

The Skin Worshipper

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This story is and the characters in it are figments of the author's imagination.



PART 1

Chapter 1

He slowly comes back out of blackness and into a strong white light. His head hurts and he is disorientated. There is a strong pungent smell that makes him nauseous. He tries to hold back, but he can't and he vomits on the floor he is lying on. That's when he notices he is naked. He looks around for his clothes, but he can't see them. He does notice that he is in a cage about six feet high and maybe eight feet by eight feet. He tries to stand up, but has to keep his head down. He realizes he is alone in the cage. Where is she, where is Katie?

"Katie!"

No answer, everything is quiet. He begins to notice more things outside the cage, the room is large, rectangular and white. In the ceiling there are double fluorescent light tubes making the room well lit, the light bouncing off the walls. A few feet from the cage door there is a black plastic sheet, making it impossible to see what is behind it.

Then he hears a sound. It's like someone is ripping fabric apart, and he calls out, "hello, anyone there?"

"Wait," says a tired voice from behind the sheet.

"Please open the cage. Where is Katie, where is my wife?"

"I said wait, I will be with you in a minute."

Anger takes over and he grabs the cage bars and tries to shake them, but they are solid, and won't move.

"Open the fucking cage now!"

There is no answer, but the ripping sound continues, then some sighing and more ripping.

"Hey, I said open the fucking cage, or I will kick your sorry ass when I get out of here."

"Idiot, now you gave me a good reason not to open the cage."

The ripping has stopped and he can hear footsteps walking around behind the sheet, then suddenly the sheet drops.

First, he doesn't understand what he is looking at, but his brain slowly puts it all together and when he realizes what it is, he screams out in agony.

"Isn't she beautiful," says a voice to his right.

He can't take his eyes of what is in front of him, his brain tells him to look away but he can't.

A man walks up to the cage, and he is naked. He has glasses and his hair is neatly combed. His build is strong and he is of average height.

He looks at the man in the cage who is sobbing quietly, not taking his eyes off the thing in front of him.

From a wooden construction hangs a body, the legs and arms held away from the body and tied to steel loops in the thick beams. There is a rope around the body's neck, which is attached to the top of the construction.

The body has no skin, he can see the muscles and sinews and the blood dripping down on the floor. Only the head has its skin attached, and it's Katie's face he sees.

"What have you done?" He sobs.

The man takes out a cigarette and lights it with an old Zippo, and after taking a couple of drags he turns his head towards him and says, "I flayed her, and her beautiful skin is now being hung in another room. I will then de-flesh it and clean it, after that it will soak in salt water for some time."

He sounds like he is reading a recipe for his favorite dish, no emotions just fact on fact.

"Later I will place her skin over a polyurethane mannequin, and add glass eyes and a wig, I will make her up and take her upstairs to meet the rest of my family."

The man in the cage falls to the floor, trying to understand what is happening. All he can remember is that their car had a flat tire. He was on the ground, taking it off and Katie was standing behind him holding the bolts, after that everything went black.

"You have to forget Katie now my friend, and begin to think about yourself. You have two choices, either I kill you and flay you after, or I do what I did to dear Katie here, flay you alive."

The man screams again.

Chapter 2

Alex Read is looking out over the valley spreading out in front of him. The sun is setting behind the peaks, and the forest below with its different shades of green is dense and looks like a green carpet from up here. The view is breathtaking and for a couple of minutes he has it all to himself, then he sighs hearing the bickering of his travel companions. He turns around and looks down the narrow path he just came up. Fifty feet below him he can see the first green, yellow, and orange of his companion's clothes. The first to make it up to where he is standing is a young Latin girl, she bends over and puts her hands on her knees and breathes heavily.

"You are out of shape Maria, you need to run more," says Alex.

"Callate vato, back in the barrio I would out run you in two seconds flat," she says her dark eyes flashing.

Maria is a beautiful young woman, long curly hair, skin like cinnamon and a body most women would die for. Too bad she is a gang member, and has at two convictions for assault and battery. It's hard to believe looking at her. She is only five feet six.

When she is breathing normally again she walks the last few steps and looks out, then she turns to Alex and says, "It is beautiful, but I don't know if it was worth the climb."

Alex just smiles at her and signals that she should take off her backpack, which she does.

The next person to arrive is a young black man, he is in much better shape than Maria and gives Alex a high five as he passes him, and sits down next to Maria and takes off his backpack.

"Look at the view Marlon," says Alex.

"Man, if I wanted to see a view, I'd buy a fucking postcard."

Marlon is a car thief, and fifteen years old. He looks at least five years older because of his height and muscles.

The last three comes up one after the other, Jenna a white girl with long blond hair and track marks on her arms. She was beautiful once, but years of drug abuse have made her look older than her sixteen years.

Then there are the twins, Jordi and Pepe, sixteen and gang members. They arrived in the USA less than three years ago and have already climbed high in their gang. Both are covered in tattoos mostly done in their home country, Guatemala, before they moved here with their mother after their father was shot.

They all sit down except Alex who is still standing looking out over the valley. He turns his head towards the group of misfits and criminals.

He works at a center for kids who are to be let out into society after serving time in a juvenile detention center, and this group is due out in a few days after this hiking trip. This is their second day on a four-day hike in the mountains and forests surrounding the center. There are miles after miles of untouched wilderness, most people never venture as far as he is planning to take them. His boss didn't like the idea at first, but after convincing her these kids needed to spend more time together and learn how to work as a team and not five individuals, he needed the extra days.

"OK guys, here is the plan. Pepe will be the group leader and take us down these slopes in a northwestern direction. The hike will be hard, the slope is very steep and it's getting dark. Make sure we stay together."

"Jefe, you know I'm not good with that GPS thingy," says Pepe from where he leans against a tree.

"You are not good at anything," mumbles Maria.

"Come over here mamacita and I'll show you something that I'm good at."

"Cut it out, we don't have all-day; let's go people," says Alex.

The group stands and Pepe takes the lead with the yellow GPS in his hand. Alex has a compass as well as a backup.

The way down is hard and they have to walk carefully, the earth is loose and covered with roots and other vegetation. A couple of times one of them loses their footing and slides down a few yards, but manages to grab something to hold on to. The sun has gone behind the peaks and darkness is falling fast.

Alex looks at his watch and realizes he has miscalculated the time of darkness. It's only 6P.M., but because of the peaks covering the sun and the thick green cover from the tree crowns around them it is almost dark as night. He looks down and guesses they have at least another mile to go before they reach the bottom and can make camp.

He doesn't say anything to the group, but he is a bit concerned now, maybe he should move up ahead and lead them down, he thinks. This is Pepe's first hike and he might be good at running from the police, but he is out of his league up here in the mountains.

He walks past Maria, Marlon and then Jordi and up to Pepe at the front.

"Hey Pepe, wait up. Let's change, I'll lead and you fall back."

He watches as Pepe turns his head around, but keeps walking and before he can call out a warning, Pepe walks right into a tree trunk, he slips and falls to the ground. Jordi tries to reach him, but the ground is slippery and he also falls. Before Alex eyes the two young men begin to slide down the slope on their backs. When Alex reaches the place where they went down, he shouts, "grab hold of something!"

Jordi is the first to stop his fall by holding on to a small bush. Pepe manages to grab a tree branch hanging low but in doing so he let's go of the GPS and Alex watches how it falls to the ground and busts open on a rock.

By now the others have reached him and are looking down at the two brothers thirty yards below them.

"Are you OK?" asks Alex.

"Yeah, nothing broken," says Jordi.

"I think I busted my foot, it hurts like shit," calls Pepe.

"Hang on, I will come down with a rope and pull you up."

He takes off his backpack and unhooks the rope attached to its side. He ties it around a thick trunk and then turns to the others who are standing around him.

"I will go down to Jordi first. When I give the signal you start pulling and help him walk up. When he is up and safe you throw the rope down to me again. There are not many branches so it should be fairly easy, but if Pepe is hurt badly you'll have to pull him up without him being able to walk."

They nod their heads and Alex turns around and carefully slides down the mountainside. When he reaches Jordi he ties the rope around his waist before telling him to let go of the bush.

"OK, you are ready, just walk up and let them help pull you, lean back a bit so you don't slip."

Jordi nods his head and begins to walk. Alex stays to make sure he gets off OK. Then he slides down another ten yards to where Pepe is holding on to the tree branch.

"How's the foot?"

"Hurt's like hell, but I don't think it's broken. I can move it and my toes."

OK, let's wait for the rope and then I'll help you up."

They don't have to wait long before seeing Marlon throwing the rope down the slope but it gets tangled in some branches.

