

Coffee Addict

Chapter 3 – Stay Indoors

“If I can leap in here ? What is Godfrey’s Plateau ?” Asked David. “Is it on plantation land ?” It was one of those occasions when Julie wished there was a flyer, something to hand to people wanting to know about Muisca, the old religion and its holy places.’

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Jorge Alvarez always viewed getting a first good look at the dead, as a definite con in the pros and cons of his job. Usually the dead had died of natural causes, or a head on collision with another car on a dark night. Violent death was actually quite rare on plantation land, or at least it had been. At least being the local chief of police, meant he could decide on what information to release to the public. What he was expected to tell the Yago family was entirely different.....

“Thanks for coming out, Luke.” Said Jorge. “The woman who found her is still in a state of shock. Our one eyewitness to the creature and she’s killed. It’s all beginning to sound like some kind of conspiracy, but beasts that eat people don’t usually organise conspiracies.”

“To do the job properly, I need to get Senora Moura’s body back to the plantation.” Said Luke.

“You know the local rules by now, Luke.” Said Jorge. “I need to get Doc Perez involved quite quickly. He’ll want the body to do an autopsy and issue a death certificate. It’s not a good system, but I have to work with what I have. Just give me a cause of death and a few details, if you can ?”

Jorge was covered in blood, as was Luke. They’d shifted the body about a few times and taken quite a few pictures. Something had eaten much of Joanna Mura’s abdomen, after ripping her open from neck to navel. The cause of death looked obvious, but Jorge had a lot of years of experience in his job. The cases that looked easy, were usually the ones that tripped you up.

“There’s a lot of blood, but not in the places you might expect.” Said Luke. “Now.....Remember I’m more used to examining dead livestock, rather than people. Doc Perez will see a clear case of death by exsanguination, a huge and sudden loss of blood. I think Joanna was probably dead when the beast began to consume her soft tissues. Dead by fright would be my guess.....A good old fashioned massive heart attack.”

“That might be useful.....Anything else ?” Asked Jorge.

“Here, help me shift her onto her right side.” Said Luke.

More blood and a few other hard to identify bodily fluids; covered Jorge’s hands as they lifted Joanna’s body and laid her, gently on her side. There was the smell too; people’s insides always had an unpleasant smell.

“Look.....Where it bit into her chest.” Said Luke. “I’ve never seen a predator with such a wide jaw. Then there is the spacing of its very sharp claws. I can’t tell you what we’re dealing with, but I can tell you what it isn’t. It’s definitely not a pack of mole rats, hunting the good people of the village.”

“Good, I always thought that was a crap theory.” Said Jorge. “Can I have something from you in writing ?”

Jorge knew Luke was going to say no, but he had to ask. Verbally, Luke would tell him anything, but he had his own bureaucracy to contend with; when it came to written reports. One day, mindless bureaucracy would take over the world, if it hadn’t already.

“We both know I can’t do that.” Said Luke “For one thing, I’m not officially here. David Sullivan will get my report and he will probably give a copy to Julie Yago. Your best bet is to see if you can get it from her.”

“Yeah.....I guessed as much, but I had to ask.”

Jorge noticed that his trainees were very good at drifting off when bored. It was almost as if they could take a nap while standing up. Even a bloody corpse didn’t seem to bother them that much. Olie actually jumped, as he yelled at them.

“Alright you two.....Get Senora Moura to the Doc.” Yelled Jorge.

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Julie Yago was still the boss of the coffee plantation, even if it was owned by a food and beverage conglomerate in Canada. In the eyes of the local government for the Caldas Department, the region of Colombia most associated with coffee growing; Julie employed lots of people and paid enough tax to get noticed. Best of all, she’d never been connected with any Narcos, dealers in illegal narcotics. That all gave her respect and with that respect, came quite a bit of leverage. If she wanted copies of the reports the police team were sending to Bogotá, she usually got them. She’d laid out the lab reports on her desk, so that Jorge couldn’t avoid seeing them. David Sullivan was there too and he’d already mentioned that she seemed to get police reports, before he did.....

“No match on the DNA of the bodies found on plantation land.” Said Julie. “The authorities in Bogotá asked the Americans and they had no match either. It seems the Mitochondrial DNA, and I have no idea what that means.....Indicates they may have arrived over the border from Ecuador. It seems likely they were employed by a drug cartel facility out in the jungle. Bottom line.....We never will know who they were.”

