn't really old, but she hadn't been that well for quite some time. As the beast leapt on her and bit into her throat, the shock stopped her heart. Mercifully, Senora Moura never felt the creature, as it began to devour her soft tissues.

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