"Throw it lower to the ground." Alex shouts up to him.

Marlon gives it another try and this time the rope lands a few feet above Alex and Pepe. Alex crawls up and grabs the rope and pulls it back and when he is back next to Pepe he ties it around his waist and helps him up.

"Pepe is hurt, but it looks like he can still walk, just make sure the rope is tight so he doesn't slip."

He sees Marlon wave his arm, and he says to Pepe, "lean back, and take small steps."

Pepe manages to walk ten yards before he slips and slides down a few feet, but he gets up and continues the slow walk up to his friends. Marlon throws the rope back down to Alex who quickly moves up the slope. When he is safe he finds Pepe sitting on the ground, his left boot is off his foot and he is massaging it.

"I think I'll be OK in a few minutes," he says.

Looking at the others who are standing around Pepe, Alex says, "the GPS is gone, but I still have my compass, so we will be all right for now. Learn from this and walk extra careful the rest of the way down."

They all nod and look down on Pepe thinking it could have been one of them.

Alex supports Pepe on their way down and after almost an hour they reach the bottom and sit down for a well-deserved break. It's completely dark now and they have their headlamps turned on. Alex is looking at a map to see where a good place for a camp would be.

Maria who watches him from where she is sitting stands and walks over to him.

"Do you know where we are?"

Alex looks at the young girl wondering if she is afraid, but her eyes don't show any emotions, they are just dark and calm.

"Yeah I know where we are, but I'm not sure where we should go. According to the map there should be a small brook a mile or so from here, we should be able to camp there."

"Sounds good, then I can clean some of this shit off me."

Maria, like all of them are sweaty and her hands and legs are covered in mud from supporting herself going down the slope.

"If you need some help washing your back, give me a holler," says Marlon from where he is sitting.

Maria gives him the finger and walks over to Jenna and slumps down beside her.

"What's the plan?" asks Jenna.

"Alex is taking us to a brook where we can camp."

"Shit! I don't want to walk anymore, my legs feel like rubber, and my feet hurt."

"Listen up gang, we are moving out, one line after me," says Alex lifting his backpack onto his shoulders. He takes off into the forest and they all line up behind him.

It's easier to walk on the flat ground even though there are more trees and bushes. They make good time and after a while Alex can hear the sound of running water. He steps out into the clearing and there, maybe twenty yards across an open space is the brook. The water is moving fast. The clearing is lit by the moon and the ground looks silvery. One after the other the teenagers come up beside him.

"This looks nice," says Jenna and dumps her backpack on the ground.

"Let's set up camp, you guys raise the tents, I will start dinner. No swimming and no messing around until after eating."

They all get to it and soon four tents are up and the smell of canned spaghetti is floating in the air.

"I never thought canned food could taste this good, " says Marlon and licks his knife and fork clean.

"Yeah Alex, you are some chef, " says Pepe.

"Thank you, but it's all about the herbs I carry in my backpack."

Maria and Jenna dig around in their backpacks and come up with towels.

"We are going for a swim, no peeking and don't come over to "clean" the pots and pans, " says Maria before they walk off.

The boy's grin and Alex shakes his head.

"Where are we going tomorrow?" asks Jordi

"We will hike another four miles across the valley then up on those peaks over there." Alex points at some low peaks that can be seen in the moonlight.

"Cool, apart from almost dying today I must say I have enjoyed this more than I thought I would," says Jordi.

"Yeah, you are a regular Davey Crockett," laughs his brother.

"Seriously, I could get into this hiking shit. It's better than hanging around the barrio and be shot at."

"You could take some courses and get officially qualified as a mountain guide. I could help you look into it," says Alex.

"Great idea, I'll join you. Then we find some isolated place and set up a weed plantation, and make some serious dough," laughs Marlon.

They hear shrieks and laughter coming from the brook, and figure the girls have jumped in.

"Must be freezing in the water," says Jordi.

"You will soon find out, when they are done it's our turn."

They three teenagers moan, but they know Alex is right.

That night they sleep deeply, and don't hear the sound of the chainsaw cutting through flesh and bone just a few hundred yards away.

The man has two bodies suspended from a tree and with precision he cuts them into pieces, and then buries them in deep holes he dug earlier. He is whistling a favorite tune and his cigarette is dangling from the corner of his mouth.

When he is done, he throws the chain saw over his shoulder and walks back to his cabin. He has no more samples to work with, so tomorrow he is going hunting, that's what he calls it. He drives his quad through the forest ten miles to a road often traveled by hikers and hunters. Then he waits until someone stops to take a leak, or maybe he places a few nails on the road like he did with Katie and her husband. Katie, what a wonderful woman, and what skin she had. Katie and her husband's skins are lying in a vat in his basement immersed in salt water and there they will lie for a few days. Then he will mount them.

Chapter 3

"Do you know where we are?" asks Alex.

Marlon scratches his head and looks at the map and then at the compass he has in his hand.

"We should be here," he says, pointing at the map.

Alex and the others lean in to take a closer look. They have been walking all morning, but now Alex suspects Marlon has lost them. When they left the campsite, he took out a bearing on the peaks where they were going and showed it to Marlon and then explained how to read the map and compass. The kid said he understood, but apparently not. Alex is not concerned, they can always backtrack, or reach an opening where he can take a new bearing. The forest is so dense that they can't see anything above them, hardly the sky or the sun.

"Hombre, now I know why you got busted, you got lost," says Pepe.

"Shut up Taco boy," growls Marlon.

"Guys, there is no point arguing, let's keep walking," says Alex.

They continue through the dense forest and after a while they come to a clearing and when they step out from the trees their mouths fall open. In front of them is a large cabin with a neat garden around it. Their position is that they can see the front door and the garden in front. There is no smoke coming out of the chimney and there is no car parked in front. There is a dirt track leading around the house and disappears into the forest behind it.

"Wait here, I'll have a look," says Alex dropping his backpack on the ground.

He walks up to the house and notices the windows are set so high on the walls that he can't look inside. He walks around the cabin and behind it he finds some gardening tools, and a small shed. When he comes around the front he walks up on the small porch and knocks on the door. No answer, so he tries again a bit harder, still no answer. He stands there thinking for a second.

"Hey Alex, anyone home?" shouts Marlon.

Alex looks over to where the group is standing and signals for them to wait. He walks back down the porch and around the cabin to the shed, and as he had thought there is a ladder propped up on one side. He takes it and leans it against the wall below one of the windows on the far side of the cabin. After climbing up he looks through the window and into a bedroom. There is a double bed, and what looks like two people lying in it. He knocks on the window, but they don't move. He realizes they could be sick so he quickly climbs down and runs back to the front door.

"Come over here, there are some people inside and they are not moving," he shouts.

He watches the kids run towards him, but before they arrive he tries the door handle, but it's locked. He steps back, and kicks as hard as he can just below the handle, and is rewarded with a crack in the door frame. Two kicks later and the door swings open. He gestures for the group to stand behind him, and he enters the cabin.

"Hello," he calls out.

The silence is eerie, so he walks in and into a living room where he stops, and just stares.

"What's happening Alex," asks Jenna who is closest behind him.

"I don't know, but something is very off here, come and have a look."

The kids enter from behind him, and fan out.

"What the hell is this?" says Marlon.

They are looking at a living room with a couch, two chairs, a TV and behind it a dinner table with eight chairs. The room is clean, the dinner table shines and the wood floor has not a speck of dust on it. The windows are sparkling in the sunlight and there are flower pots in the corners. There is a faint smell of something in the air, but Alex can't say what it is.

Around the table are eight mannequins, a man dressed in a dark suit and blondish hair and a woman in blue blouse and long curly brown hair. There are two elderly people, grandparents maybe, two teenage girls and two younger boys. The girls wear makeup and are dressed in black tanks tops, and one of them has a tattoo on her left forearm.

In the couch there are two mannequins looking like women in their thirties and a male mannequin is sitting in one of the chairs.

"Maybe someone uses this cabin for photo shoots, like in a magazine or a TV commercial," says Jenna and walks up to the table.

There is a bowl with fruit in the center and she picks up an apple, "hey, this is real." She takes a bite from it, "mm tastes delicious."

Pepe and Jordi walk over to the two teenaged girls and stands behind them, then Pepe leans down and says, "guapa, do you want to go to the movies tonight?"

His brother laughs and kisses the cheek of the other girl.

"Guys, this is not a TV set, or anything like it. I think we should get out of here as soon as possible," says Alex still by the door.

"C'mon man, this shit is cool, it looks like a giant dollhouse," says Marlon walking around to where the twins are standing.