“We were expecting that, but hoping for a miracle.” Said Jorge. “I’m pleased that they’re not missing persons from any local village.”

“Mitochondrial DNA is passed from mother to child.” Said David Sullivan. “It can give a good indication of where someone was born. Have you ordered your plantation staff to stop partying out in the woods ? My people are still finding camp fire sites and empty booze bottles.”

Julie had ordered her staff until she was blue in the face, but she wasn’t going to tell David all the details. She didn’t want him to get the idea that she’d give him daily reports, or any other such nonsense. She’d been promised a fair degree of autonomy when Tessera Coffee had bought her plantation, and she was determined to keep that autonomy.

“Signs go up, staff are given warnings.” Said Julie. “At the end of the day we employ most of the young people in the area. They’re young, horny and half crazy.....Or so it often seems. I am in the process of hiring guards from Manizales City. An agency is recruiting for us, mainly men and women who’ve been in the police, or the armed forces. Hopefully the guards will keep the young people safe.”

Her guests were shocked, which pleased her. Julie was prepared to hire a hundred guards, all experienced in the use of firearms. It wouldn’t be cheap, but if it stopped another girl like Bea from being half eaten, it was worth it.

“I didn’t notice any paperwork for hiring extra staff.” Said David. “The extra costs.....It will need approval from the finance team in Calgary.”

“While we wait for approval, more could die.” Said Julie. “In the short term, I will be using my own money to hire guards, mainly for the village. If it’s seen to work.....I’ve noticed it’s far easier to get something signed off, once it’s shown to work and be popular.”

“How many men are you going to hire ?” Asked Jorge.

“Men and women, Jorge.” Said Julie. “I’ve set a hundred as the maximum, but it’s really a case of getting some in place and seeing if it works. If nothing else, the plantation staff should sleep better in their beds at night. I’m not being totally altruistic.....staff who feel safe will work harder and better.”

David was tapping away at his satellite phone; no doubt reporting the hiring of guards to his boss. Julie didn’t mind, her personal fortune was almost legendary. She could afford to hire a few guards for quite some time.

“I know Doc Perez can be a problem.” Said David. “Any surprises in his autopsy report for Senora Moura ? I know I will eventually get a copy, but I’m assuming you get told first, Jorge.”

“Nothing to rock the boat, at least not too much.” Said Jorge. “Senora Moura died from massive blood loss, after being attacked by some kind of wild creature. The Doc hinted at one of Colombia’s famous big cats. I’m trying to discourage a massive turnout for her funeral.”

Julie hated to do anything that implied their meetings were going to be a regular thing. She’d been to so many meetings though and read through so many minutes of those meetings. The question seemed to arrive on her lips all on its own.

“That funeral is this afternoon.” Said Julie. “Before we go our separate ways.....Is there any other business ?”

“You make us sound like a committee.” Said David. “I’ve got nothing to add.”

“This sounds a problem, but could have been worse.” Said Jorge. “Chad got several bees in several bonnets, about the holy site on Godfrey’s Plateau. If I hadn’t offered to help him, he’d have gone full on OCD about the place. I could tell he was building up to something. Chad even mentioned hired helicopters and spraying defoliant over the jungle. By offering to help him get there, I’ve bought us time to defuse the situation.”

Other outsiders had been to see the holy place and their world hadn’t ended. It was only a very old temple on the top of a high plateau. Just a few old stones really, but the locals treated it as though their Gods lived up there.

“As long as Chad can keep a visit quiet.....There’ll be no problem.” Said Julie. “I’ll even help you get him there, Jorge. I’m one of the few who was taught the route through the jungle. Have you been there Jorge ?”

“No, never.....I’d love to see what’s there.” Said Jorge.

“If I can leap in here ? What is Godfrey’s Plateau ?” Asked David. “Is it on plantation land ?”

It was one of those occasions when Julie wished there was a flyer, something to hand to people wanting to know about Muisca, the old religion and its holy places. Julie thought of herself as a non-believer, but she was still careful not to offend against the rites and doctrines of Muisca.

“Oh, David.....Hard to explain quickly.” Said Julie. “I assumed you’d get a broad brushstroke introduction from your head office people. There was an...Incident during the period when I sold the Yago Plantation to them. Have you heard of Muisca, the old religion ?”

“No, not a word.” Said David. “I have a feeling I need to do a bit of reading on the internet.”