"Girl, you don't want to be hanging around these losers. You know the saying, once to try black, you never go back," he says and caresses the cheek of one of the girls at the table. His other hand moves up the nape of her neck and he gives her a massage. He looks over at Alex and grins, and then pulls his hand from her neck.

"What the fuck, look at your hand, " says Pepe.

Marlon looks at his hand and a couple of his fingers are red. His first reaction is to smell it, maybe it's paint or something.

Marlon has been around for a long time even though he is young, and has smelt blood before.

"What the hell, Alex, this is blood, " he says wiping it off on his pants.

Alex comes around where they are standing, and lets a finger touch the neck of the girl, when he looks at it there is a smear of red on it.

He kneels next to the girl and looks at her face, his finger traces the line of her jaw and then he says, "we better leave right now, this is real skin."

First there is silence, and then all at once the teenagers run for the door and out into the sunlight, Alex is right behind them.

When they reach the place where they left their backpacks they stop to catch their breaths.

"What are we going to do?" asks Jenna.

"We need to call the cops, right now," says Alex taking out his phone.

He walks around trying to get a signal, but there is none.

"Fuck, I get no signal."

The others look at him, he has never sworn before, and they know he is scared.

"What do we do? We can't stay here if, whoever owns the cabin, comes back. The door is busted open, and they will know someone was here," says Maria.

"She is right, we need to get back into the forest and get as far away as possible," says Alex and picks up his backpack.

They walk fast in a single line into the trees leaving the quiet beautiful clearing behind them. Alex checks his watch, still morning, they should be able to put a few miles between them and this place before darkness falls. The next day they will reach the main road and help.

Chapter 4

John Kerry is putting on his coat by the front door when his eleven year old son, Tim comes up to him.

"Dad, you said you would help me with my project today."

He looks down at the blond child with his big blue eyes looking up at him.

"We can do that in the afternoon, I have to go out for a while, and if you help your mother I'll pick up some ice cream on the way back, how does that sound?"

"Great dad, chocolate chip, OK?"

"Sure son," says John and ruffles the boy's hair.

In his truck he turns on the radio and hums along with the music. It's a beautiful day, and the drive up the mountain is a delight, almost no traffic on the road, and no rain clouds in sight. It takes him just over an hour to reach a dirt road where he turns left.

Driving slowly under the canopy of trees he makes his way up and deeper into the mountains. After another forty five minutes he turns off the dirt track and parks the truck. He gets out and from under a big tree he pulls out webbing, similar to what the military use to camouflage their vehicles or buildings. He drapes it over the truck and makes sure it's snug. He takes out a small backpack with a thermos, and a sandwich. Then he takes off along a trail leading away into the forest. He walks for a while and then enters a clearing where he heads for a big rock on the other side. When he reaches it he bends down and using his fingers pulls the rock wall up. It's not a real rock, just another camouflage and under it there is a powerful Quad.

After he starts it he makes sure his backpack is comfortable on his back and then drives along the clearing, and right through some bushes. On the other side there is a wider trail, and he takes off down it.

It took him almost six months to build this trail from the cabin to the clearing. He had built the cabin after and it took almost two years to do it. The windowpanes and doors he had sent to a PO BOX where he picked them up and drove them out here. Electricity comes from a generator in the basement fueled by diesel. The room it's in is sound isolated so when it runs it can't be heard from

outside. The exhaust fumes are pulled out by a system of fans in tubes that end fifty yards into the forest behind the cabin.

When he reaches the cabin he parks the Quad and walks up the porch, and there he stops staring at the door. It's ajar and he can see several muddy boot prints going in and coming out. He kneels and lets a finger trace one of the prints, still humid. They must have been here less than half an hour ago. He stands up and looks around him, scanning the tree line surrounding the clearing, nothing. No sounds apart from birds and insects buzzing. He sighs and steps into the cabin.

"Hello people, how are you today?"

Silence.

"I see you had visitors, anyone I would know?"

Silence.

"I see, OK then, I'll go and look for them and bring them back here, how does that sound?"

Silence.

He walks past the living room and into one of the bedrooms where he opens a closet. On the floor there is a hatch which he pulls up and reaching inside he finds the switch for the light. He carefully steps down on to a set of wooden steps and moves down.

When he is standing at the bottom he finds another switch and turns it on, one by one several rows of fluorescent lights come on. Straight ahead of him is the wooden construction he uses for skinning, and behind it is the metal cage where he keeps his prey.

The room is an underground cave that he found by accident while hunting. He was up here and when he walked across the clearing heading back to where he had parked his truck, he fell through a hole and landed on the rocky floor. The fall wasn't long, maybe ten feet and he was lucky, he only sprained his foot. Using his lighter he walked around the cave and noticed it was dry, no water coming in. After searching he found another entrance, a long tunnel leading a hundred feet underground and ending in the forest. He figured that at some point in time, this cave was used to hide things, maybe weapons or something more valuable. He decided to come back with a torch and have a better look at the place, a plan had formed in his head.

He takes off his clothes and hangs them neatly on wooden pegs on the wall. When he is naked he crosses the cold floor to a big wood cabinet, it's almost six feet high, eight feet long and about four feet deep. He opens the double doors and turns on the light inside. When it comes on he sighs with pleasure. There are shelves on one side with knives and scalpels. On the other are different crossbows hanging from pegs, and in one corner are several bamboo tubes of various dimensions, the shortest about three feet and the longest as tall as the cabinet. He whistles while he chooses a crossbow with six bolts hanging under the bow, and then he picks up one of the bamboo tubes, he chooses one of the midsize ones. Closing the doors he moves to the left where there is a small fridge, he opens it and takes out a box about twenty inches long and five inches wide. Inside are thin wood spikes with a cotton ball on one end and the other is sharp as a razor. He closes the fridge and moves back to where he hung his clothes. From another peg

he takes a leather strap and ties it to his leg, he inserts the wooden spikes carefully and then straps the bamboo tube over his shoulder using another leather strap. He grabs the crossbow and turning off the lights he heads up the stairs, across the living room and out on the porch where he stops and kneels. His face turns up against the sun, and his nose twitches like a rabbit, then he says in a voice quite different from the one he used with his son, "the hunt begins."

Chapter 5

Alex looks up at the sky. It's getting dark and he and the kids are tired. They have walked for almost six hours straight, going as fast as they can through the dense forest. Only stopping for short breaks to drink water and have something to eat. The night is coming fast and he decides to stop here and make camp. He figures they have another four hour hike in the morning before they reach the road back to the center.

They had talked a lot about what they had found during the day, and they are all scared. The consensus is that whoever built the cabin and placed the bleeding mannequins in it is not right in the head.

"We stay here for the night," he says and drops his backpack on the ground.

"Jesus, I'm tired," says Jenna and lies down, using her pack as a pillow.

"Are you sure this is safe, I mean we don't know if we are being followed?" asks Marlon.

Maria looks at him with contempt, and says, "for being a badass from the hood you sure sound like a pussy."

"Fuck off, Maria."

She chuckles and sits down where Jenna is lying. "How are you feeling chica?"

"Like shit."

"We'll be all right."

Jenna looks at her and says, "why? Because you say so?"

"No, because I know so. I've been in worse situations and have always made it out."

"Uh-huh."

Alex takes a walk around the area, but can't see or hear anything. He tries his phone again, but still no signal. He goes back and sits down among the group.

Pepe takes a drink from his canteen and after putting it back in his backpack says, "shouldn't we take turns being awake? Like a lookout?"

"Not a bad idea," says Alex.

He will stay awake until midnight then Pepe followed by Jordi, and Maria will take the last shift. Marlon and Jenna will hopefully be able to sleep all-night.

"This is bullshit, why do I have to be awake and she can sleep?" asks Maria, pointing her thumb at the already sleeping Jenna.

"Because you are you, and I trust you," says Alex with a grin.

The group settles down and when it's dark everyone except Alex is asleep.

Kerry is hunched down behind a tree twenty yards away, his nose twitches and he breathes in the smell of sweat and deodorant. He caught up with the group after just an hour and followed them. Staying behind them and moving from one tree to the next on bare feet. He had stopped by an overturned tree where some water had collected during the last rain. Mixing soil from the ground with a little water he had used the mud to paint long strips along his body and face. When it dried it itched, but his mind puts the feeling away and he is now virtually invisible in the darkness.

He moves a bit closer and watches the only grown up leaning against a tree, his eyes are open and looking into the darkness. Did he hear him? Doubtful, Kerry knows he is as silent as can be, there is no way the man had heard him. He moves to his right and circles the group.