“Look up Muisca and worship of the sun god Sueba.” Said Julie. “That will get you started. Then we need to slow down Chad a little. In the end though, we will need to help him get to the temple.”

David was going to ask, of course he was. He wouldn’t have the job he had, if he didn’t have a decent intellect and a healthy amount of curiosity.

“And the temple.....Is that covered in Muisca, lesson 102 ?” Asked David.

“It is a very special place, David.” Said Julie. “Just be a little patient until we get there. I am assuming you’ll wish to go ?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” Said David.

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They’d all attended meetings held by the Yago Plantation, all four of them. They weren’t really plantation brats though; their parents all ran small shops in the village. Maybe that made them feel immune to the death that seemed to be stalking those who worked directly for the plantation? Maria knew she didn’t feel as anxious about things, as the kids whose parents worked at the plantation. The four of them, her and her closet friends, were still meeting up in the woods. None of them thought they’d be the next Bea Moura. After all, they had nothing to do with the plantation, not really. Maria was seventeen and her mum and dad ran the largest general store in the village. A good store.....She’d heard people saying nice things when they didn’t know she was listening. Kids are invisible to adults they weren’t related to, even seventeen year old kids.....

“Oh Maria.....Did you forget the beers?” Asked Luis.

“No, I put them at the bottom of your pack.” Said Maria. “You carried them all the way here.”

There was a lot of laughter and a tussle, which ended with quite a long cuddle. Maria liked Luis, he was handsome. A nice shape too, with no fat, but not too skinny either. She had a thing about skinny guys and it wasn’t a nice thing. Luis was nice though and if they were still together at the end of the summer, he’d be her first lover. Maria had thought it over, probably too much. She’d decided that Luis would definitely be the first. Not that she had much idea about what to expect. One experienced friend had told her that after it stung a bit, it was all wonderful.

“Nothing better in the world, than good sex.” Her friend had told her.

Luis had lost his mum the previous year; she’d had a cancer of some kind. His dad still ran the one and only auto repair place in the village. Luis was also the old guy of the group, at the age of eighteen.

“Tell Mauricio.....He’s being an ass again.” Yelled Daniela.

No shortened names, no nicknames, they’d all agreed on that. Their parents had awful fluffy sounding names for them, but they’d decided to have none of that. They weren’t far off being adults, even looking for jobs. All four of them had decided to use their full given names, the names they’d been given when christened.

“What is he doing now?” Asked Maria.

“Being an arse.....Saying gross stuff.” Said Daniela.

They were sort of going out and it was unlikely Mauricio had done anything worthy of Daniela’s insults. They were both the same age, sixteen fairly recently. There was an unwritten rule that girls of sixteen, dated guys of eighteen. The rule mattered; you broke it at your peril. Daniela was leading up to ditching Mauricio in favour of an older boyfriend. Until that happened, they’d still be going out to the woods to get high and fondle each other’s intimate places. Maria had decided that dating guys could be tough going, if you didn’t follow the rules.

“Stop being an arse, Mauricio.” Shouted Luis. “Or I’ll come over there and sort you out.”

Mauricio was, as previously stated, sixteen. His parents ran a very popular hairdressers in the village. A unisex hair place, which was a bit racy for rural Colombia. Again as previously stated. Daniela was sixteen too, which was the cause of their current strife. Her parents ran a clothing store in the nicest part of the village.

“I’m sorry if I can sometimes.....Be an arse.” Said Mauricio.

“You’re not so bad.....I do like you.” Said Daniela.

They started kissing, which probably meant no more fighting. Poor Mauricio might soon be replaced by a muscle bound eighteen year old football player, but for tonight.....There would be a good vibe. Maria hated to admit it, but she'd have rather died than date a guy her own age.

"I thought the calendar showed a full moon for tonight." Said Luis.

"No.....Tonight is a new moon." Said Maria.

The arc of pale moonlight, barely showed up against the night sky. Maria pulled a bag of junk food from her pack. No using her flashlight, she ripped the top off the pack and began to nibble what was inside. There was a new junk food tax in Colombia, which gave a forbidden fruit feel to anything sugary and unhealthy.

"What did you bring ?" Asked Luis.

"Not sure what this is.....But it tastes great." Said Maria.

Next Luis took the top off a bottle of Corona beer. There were lots of good beers made in Colombia, but there was a certain feeling about drinking the more expensive Mexican brew. Not that they had money to burn, they'd share the bottle of beer.

"Oh.....Warm beer." Said Luis. "Not that I'm complaining.....Or I won't be complaining after a few mouthfuls."

Maria took a huge swig from the bottle and as usual, the bubbles went up into her nose and made her sneeze.

"Still tastes weird, but I'm getting used to it." Said Maria.

There wasn't much light, though they had piled up some dead wood to make a camp fire. Getting friendly was great in the dark, but after the deaths of Alex and Bea.....A camp fire was now almost compulsory. Maria could just about see the other couple and Mauricio was taking the top off a bottle of beer. It hissed, of course it did, it was what bottled beer did when you opened it.

"Wow, did you see that ?" Asked Maria.

"See what ?" Asked Luis.

"Something moved in the trees.....It was really big." Said Maria.

"Yeah, not a funny joke, Maria." Said Luis. "Everyone knew Bea and her mum."

"No really.....It sort of appeared out of the trees, when Mauricio opened a bottle of beer." Said Maria.

"Where ? I can't see anything." Said Luis.

Maria pointed, but there was nothing there now.

"Shit, it's gone.....I'm not lying, Luis." Said Maria. "It was really big.....Easily the size of a horse."

Luis was one of those guys who will never let anything go. They could have been drinking and kissing, but no.....He had to start yelling at the other two.

"Hey.....Daniela.....Did you guys see something come out of the woods ?" Yelled Luis.

"Yeah, yeah.....Not funny." Shouted Daniela.

"Way too soon dude, way too soon." Yelled Mauricio.

"No.....Not a joke.....Maria saw something." Shouted Luis.

When the large creature grabbed Daniela in its huge jaws, there was a sense of unreality. One moment their friend was fine, the next she was being shaken about like a rag doll.

"No..... No.....We have to help her." Said Maria.

Daniela was screaming, but the sound seemed to be very close. It was Luis, screaming in fear, his eyes wide with terror. Maria thumped him and he didn't react....There was just the constant loud scream. Maria got up with the intention of trying to help her friend. It changed though, the huge

monster changed in some way. It had an even bigger head, with wider jaws and more teeth that glistened in the light from their camp fire.

“Oh, Daniela.....No.....No.” Yelled Maria.

There is a limit to anyone’s bravery. When Maria saw her friend ripped apart by the creature, she turned and ran. She knew the woods, but even so, she tripped and fell several times. Her knees were bloody and painful; by the time she stopped and looked back. If the fire was still alight, it was hidden by the trees. She’d panicked and wasn’t proud of it. There was a moment when she thought of going back to see if Luis or Mauricio needed help. No one in their crowd had phones, they were expensive and there was very little reception in the woods that surrounded the plantation.

“I should go back.” Maria mumbled.

No use, panic set in again as she heard something moving through the trees. It sounded massive, as it seemed to be shoving trees out of the way. When Maria heard what sounded like a tree being pushed over, she ran again. Almost no light now. What there was of the new moon, seemed too hidden by clouds, or maybe a mist. Maria fell a lot and each fall was noisy. Yet, sharp teeth didn’t grab her and she never felt claws ripping into her back. After one really bad fall, Maria dragged herself behind the fallen trunk of a dead tree. It was her hip she’d hurt, it was causing her a lot of pain. No phone, no watch, she had no real idea of the time. No glow in the sky to the east, so it was still a while from dawn.

“Fuck.....It altered, it changed.....I saw it.” She muttered.

There was still the urge to go back, to see if Luis was still in one piece. Mauricio had always said he was a lover, not a fighter. That didn’t bode well for his survival. Back to where though, all the falling over in the dark had turned her around. She only knew where east was with some certainty, when there was the early morning glow in the sky.

“Dawn at last.....I need to head north and a little east, I think.” She muttered.

That should bring her to the southern edge of the plantation, but she wasn’t certain. Her hip hurt, really hurt, which wasn’t going to help her get home. It wasn’t painful enough to mean she’d dislocated it, but it was bad enough.

“Shit.....It’s found me.” Maria mumbled.

The noise in the trees wasn’t that loud and it didn’t sound like a huge heavy brute. Definitely not the sound of a beast who could knock trees out of the way. As whatever it was fell down, Maria recognised the sounds it made. Mainly it was complaining about the Gods, its own bad luck and the time it was taking for the sun to rise.

“Mauricio !” Maria yelled. “I’m over here.....Follow my voice.”