Alex thinks he heard something, like a twig breaking, but when he listens more intently he can't hear a thing. Must have been a small animal, he thinks. He looks at his watch, still an hour left until it's time to wake up Pepe. The kids are sleeping around him. Marlon snores a little and fidgets in his sleep.

Kerry crawls up to the white girl on the ground. He is just behind her head lying on the ground. From here he can smell her and the dark skinned girl beside her. They smell different; he doesn't like the smell coming off the white girl. From where he is he can see her skin is old beyond her years, her hair is damaged, and he decides she is useless. Slowly pulling one of the wooden spikes from his leg, he lets the sharp tip barely touch her skin where her right carotid artery is. He pricks the skin-deep enough to draw a drop of blood. The girl twitches, and then lies still. He listens, and hears how she exhales out, and then she is no more.

Alex turns his head and looks over where Jenna is sleeping, she had just moved a little. He yawns and settles back against the tree to wait for midnight.

Kerry moves backwards slowly, then turns around and crawls away. When he has crawled far enough he leans against a trunk and settles in for the night.

"Rise and shine people, we have another few hours to walk, " says Alex stretching his body.

"My body hurts like hell," says Marlon sitting up.

Maria is drinking some water and eating a power bar, she has been awake for hours since Pepe woke her up.

The night was quiet, she didn't hear a thing, and now she can't wait to get moving so they can get back to civilization, and away from this place.

"Hey, Jenna, time to wake up," says Alex nudging her foot with his.

She doesn't move, just keeps on sleeping.

"Jenna, C'mon get up, we have to go," says Alex bending down and shaking her.

Jenna's head rolls in an unnatural manner and her mouth falls open, a spider crawls out.

"What the fuck," says Jordi who is sitting next to her, putting on his shoes.

Alex jumps back and looks down at the young girl. He bends down brushing away the spider that is walking up over her closed eyes towards her hair. He touches her cheek, it's cool and dry. He feels for a pulse, nothing.

"Is she dead?" asks Marlon standing next to him.

Alex turns around and looks at them, and says, "yeah, she is."

"How is that possible, she was fine last night, a bit tired sure, but she wasn't sick," says Maria.

"I have no idea, maybe her body was weaker than I thought because of the drug abuse, but the doctor said she would be fine. I don't get it."

They are silent for a while and then Pepe asks the obvious. "How do we take her with us?"

Alex thinks for a while, walking around in a tight circle, the others watch him intensely. Then he stops and sighs, and looking at them he says, "we have to leave her here. We can cut markers in the trees from here on to the road, and that way I can come back with help and bring her back."

"No man, we can't just leave her here. There might be wild animals around, they could eat her," says Pepe.

"I doubt a bear or a mountain lion will find her in less than eight hours that it will take me to come back with help. As soon as we are on the main road out of here I can call for an ambulance and police," he says.

They are all quiet, and then Maria clears her throat and says, "let's go."

They grab their packs and Alex leads the way as the group continues through the trees.

Kerry watches them from his hiding place and smiles. The man the other calls Alex has no idea where he is, there are at least eight hours walk to the main road, not four. He looks up at the sky and his nose twitches, rain he thinks. The sky is cloudy, and the wind is picking up a little, rustling the tree crowns. He smiles, he loves hunting in the rain.

Chapter 6

Maria looks up when the first raindrops hits her head. The clouds are dark and ominous, and the forest has become darker around her now that the sun is gone.

"Hey Alex, didn't you say the weather would be good?" she calls.

Alex is up-front and when he hears her he stops and the group gathers around him.

"Yeah, I have no idea where this came from. Maybe it's just local and will pass us soon."

There is a rumble of thunder and the few drops, turns into a downfall.

"So much for that, we will get drenched. How far do we have to go?" asks Marlon.

Alex pulls the plastic wrapped map out of his leg pocket and unfolds it. Using his compass he makes some calculations and says, "another two hours I think."

"You think? Look Jefe, I don't want to sound like an asshole here, but do you know what you are doing?" asks Jordi.

Alex looks at him and says, "yes I do, and I don't need any bullshit from you or anyone else, is that clear?"

"Look, we are all a bit shook up by Jenna's death OK, all we want is to get back to the center," says Jordi, looking at the others.

They all nod their heads in silence.

"Fine, let's go then," says Alex and pockets the map and continues walking.

Kerry is behind them to the left, hiding behind a tree trunk. He has his crossbow in his hands and has just loaded a bolt. He takes careful aim at the last person in the line, it's the twin brother of the one who just spoke.

The crosshairs lands on his neck, and Kerry breaths out slowly, and lets the bolt fly. In the rain the group can't hear the thud the bolt makes when it hits the boy in the nape of his neck. He just drops to the ground, twitches a few times and becomes still. The group continues walking like nothing has happened.

Kerry straps the crossbow over his back and moves to the next tree, following them. He can move faster now since the rain covers any sound he might make. He looks down at his body. The mud is coming off his skin, but he doesn't care, he doesn't need it any longer.

Alex sits down on a big rock, and looking back at the kids behind him he notices one is missing.

"Hey Pepe, where is your brother?"

Pepe turns around and looks behind Marlon to see where his brother is. He doesn't see him and turning back to Alex he says, "don't know, maybe he is tying his shoelaces."

"Well, just don't stand there, go back and get him, hurry up."

Pepe takes off as fast as he can, making his way through the underbrush. After a while he sees his brother lying on the ground.

"Hermano, what are you doing?"

His brother doesn't answer, so he shouts, "hey asshole, get up, we are all waiting for you."

He wipes some rain from his face with his hand and when he gets closer he sees something sticking up behind Jordi's head. He bends down and then pulls back and stumbled on a root. Sitting on the ground, he shouts, "Alex! Alex!"

The others hear the scream and come back to see what's going on, and when Pepe hears them arrive he just says, "he's dead. Someone shot him."

Alex moves past the kids, and kneels down next to Jordi. There is an arrow or bolt sticking up from his neck. It's made of some metal, maybe aluminum, and has plastic feathers.

He stands up and says. "Turn around, and run as fast as you can, don't stop just run."

At first, nothing happens, so he screams, "run!"

They all turn around and run through the trees, Maria stumbles and falls, but gets up fast. Marlon takes off his backpack and drops it so he can run faster. Alex does the same.

Kerry smiles, how he loves a running prey, so much more fun than a sitting one. He gets up from his kneeling position and follows the group. He runs hunched down, in a looping way, moving from one tree to the next. Soon he sees the back of the other brother, and he pulls the crossbow from his shoulder. He increases his speed and soon he is no more than ten yards behind him. The others are a bit further on, but not much. He cocks the weapon while running and loads a bolt. He stops for what seems like a second, aims, and fires.

Pepe feels a kick in his back and stumbles, but regains his balance and sees something is sticking out of his chest. The razor sharp point of an arrow is sticking out about an inch through his jacket. Suddenly he feels weak, his legs don't want to carry him, he tries harder, but to no avail. He stumbles and hits the ground headfirst. He tries to turn over on his back so he can scream for help, but the bolt sticking out of his back doesn't let him, instead he ends on his side. He tries to scream, but no sound comes out. Suddenly there is someone beside him, thank god, they came back for him, he thinks. He looks up and what he sees makes him try to scream again.

The man is naked, and his skin is taut over the strong muscles playing under it. His eyes are cold, like a wild animal. He doesn't say a word, just looks at him, and then carries on after the others.

Pepe coughs once, and feels something warm in his mouth, then he coughs again, and everything goes black.

Alex looks ahead and sees Maria to his left, and Marlon on his right, he takes a chance and looks over his shoulder, no Pepe. He thinks he sees something move behind him among the trees. When he turns his head forward, he has no time to change direction, and he runs straight into a thick tree and hits his head hard against the bark. He falls to the ground and the rainwater begins to seep through his clothing. He tries to sit up, but he feels faint and lies back down again.

Kerry arrives as the man lies down, he is bleeding from his head. He kneels down next to him and the man opens his eyes and looks at him.

"Help me," he moans.

Alex looks at the face of the man next to him, he doesn't move, just stares at him. Then his head turns slightly to the right, and his nose twitches. His head turns back to Alex and he puts his hand on his throat. Then fear sets in as sharp nails dig into the skin, and he knows he is bleeding.

Kerry looks into the other man's eyes, and rips out his throat with one single movement. The man gurgles and blood squirts over Kerry. He looks at the skin and the flesh in his hand turning it around. Then licks a little of the blood, and throws it away. Standing up, he smells the air, the rain is slowing down and there it is, that wonderful exciting smell of fear. He takes off after the other two, using his lopsided style of running.