A flashlight would have been nice, but her backpack had been left on the ground next to their picnic. On the other hand, there would have been a temptation to use it, which might have turned her into creature food.

“Where are you ? Shout again.”

“Here.....Here Mauricio.....Over here.” She yelled.

He obviously didn’t have a flashlight either. There were a few more shouts of directions, before Mauricio was sitting on the ground next to her. The sun was rising; giving just enough light to see that her friend looked more beat up than her. Mauricio had a nasty jagged wound on his left cheek, that looked like it might be a bite.

“Are you alright ?” Asked Maria.

“I’m alright, I can walk.....Can you ?”

“Yes, well I think so.....I was alright before I sat down.” Said Maria.

“You might have seized up.” Said Mauricio. “Come on, up on your feet.....We need to get back home. Our parents will be going crazy.”

Maria had seized up, standing was agony, but only for a minute, or so. As she shuffled about to get the blood flowing into her legs, Mauricio touched her arm.

“You should know.....I saw that thing kill Luis.”

“It was very dark..... Are you sure ?” Maria asked.

She’d loved Luis in her own way, but now she was hearing that he was dead; she was still worried more about her parents thinking they might never see her again. They were ridiculously late and there was still a long walk back to the village. Tears for Luis would probably arrive later, when she was on her own.

“Luis had his flashlight aimed right at it.” Said Mauricio. “I saw it.....It bit him almost in two. I’m sorry, Maria.....I know you two were really close.”

“It changed.....I saw it become something, different.” Said Maria. “It went after Daniela and.....There was so much blood. Its head changed, and its claws. Did you see it change ?”

“Careful.....Say things like that to the police and they’ll think you’re crazy.” Said Mauricio.

“Tell me, Mauricio.....All the time you were watching it eat Luis.....Did you see it change ?”

He’d seen it happen, she could tell by the look on his face, as dawn began to turn into full daylight. She liked Mauricio well enough, but she knew his weakness for never wanting to upset anyone in authority.

“I’m not about to shout about it to Jorge, the chief of police.” Said Maria. “Just tell me.....Did you see that thing change its shape ?”

“Yes.....I wasn’t sure if I was hallucinating.” Said Mauricio. “Then I saw it change again.....Its back legs seem to expand and look stronger.”

“Thank you.....Neither of us was hallucinating.” Said Maria.

“Just remember that we can’t tell anyone.” Said Mauricio. “Start talking about.....Shapeshifters and we will end up in a padded cell.....For life.”

“Alright, I agree.....We keep quiet about that bit.” Said Maria. “Crap, your face looks bad. Did it bite you ?”

“No, I ran into a tree.” Said Mauricio.

“Alright.....Just a bit north of directly east.” Said Maria. “We’ll be home for breakfast.”

It was a hot dry day and they had no water. Two streams were so wide they had to find somewhere shallow enough to wade across. Once there was a sound in the trees that made them crouch down and keep still for over an hour. They walked into the village at barely ten minutes before midday.

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Chad Hudson had a powerful four wheel drive now, delivered all the way to the village. Things seemed to be happening now, though the continued deaths would mean a lot of pressure from the local authorities. There was even a set of combat armour to go with the beast of a truck. Colombia was hot though, hot and humid. The armour was unlikely to be worn during the day. No extra weapons had been delivered recently, but Chad was happy with an assault rifle over his shoulder and his own personal monster killer of a gun. He was currently looking at a girl called Maria, as Kate Doyle cleaned her up a bit. Her parents had been called, so Chad needed to talk to her now.....

“You’re sure Luis and Daniela are both dead ?” Chad asked.

Kate gave him a look, as though he was already going over the top. Two of the kids were reportedly dead, so she could give him the stink eye as much as she liked. Being soft on the poor kid, wasn’t going to help. Her friend Mauricio had already been collected by a very worried looking mother.

“Yes, I saw Daniela die.....Mauricio saw it begin to eat Luis.” Said Maria.

“Describe it to me, Maria ?” Asked Chad.

“It was really dark.”

“As best you can.....How big was it ?” Asked Chad.

“Huge, easily the size of a horse.....like a wolf the size of a horse.” Said Maria.

“All black fur and massive teeth.....That was how Bea’s mum described it.” Added Kate.

Good, she was helping and not giving him that look all the time.

“Yes, lots of teeth catching the firelight.” Said Maria. “It did look very much like a massive wolf.”