Maria is crying, her tears mix with the rain coming down her face. Her lungs are burning, and her legs feel weak. She can barely see Marlon making his way a little to her right and a few yards ahead of her. He is running slower now, more like a tired jog. "Hey, we got to keep going," she manages to shout.

He waves at her and she notices how he gets some extra strength from somewhere and his pace increases. Maria pushes her lungs to their breaking point and manages to pick up some speed too.

Kerry aims the crossbow and pulls the trigger. He is aiming just a little ahead of the girl, and he is only fifteen feet behind her to the right. She should run straight into the bolt.

Her head snaps to the side and Maria loses balance, she falls headlong to the ground, and her head hits a rock, a flashing pain and then everything is black.

Kerry moves up and looks down at the body. The bolt is buried in her cheek at an angle going up. He kicks the body, and it doesn't move. Dead.

Hanging the crossbow over his back, he takes the bamboo tube and loads a spike from his leg. He sets off to the left, moving incredibly fast. Gone is the lopsided gait, now he is running like a jungle cat, low to the ground, and long steps. He looks to the right and sees he is parallel to the black boy. He increases his speed and turns slightly to his right.

Marlon chances a look behind him, no one. All his friends are gone, and Alex too. He looks forward again and is just about to try to run faster when a figure steps out from behind a tree a few yards ahead of him. Marlon stops, and looks at the figure. He doesn't move, and he is holding something to his mouth, like a long tube.

"Hey man, help me. My friends are back there, they are all dead."

The man doesn't say anything, just stands there. Suddenly there is a stinging pain in his chest, Marlon looks down and sees a thin piece of wood sticking out from his body.

"What the fuck-, " and everything goes black.

Kerry puts back the tube on his back and walks up to the boy on the ground. He is big for his age, he thinks. Bending down, he checks his pulse, good, still alive. He takes the body and lifts it up, placing it over his shoulder. The arms hang down on one side of his head and the legs sticking out on the other. Hefting the body a bit higher up, Kerry takes off in a fast walk back to his cabin. He isn't worried, he has carried bigger men, longer distances than this. The black boy will make a great addition to his otherwise white family. He wonders if his skin will sing to him the way the white skins do.

Chapter 7

The sky clears and the sun comes out. There is a rainbow on the horizon and a few rays break through the tree crowns and shines on the girl lying on the ground. She moves a leg and moans.

Maria's head hurts and there is something in her mouth, she can't close it. Then the pain hits her and she screams, but no one hears her. The forest is silent around her, just rain water dropping to the soft ground forming puddles.

She uses her hand and what she feels makes her scream again, there is a piece of metal going in her right cheek through her mouth and coming out just below her left eye. She can't close her mouth, but at least she can see with both eyes. She manages to roll over on her back and touches her head where it hurts. Her hand comes back with blood on it, but not a lot. She feels nauseous, and then she vomits, most of it comes out, but some is still in her mouth, being blocked by the bolt going through it. She coughs, but it turns into another scream as the pain explodes in her head and mouth. Her tongue feels the jagged edges of her molars, and she realizes the bolt had hit them and was angled upwards, almost entering her brain and eye.

When the pain lessens, she manages to get up on her feet and leans against a tree. She looks around, but sees no one. She doesn't dare to scream because of

the pain. She takes a few deep breaths, and then begins to walk in the direction she thinks the road is.

The day moves into afternoon, and it becomes darker. She isn't sure how long she has walked, and she is tired. Her head aches and so does the rest of her body. She was mumbling for the last hour, saying the same over and over again.

"Dios mio, ayudame, porfavor. God, please help me."

She reaches the top of a hill and she stops there to catch her breath. Suddenly she hears a rumble, and looks up thinking it's another thunderstorm moving in. But the sky is clear above her.

Then she hears it again and turns her head towards it. At first, she doesn't understand what she is looking at. She thinks it's a small river, maybe a few hundred yards away and slightly below her, but the water isn't blue, it's grayish.

Then she gets it, the road. She made it, she will be OK. Standing up, she walks as fast as she can towards the gray line, and when she reaches the edge of it, she passes out.

* * * * *

"Stop changing channels, honey, it's driving me nuts, " says Harry, looking at his wife.

"I just want to hear some good music, none of that dunka-dunka the kids listen to these days," says Helen.

Harry sighs and wonders when his wife will understand they don't play Polka on the radio these days, at least not around here.

It's getting darker outside, so he slows down his car and turns on the headlights, staying close to the right side. They only have a few miles left and he doesn't want to have an accident now. He has read that most accidents happen close to the person's home, he guesses people pay less attention when they get closer to their destination.

"Look honey, a dead deer. Poor thing, she must have been hit by a car."

Harry looks to where his wife is pointing, first he thinks she is right, but just as he passes what looks like a dead animal, he sees something, an outstretched arm. He steps on the brakes and the car skids to a stop.

"What in the Lord's name are you doing Harry, you could have killed us, " says Helen, looking at her husband of forty years.

"That is no deer, it's a human being," says Harry and gets out of the car.

"Be careful, it could be one of those crazy Hippies, they use drugs you know."

"Oh, shut up woman, the Hippies disappeared thirty years ago," he says making his way back around the car.

He carefully walks up to the body on the ground. When he gets closer he realizes it's a girl, or he thinks it's a girl. Her face is turned away from him, but her long hair is splayed out like a halo around her. She doesn't look like she is breathing.

"Dear God, please don't let her be dead," says Harry under his breath.

"What's happening," he hears Helen calling.

"Shut up woman."

He kneels next to the body and sees the bolt sticking out of her cheek, he gasps and pulls back, falling on his behind.

He is just about to get up and call the police, when the body moves and a moan escape.

She is alive, my god she is alive, he thinks.

"Helen, call the police, it's a young girl, and she is alive, hurry!"

He takes off his coat and lays it over her. She manages to turn her head slightly, and he looks into a pair of dark brown eyes, they are filled with tears.

"Please, please help me. They are all dead, he killed them."

Harry leans in closer to her and asks, "who killed your friends?"

She swallows and says, "the naked man, he killed them."

Before Harry has a chance to say anything, she takes a breath, then her body trembles and she exhales one last time.

Harry looks down at the young girl and tears form in his eyes. He pulls up his jacket to cover her face, and then he stands up and walks back to the car where his wife is on the phone to the police.

Chapter 8

Jim Hawk is leaning against his police cruiser smoking a cigarette. The car is parked off the I25, and behind him is the Colombia River. He can't see it, but he can hear it.

He removes the cigarette from his mouth and takes a deep breath. He still hasn't gotten used to the fresh air out here in the wilderness. Originally from LA he was a child of concrete, the closest to trees he ever got was the ones in the park his mother would take him to. There was one, some big leafy thing, surrounded by buildings and traffic.

It's dark and he is thinking about heading back to the station and call it a day. Nothing has happened during the hours he has been parked here. Sometimes he gets to fine some truck driver for speeding. Compared to policing in LA, this is a vacation.

He moved to the town of Green Tree five years ago, it's small and the last census said there were around two thousand souls living there. Three of them are police officers, and Hawk is the chief.

Back in LA he was a detective in the Narcotics department. He had been on the job for ten years when it happened. Some scumbag he had busted made a call, but instead of calling his lawyer he called another scumbag. He never found out how, but the second scumbag found out where Hawk lived, and when he came home, the man was waiting for him with some compadres, and a shit load of weapons.

Hawk had hardly time to sit down to eat with his wife and four-year-old son when the shooting began.

Hawk's house was the last in a row of five. It was built at the turn of the century and the plot was large. His wife Vivian had worked hard to make a beautiful garden, not only flowers, but also growing vegetables and fruit trees. It was her favorite place to be when she wasn't teaching.

The bad guys had surrounded the house on four sides, and began to shoot at the same time. When it was over Hawk had been shot in his left shoulder and a bullet had grazed his head, taking off half of his right ear. Vivian lay dead on the floor from three bullets to her chest, his son Victor lay on the floor with a bullet in his stomach.

Victor lived for three days, and then died of complications. Hawk went home, and tried to hang himself, luckily for some, not him, he had thought at the time, the beam in the garage broke, and he fell down, but not before the rope had burned into his skin.

Now he sported half an ear and a red scar on one side of his neck going in under the chin and ending on the other side.

After the fuck up with the rope he had moved to Miami for a year spending time with his retired father. They spent hours and hours talking about life and how shitty it could be some time.

"Jim," his father said one morning when they were on the golf course, "you need to get your life back on track. Vivian and Victor have been gone for over a year, and you are still young and need to think about your future."

"Dad, I don't want to think about anything, except my putting skills."