“So you had built a camp fire ?” Asked Chad.

“Yes.....It was the first thing we did.” Said Maria.

They were in a room at the rear of Jorge’s office, though he wasn’t there. One of his trainees had mentioned him going to see Julie Yago. The same trainee, Olie.....Had just opened the door enough to get most of his head into the room.

“Maria’s mum is here to collect her.” Said Olie.

Maria wasn’t an adult; they shouldn’t even have been questioning her without a parent there. A good rule designed to protect kids, but it wasn’t the time to totally respect the rule book.

“Does she look upset ?” Asked Maria.

“No.....She just looks tired.” Said Olie.

It was now or never, even if Kate was giving him the stink eye again.

“Just one more question.” Said Chad. “We need to investigate where you had the picnic, or party.

Can you give me rough directions on how to get there ?”

“Yes, of course.....Poor Luis’s body can’t be left there, or Daniela.” Said Maria.

She gave them a really good set of directions, to a place she admitted they’d used a lot. Not exactly a SatNav location, but Chad was sure he’d be able to find the place. At the fork of two small rivers, it was probably easy to find on a good old fashioned printed map. By the time Maria’s mother drove her away in a family hatchback, Chad had decided to invite Kate.

“I’m going straight out there, before the jungle wrecks any evidence.” Said Chad. “Want to come along ? You might be useful.”

“Might be useful, huh.....Alright, but I need to get back by mid-afternoon.” Said Kate.

“No problem.”

It wasn’t far; the kids must have got turned around on the way back. The truck got nearly all the way, before there was a fairly deep looking river. Chad had faith in the vehicle, but he wasn’t going to risk getting stuck in the river.

“About half a mile to walk from here, maybe less.”

“Fine, but I’m assuming we can find the truck again ?” Asked Kate.

“Hey, have a little faith.” Said Chad. “I know I’ve left it late to mention it, but you need to select a gun from the back. No one goes out unarmed now.....No one.”

“I don’t think I could hit anything.”

“Just grab a gun.....I’ll be happier if you’re armed.” Said Chad.

There were body bags in the rear too; he always had a few with him, just in case. While he folded up two of them and put them in a backpack, Kate chose a modern military assault rifle. She didn’t handle it like a total novice.

“I can see I won’t have to tell you which end to point at the bad guys.” Said Chad.

“My first serious boyfriend was a gun nut.” Said Kate. “Had a motorcycle too.....Drove my mum crazy.”

After getting wet boots crossing the river, the terrain dried out quite a bit. Chad had been right, it was less than half a mile to where the four youngsters had built a campfire. The ashes had been spread out and some looked to have burned a few dry bushes. It would have all looked like a badly managed temporary camp, if it hadn't been for the human remains.

"Crap.....They're barely recognisable as people." Said Kate.

Luis was the worst; his face had been chewed away to the bone. Daniela's body had ended up in the fire, which had left her in a worse condition than Luis. Chad had seen a lot of death, but those two kids.....It wasn't right, not when they were just out for a bit of fun.

"Nothing ran away when we approached." Said Chad. "Be careful, something is scaring off the carrion feeders and it's not us."

The small eaters of anything dead in the jungle, should have been there, making the most of a rare feast. Not only were they not there, there was no sign they'd ever been there. No bite wounds from small teeth, no dragging away pieces of severed flesh. Kate actually raised her assault rifle.

"Do you think it's still around ?" Asked Kate.

"Maybe, but I'm paid to be over cautious." Said Chad. "Can you really use that rifle ?"

"Yeah, won a few medals when I was in my teens." Said Kate.

"Then you can keep watch, while I bag up the two dead kids." Said Chad.

It wasn't pleasant, but it had to be done. Leave the bodies out in the open for another day and something would start chewing at them. It might be the creature Maria said was as big as a horse, or it might be a big cat of some kind, looking to feed her young. Either way, the dead kids deserved more dignity than being a dinner for wild animals. Picking up the loose bits though.....That was the worst part.

"Do you need a hand ?" Asked Kate.

"I brought gloves.....Just keep watching for anything that might want to eat me." Said Chad.

It took nearly an hour to get every piece of bone, flesh and gristle into two body bags. Separation wasn't perfect; some of Luis might have gone in with Daniela and vice versa. Not a huge problem really and the lab guys were capable of sorting it out. The important thing was to get them back to the mobile lab the Bogotá cops had set up. Getting the body bags to the truck was going to be fun, but Chad was happy that he and Kate could manage it.

"Chad !" Shouted Kate. "I saw something.....It was really big."

No verbal follow up, she began to pepper part of the jungle with single rounds. Chad had placed his rifle against a tree and he recovered it. He had no idea what Kate was firing at, but he was beginning to trust her instincts.

"There.....Twenty yards away, where I just aimed." Said Kate. "I know it sounds crazy, but it changed colour. Like an octopus, it can merge into its background."

"Crap, yeah.....I can see it now." Said Chad.

Like a chameleon, at least to Chad. It was a predominantly green colour, with brown and red patches to merge into the vegetation. If an assault rifle could kill it, Kate would have been stood over its corpse. Chad used his gun, which could fire high velocity rounds and fire them accurately. The highest loading of any rounds he'd heard of.....The gun could have probably brought down a T-Rex. He quickly fired four times, while Kate used her rifle on fully automatic. When the creature screamed, Chad was sure it was his gun that had hurt it.

"Keep firing.....We're hurting it." Yelled Chad.

A strange almost human like scream, that was repeated. It changed again, turning into a yellowish brown colour with splashes of light green. It was matching an area of general rocky debris and doing

it perfectly. Actually not quite perfectly, as Chad could just about see its outline. He fired several more times and heard the creature scream yet again, before running off through the trees. It really was as big as a horse, Maria had been telling the truth.

“There must be blood.....We hit it, we hurt the bastard.” Said Kate.

Kate was off, beginning to run after the brute. Gun up and ready, she looked ready to chase it halfway across Colombia.

“No Kate.....I’d like to go after it too, but there might be more of them.” Said Chad. “Then there are the bodies of the two kids. We need to take them to the mobile lab. We will come back here, but with more cops and a lot more guns.”

“There must be blood.....We both hit it.” Said Kate.

“I found blood when I shot one.” Said Chad. “The lab guys at head office said it was unidentifiable.....Not any living thing on the standard database. I was told to keep quiet about that, but we just fought together.....Anyway, we need to get the body bags and get out of here.”

“Not any living thing ?” Asked Kate.

“Luke told me that eighty five percent of our DNA, is identical to the DNA of a humble mouse. He went on to say the blood only shared ten percent of its DNA with humans, Homo sapiens, us. Head office are putting it down to sample contamination. As for Luke.....He seems pretty excited.”

“Crap.....Maybe we should come back with more guns.” Said Kate.

Getting the body bags across the shallow river was the worst part, more dirty water and unidentified muddy crap, all over their boots and lower legs. Eventually they had the bags in the back of the truck and were heading back into the village. Being comfortable at last, seemed to make Kate want to talk.

“So, what’s your theory about the beast ?” Asked Kate. “Some crazy biohazard type of experiment that went wrong ? Now they’re running wild in the jungle ?”

“I tend to avoid conspiracy theories.” Said Chad. “The crazies on social media had Covid down to everything from Chinese germ warfare; to a bottle falling out of a window at the CIA. Conspiracy theories don’t shine a light on these things; they drown the truth under grubby water.”

“Oh, mister boring.” Said Kate. “I won’t tell on you, Chad. You must have a theory lurking somewhere in your brain.....Tell me ?”

Chad liked Kate and she was still kind of growing on him. The way she’d been willing to go charging off into the jungle. Besides her personality, he’d always had a thing about red heads. There were stories in the office, rumours really. Someone had mentioned seeing her with the same guy a few times. There was even talk of her being seen with another woman. Probably all as reliable as Covid being a secret CIA project. Anyway, she might say no.

“One condition.....And I’ll tell you my theory.” Said Chad. “If you agree to join me for a burger, fries and some beer tonight.”

“You mean a date ?” Asked Kate.

Chad hated drivers who didn’t keep their eyes on the road. He broke his own rule by looking directly at Kate and nodding at her.

“Fine.....Burger and fries it is.” Said Kate. “Beer too of course, lots of beer.”

“My personal theory is genetic alteration.” Said Chad. “Someone has a secret lab out in the jungle; the Narcos have been doing that for decades. They were trying to make a super beast, the ultimate killing machine for the army. Something went wrong of course, it always does. Their pet beasts got out and are now in the jungle, multiplying and getting stronger.”

“Talk about mister depressing.” Said Kate. “Do you really believe that ?”

“I do now.....By this evening I may think it’s total shit.”

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