"Rubbish boy, listen to me. If you don't find a job within the next three months, I will personally kick you out of the house and you can become a hobo if you want. I'm not going to have you around the house doing nothing."

At the time Hawk hated his father for what he had said, how insensitive he had been, but later he realized his father was right. He would never forget his wife and child, they lived inside him, but he had to move on, do something useful.

He began to look for jobs on the internet and by a fluke, he found a website where different police departments posted jobs. He applied to three of them. One was the position as Chief of Police, Green Tree, Washington State.

"Chief, over."

Hawk clicks the radio on his shoulder and says, "Chief here, over."

"Mrs. Springer just called in, she and her husband have found a dead body a few miles from your location, and I have called the ambulance. It should be there shortly."

Harry and Helen Springer, retirees from New York, they moved to town to help their daughter with her baby when her husband left her. Then she met a trucker and moved to Seattle, but the old folks stayed behind. Nice couple, even though she runs over poor Harry anytime she can.

"I'll be there in a few minutes, " he says while getting into the car.

"Here comes the police," says Helen.

She and Harry are sitting in their car and can see the blue lights from the police cruiser coming towards them.

"He's not coming from town, must have been out ticketing truckers," says Harry.

Hawk parks on the side of the road and steps out, and then walks over to the Springer's car. He leans in and asks, "where is the body?"

Harry uses his thumb and points over his shoulder and says, "behind us, it's just a kid, a girl, can't be more than sixteen at the most."

"Wait here while I have a look."

He opens the trunk of his car and takes out a roll of yellow tape and from a bag a camera with a powerful flash. Then he pulls out his flashlight from his belt and shines it on the ground in front of him. Harry is right, there is a body on the side of the road, one arm stretched out over the tarmac, but most of it is still in the shrubs.

The flash from the camera lights up the entire area when he takes several photos from different angles. When he is done, he walks in a big circle while letting the tape out behind him. While walking around the body he uses some nearby trees to support the tape so it doesn't lie on the ground. He is careful not to step on anything that could be used as evidence. When he is back to where he started he looks around and finds a large rock which he uses to anchor the tape to the ground. Then he kneels and shines the light in the dead girl's face. He has seen plenty of dead bodies in his career, but it's always worse when they are kids.

The bolt goes through her face surprises him, with kids, it's usually an overdose or suicide, in LA there were shootings as well.

He looks closer at the entrance wound and the exit wound. He shines his light around the body. Her clothes are ripped, and there are scratches on her hands and face. Not from nails, more like if she was running in a dense forest and was scratched by branches. He turns and shines the light into the forest behind him, nothing but trees. She must have come from in there he guesses. He turns back to her face and check her clothes for blood, but can't find much.

He stands up just in time to see the ambulance drive up and park close by. Its sirens are not on, the person was dead, so there is no hurry.

"What's up Hawk?" asks the man wearing a windbreaker and baseball cap stepping out from the ambulance. He has jeans, a sweater and boots. In his left hand there is an old doctor's bag.

"Hey Doc, dead girl, in her mid teens I would guess. She has a crossbow bolt through her face, but I don't think that was what killed her.

Doctor Martin Stewart is the town's general practitioner and the coroner. In fact, he is a bit of everything. He has delivered babies in homes, and written death certificates for the elderly. People call him Doc Martin in his face; he doesn't seem to mind being called the same as the famous boots made popular by Skinheads all over the world.

"Help me roll her over," says Doc and together they roll her on her back.

"Yeah, she is around fifteen or sixteen. I would guess she is of Latin origin, and you are right, there is no way that bolt killed her."

"What do you think did?"

Doc Martin looks at Hawk and says, "fear maybe?"

"Fear?"

"Yep, look at her eyes."

Hawk shines his light in the dead girl's eyes, they are wide open and when he steps back a bit and takes in the whole picture of her face he sees what Doc is referring to. Even with the bolt in her face, he can see her mouth is open as if she was screaming, with the wide open eyes, she looks scared.

"C'mon Doc, she was most likely scared, she might have known she was dying, that doesn't mean she died of fear."

"I'll know more after the autopsy. I'll get the stretcher and then you can help me put her in the ambulance."

When Doc has left Hawk walks over where the Springer's are leaning against their car.

"I need to ask you a few questions before you can leave. Who found the body?"

"First we thought it was a deer, but when I passed her I saw an arm, and realized it was a body," says Harry shaking his head sadly.

"So you went over to her, and did what?"

"Well, I went to see if she was injured, and if I could help. I wasn't sure if she was dead or not."

"When you got close, and you saw she was dead, that's when you put your jacket over her?"

"I spoke to her first."

Hawk's face comes up from his notebook, "spoke to her?"

"Yes Sir, she was alive when I got to her."

Hawk wonders why Harry didn't say this before, it was important. He sighs and asks, "OK Harry, what did she say?"

"She spoke of a naked man that had killed her friends."

"C'mon Harry, did she also tell you about Big Foot?"

Harry stares at Hawk and he realizes he's made a mistake.

"Look Chief, I might be a city boy from New York, but I'm not dumb or deaf. The girl said a naked man had killed her friends, OK."

"Sorry Harry, it just sounds crazy."

"I agree, but that's what she said."

Hawk finishes with his notes, and tells the Springer's they can go home. He goes back to his car and calls in, telling Mrs. Winter, the receptionist; he is on his way back and he will wait until she dispatches Deputy Fieldman to the area.

While he waits, he smokes another cigarette and drinks some cold coffee from a thermos he finds in his car. It doesn't take long before another police cruiser shows up and a young man steps out.

"What's up Chief?"

"You have to wait here until the Forensic People show up. I'll call them from the car. They are coming from Jonesborough, so it could take a while."

Chapter 9

Becky Kerry is standing by the window in the living room looking out into the darkness. She has just come down after putting little Danny to bed. Before she turned off the light in his bedroom he had asked her where his father was.

"You know that your father loves you a lot, it's just that sometimes he needs to be alone, that's all, now go to sleep."

"Mom, but he promised he would help me."

"I know, maybe tomorrow. You still have a couple of days before you have to turn in the project, right?"

"Yeah, OK. Good night.

"Night baby."

Becky nibbles on her fingernails as she continues to stare out into the darkness. Things have changed, it wasn't always like this. When she met John he was an overweight goof ball, a happy man, who loved to make people laugh. They had met at a party and it had been love at first sight, at least for her. They were in their late twenties, and he was working at the University. She was getting her second MBA at a different one. He loved his work, and often brought it home, and she liked to sit with him at the dinner table and help him in his research. He was on his way to get a PhD in Pre-Colombian tribes of the Amazons; her Masters were much more boring.

He dreamt of going down there to the Amazon and find a hidden tribe, to be the first to approach them, live with them and learn from them.

A pair of headlights turns up on the driveway and she sighs, he is home, thank god.

"Hi honey, sorry for being late, I had a flat tire."

"It's OK, Danny missed you."

John takes off his jacket and hangs it on the usual peg by the door, and then walks to the living room, making a detour to the kitchen for a cold beer.

"How's the cabin?"

"Great, your garden is taking off you know. You need to get up there and work on it," he says.

She loves going up there, but with the work she has, there in never time.

"When are you going to clean the trail so we can drive all the way to the cabin?" he asks.

He looks up at her taking the beer from his mouth and says, "never, you know what that could mean, vandalism, and squatters."

"Surely we can put in some kind of alarm, and strengthen the windows and door," she says, sitting down next to him.

"No, I don't want to risk it."

She gives up and leans her head against his shoulder and they watch TV for a while before going to bed.

She watches as he undresses and when he turns his back to her, she shivers, she always does when she sees the tattoos. Like stitches they run from the nape of his neck down to his butt. The same lines encircle his wrists and ankles.

When he slips under the sheets she curls up with him, he is so warm, and she feels safe next to him.

John closes his eyes, getting mentally ready for the dreams that he has every night. He fears them and welcomes them at the same time.

He is wet and scared, and around him are the sounds of thousands of night insects. The jungle is so dense he can hardly see a yard ahead of him. He is sitting under a big leaf from some kind of bush, and he is shivering. He can't hear them, but he knows they are out there, looking for him. He feels something on his naked shoulder, he looks down and a huge spider is crawling down towards his chest. It's as wide as his hand and he doesn't dare to move. It might be poisonous, he sits still and after a while the spider crawls down to his hip and from there on to a leaf and away.

Becky wakes up from John's stirring, he is talking in his sleep again, not talking just mumbling incoherently, and sometimes he shakes, and then relaxes. She caresses his cheek and he calms down again, breathing normally.

She has begged him to seek help, but he refuses, says he doesn't want to talk about it. Yet again, he wrote a book about his experience, and it became a best-seller. He doesn't have to work any longer, just collect royalties. She is sure there are several chapters missing in the book, there has to be, these nightmares come from somewhere, and not the funny experience he wrote about.

She leans back into her soft pillow and closes her eyes. Maybe someday he will tell her what happened down there in the Amazon. After all, he was missing for three years.

Chapter 10

"I can see that the Green Tree police department is making good use of the taxpayer's money," says Hawk when he walks in through the glass doors at the police station.

Behind the desk is Mrs. Winter, she reminds him of the actress from, *Murder She Wrote*, a grandmother type. But he knows she is far from it, she is an avid outdoors woman who hikes for miles with her husband, and she has a hunting license.

His comment was aimed at the deputy leaning against the desk sipping coffee and eating doughnuts.

"Isn't it a bit late for that much sugar?"

"Never Chief, it is scientifically proven that police officers work better when they have a lot of sugar in them," says Deputy Collins and grins.

Hawk looks at him and shakes his head in despair. Collins has only been with the department for half a year. He used to be with the Forest Rangers.

"How was it?" asks Collins.

Hawk grabs a plastic cup from a dispenser behind Mrs. Winter and pours some coffee in it. It's stale and cold. He looks at the coffee-maker, it's turned off. He sips the cold drink and says, "bad, a young girl with a crossbow bolt through her face. She was alive when the Springer's found her, but died before I arrived. Doc Martin took her back to the medical center for an autopsy, I guess we will know more tomorrow."

"A bolt? Sounds like a hunting accident."

"Uh-huh, it was my first thought also, but it's not hunting season."

"No ID, nothing to tell us where she came from?" asks Mrs. Winter

"Nope, nothing. She was dressed like a hiker, warm clothes, good boots, but they were ripped and hung in tatters. She must have run or walked far in the forest before she ended up where she was found."

They were all quiet for a while, and then Hawk tosses the plastic cup in the wastebasket and says, "I'm going home. Who's on night shift?"

"Should be Fieldman, but since you dispatched him to the scene I guess it's me."

"OK, have fun, and don't fall asleep."

Mrs. Winter, and Hawk leave the station, each one getting into their car and driving to their respective homes.

In his small house on the outskirts of town Hawk settles on his sofa with a bottle of Jack Daniels next to him on a low table. There is an ashtray already filled with old cigarette butts. He turns on the TV and the DVD player, and on the remote he presses play. On the screen is the Disney Castle and he can hear the voices of Vivian and Victor. It's the last video he has of them. They went to Disney World a few weeks before they were shot. Looking at the video Hawk pours a big glass of the amber liquid. He was offered all kinds of pills after they were killed and his suicide attempt, but he said no. All he needs is his bourbon and cigarettes. He is just about to sit down in front of the TV when his cell phone rings. He looks at the screen, it's Fieldman.

"Yeah?"

"The Forensic people are here, and they have walked the area, but haven't found anything. They say they will give it another thirty minutes and then leave."

"OK, call me if something interesting shows up."

Hawk watches the movie three times, and then he passes out on the sofa. The empty little house fills with his snoring and anguished screams that no one hears as he dreams about that evening.

Chapter 11

Hawk arrives first at the police station the following day and sends Collins home to rest. He opens a bottle of Tylenol he keeps in his drawer and takes three together with the coffee he has bought on the way there.

After reading the night log and seeing nothing exciting has happened he picks up the phone and calls Doc Martin.

"Good morning Doc, anything yet?"

"Jesus Hawk, it's only eight in the morning."

"So? You have no social life anyway, and I know you were up early working."

Doc Martin is a divorcee from Seattle, and moved to town to start a new life. Back in the city he was a well-known doctor at one of the big hospitals. He did some private work too, and made some money. During the divorce his wife took everything, since Doc Martin had done something he shouldn't have. He never talks about it, but one late night during a Thanksgiving party, he confided in Hawk and told him he had taken off to Las Vegas alone one weekend. He gambled away close to \$200,000 and slept with several hookers. At the time he was a sex addict, and had managed to keep it a secret from his wife, usually by going out of town. This time he had fucked up big time. He got one of the girls pregnant, and she had a friend in the hotel where he stayed. The girl got his home address and one morning she showed up at his house. His wife opened the door and found a

young girl, barely out of her teens standing there demanding to see him. She put two and two together and the next day she filed for divorce. The girl had an abortion and was never heard from again, but Doc Martin's life was never the same again.

"You got me. I've been working since four this morning. I think you better come here, there are a few things you need to see."

"Anything interesting?"

"You could say that."

Hawk hangs up and bumps into Mrs. Winter on his way out.

"I'm off to see Doc. I'll call in later."

"Have fun," she says in her usual happy way.

The town is awake. People are walking to and from their houses, and Hawk waves as he drives along the main street. He knows almost all of them by their first name, and some only by their last. The town is quiet with little crime. During the weekends there are some fights and sometimes domestic disputes, usually concerning a wife or a girlfriend screaming at her drunk man who just came in from a late night. The last murder was recorded ten years earlier. A miner had gotten drunk in one of the few bars and after molesting one of the girls working there, he was found dead in a back street. The crime was quickly solved when the girl's boyfriend walked in to the station the following day and admitted what he had done. It was a crime of passion, but the guy still got ten to fifteen at the state penitentiary.

The day is beautiful. The sun is shining and there is no wind. Summer is coming, and with it the tourists. They come to fish and hike in the mountains, and with them come more work for Hawk and his deputies.

He parks outside the medical center and enters. There is no one in the reception waiting, just Jill the nurse at her station.

"Good morning Chief," she says with a yawn.

"Morning Jill, is Doc in the back?"

"Yep, he is waiting for you."

Hawk finds Doc in one of the two rooms the center has. It's full of equipment and shelves of bandages, syringes and other medical supplies. In the middle there is a metal table and on it is the girl from last night under a white sheet.

"What do you have for me?"

"This," says Doc and pulls down the sheet.

"Wow, interesting," says Hawk.

"I agree, I've never seen anything like it."

Hawk looks at the body, and smiles. Between her breast and her pubic hair are several tattoos. They are slightly damaged from the Y insertion from the autopsy, but he can see the tattoos are no more than a year or so.

"What is it?" asks Doc.

"Gang tattoos, I saw plenty when I was working in LA."

Hawk leans in closer, there are two large letters and then a small script under it, it's in Spanish.

"She belonged to a Latin gang; I'm not sure which, but definitely Latin."

"How the heck did she end up here? Maybe someone killed her somewhere else and dumped the body?"

"I doubt it, gangs don't usually drive hundreds of miles to dump a body, and they don't use crossbows to kill with. No, someone shot her close to where we found her. She was alive and running through the forest, just look at all the scratch marks on her face and arms."

Doc nods his head and says, "what still bothers me is the cause of death. It wasn't the bolt itself, it didn't hit any important parts. It entered her cheek and bounced off her molars and then went out the other side."

"Any ideas?"

"Well," Doc rubs his cheek and runs his hand over his hair, "I'd say a heart attack killed her."

"What? She is too young for heart problems. C'mon, you can't be serious."

Doc nods his head, and says, "sorry Hawk, that's as close as I can get. I will send samples to Seattle so they can run more tests on her, but to me she died of a massive heart attack."

Hawk leaves the medical center and on the drive back to the police station he decides to check around with some old colleagues in LA, maybe they have some information about the girl. Before he had left, he took photos of the tattoos and her face.

"Burt, Hawk here, how are you?"

He is sitting at his desk with the phone cradled between his shoulder and good ear. There is a soda can in front of him and he has an unlit cigarette in his mouth. His desk is a clutter of paper and old coffee cups.

"My man in the wilderness, how are you doing Hawk?" A rough voice says in his ear.

Burt is ten years older than Hawk and they became good friends in LA. He worked the gangs and since their cases often crossed, drugs being a big money maker for the gangs, they spent a lot of time together.

"I'm fine, listen I have a dead girl up here and I need your help."

He tells Burt a short version of what happened the previous night and what he knows so far.

"OK. E-mail me the photos and a description of her, and I'll find out if we have anything on her."

He hangs up and is just about to reach for his soda when Mrs. Winter sticks her head in.

"Chief, I think you want to come out here for a second; there is something you need to hear."

He gets up and follows her into the reception area and there is a tall blonde woman sitting on a chair. Her nose is reddish and so are her eyes, she has been crying.

"This is Mrs. Read, her husband is kind of missing."

Hawk sits down next to the woman and says, "tell me what happened."

She takes a deep breath, "my husband, Alex, works as a counselor at the Juvenile Center outside town, and he took some kids in to the mountains a few days ago, and no one has heard from them since."

"Have you contacted the Center?"

"Yes, several times, and they haven't heard anything either. They insist nothing is wrong. They are due back today or tomorrow at the latest."

"So, why do you think something is wrong?"

She snivels and says, "Alex always calls in, he makes sure he has a signal at least every second day, and now I haven't heard from him in almost three days, something is wrong."

Hawks sighs and says, "look Mrs. Read, I'm sure everything is fine, but I'll drive to the Center and have a talk with them, OK?"

"Thank you Chief," she gets up and walks out, Hawk watching her.

"What do you think?" asks Mrs. Winter.

"I have only met Alex Read a few times, but he seems like a nice enough guy. He is not the best outdoors man, so there is a possibility he got lost with the group. It was raining hard the other day and it's easy to lose track of your directions on ground level."

He walks back to his office and grabs his jacket, then leaves for the one hour drive to the Juvenile Center.

Chapter 12

Marlon is in extreme pain. He can't see anything, just blackness, but the pain emanating from his wrists and ankles is terrible. He screams again, but no one answers. His throat feels like sandpaper from screaming and lack of water. He doesn't know where he is, all he knows is pain. He has lost track of time since he came too.

Suddenly he hears a click and light burns his eyes. He closes them and can hear someone whistle and footsteps on a floor. He opens his eyes a little, and bright white light stings them.

"Great, you are awake, then we can begin, just let me get changed and I'll be right with you." The voice says in a friendly tone.

Marlon manages to open his eyes and when he looks down, he realizes he is hanging about two feet off the floor. He looks up and to his sides, "what the fuck is this? Hey, you, get me down from here, it hurts."

His wrists and ankles are tied to metal rings on a wooden structure, above him is a noose made of thick rope.

"Hang on, " says the voice.

"Get me down now, please, it hurts."

The man comes back and he is naked, he walks up to where Marlon is hanging and looks up at him.

"I know it hurts, it always does, but don't worry, I'll give you something for the pain before we begin."

"Please, let me go, I beg you."

The man walks over to a table and picks up a syringe and an IV. He hangs the bag on a hook in the structure and connects it to Marlon's wrist. Then he takes the syringe and without saying a word he plunges it into Marlon's thigh.

"The injection I just gave you is a muscle relaxant with some pain reliever in it, and the IV is a saline solution to keep you alive, at least for a while."

"What are you going to do? Whatever it is, please don't, just let me down, I haven't done anything."

The man looks up at him and says, "no, you haven't done anything, but I'm curious. I wonder if your skin makes the same song as white skin."

"Who the fuck are you, the KKK? What's this racist shit, get me the fuck down now."

The man chuckles, and answers, "no, I'm not with the KKK, I have nothing against black people, or brown, or yellow for that matter."

He walks away and Marlon can see there are stitch marks on his back along his spine. He opens a metal cabinet and takes something from it. Then, on the way back he picks up a ladder, one of those small ones you have at home, two steps only. He walks around Marlon and places it on the floor, and then he steps up on it.

"Now, this is going to hurt a bit, well, a lot. But be brave, it's for a good cause."

Something cold is pressed against his neck, just below the hairline, then a searing pain runs down his spine and stops just above his buttocks. Then he feels a warm liquid running down his back and dripping onto the floor. He looks down and sees a pool of blood forming, and he screams.

Kerry whistles as he takes hold of the black skin and pulls it away from the flesh a little. He cuts along it with his scalpel. It comes loose and he pulls at it again, and when the tearing sounds reaches his ears, the feeling running through his body is almost sexual, he shivers and moans.

Marlon lives for thirty minutes, and the last thing his mind registers is looking down and seeing his own skin hanging down below his waist.

When Kerry is done, he takes Marlon's skin and lays it in a vat of salt water. Then he goes back to where the body is hanging. It's just a red doll without skin. He can see the muscle tissue and the veins. He unties it from the construction after placing a large plastic sheet under it. When it falls down, he wraps the body in the plastic and on his way up, he grabs a chainsaw hanging on the wall.

When he comes back, he looks in another vat where a skin is floating. He picks it up and feels it, then nods his head. After dropping it back in the salt water he crosses the floor to a row of mannequins. They have no eyes or hair, they are white and sexless. He chooses one and rolls it over to a platform on the floor. He goes back to the vat and fishes up the largest part of the skin, the body. He carries it over to the platform and there, slowly and carefully, he dresses the mannequin in it. It's not hard at all. The skin is like a jacket with the zipper in the back. He threads the legs first and then pulls the skin tight, then threads the arms, and finally pulls everything tight in the back. With a hand held sewing machine he sews the skin together, the stitches starting at the buttocks and going up the spine. He steps back and looks at his handy work, then nods contently. He walks around the mannequin and pulls and adjusts the skin a little, he cups the breasts and adjusts them too.

Back at the vat he picks up the skin forming the face and hair. The hair he will dry later and shave off replacing it with a wig. The eyes are also gone and will be replaced by glass.

He places the skin over the head of the mannequin and pulls it down. After a few adjustments he is pleased and continues to sew the head skin to the body skin. He steps off the platform and stands in front of his latest creation.

The face of the woman he had skinned in front of her husband a week ago is staring back at him from an eyeless face.

"Welcome to the family, Katie," he says before turning off the light. On his way up the stairs, he realizes it's pizza night tonight. Hopefully his wife has ordered extra pepperoni.

Chapter 13

The Juvenile Center is located in an idyllic area a mile off the I 20 south of Green Tree. It's not fenced in, nor does it have a wall around it. It looks more like a summer camp than anything else.

Hawk parks in the place marked "visitors" and makes his way to the main door. Inside, he finds a reception area with plastic plants to one side and a low table with some chairs around it. A young man with glasses and a red T shirt with the word Staff stenciled on the left side is sitting behind a desk. He looks up at Hawk and gives him a crooked smile.

"How can I help you officer?"

"I need to talk to the director, it's official business."

He picks up a phone and says a few words in it. Then, looking at Hawk again, he says, "have a seat the director will be right with you."

Hawk doesn't sit down, but walks over to a window on the right. Outside is a field and he can see about ten kids running around it in small groups. There are some men and women in red T shirts watching them, like he thought, looks like a regular camp.

"How can I help you," says a soft female voice behind him.

He turns around and looks at the tiny woman in front of him, she can't be more than 5'5" tall. Her face is beautiful and framed in a short hair cut. She is a brunette and her dark eyes are looking at him with a curious glint in them.

"Hi, I'm Chief Hawk, from Green Tree, and I have a woman there wondering where her husband is. Last she heard he was taking a group of kids from here on a hike."

The woman nods and says, "please, come with me, we can talk in my office." Hawk follows her and can't help looking at her butt. She is dressed in a dark business suit, but it can't hide her body. To his shame he imagines her naked, and quickly shakes his head to clear his mind.

Her office is small but nicely furnished in light woods and white walls. There are some photos of kids on the walls together with several diplomas.

He sits down in a chair in front of her desk while she walks around it and sits down.

"I'm Sandra Darwin, and I'm the director of this Center. You must be talking about Alex Read. He isn't a full time member of the staff, he does counseling and

takes the kids on these hikes, he believes it forges them and makes them team players."

Hawk nods slowly, and asks, "when did you last hear from them?"

"I haven't heard from them since they left, three days ago."

"Is that normal?"

"Yes, Alex has done these hikes several times now, and it's always the same. They leave and come back three or four days later."

"What about the kids, who are they?"

Sandra picks up a file and looks in it, and says, "he took five kids this time, which is normal. They were Marlon Jones, Jenna Swansson, Pepe and Jordi Rodriguez and Maria Santos."

"Any of them violent?"

Sandra laughs, "Chief Hawk, these are kids who have been in and out of the system since they were very young, they are all violent in some way or another, but if you mean if they are killers, I would say no, they are not."

"Where were they from, originally I mean?"

Sandra goes back to the file and says, "Marlon is from Spokane, Jenna from Seattle, the Rodriguez brothers from Sacramento, and Maria from LA."

Hawk's head comes up from his notes, and he says, "LA? What was she in here for?"

"Let's see, here we go, Maria Santos. Known gang banger since the age of eleven, she was here for assault and battery."

Hawk pulls out his phone and taps it until he has the photos he took of the dead girl.

"Is this her?" he asks and gives Sandra the phone.

She looks at it, and says, "yes, that's Maria. What happened to her face? Where did you find her?"

"Crossbow bolt went through it, and she was found yesterday north of here on I20. An elderly couple found her on the side of the road."

"And the others?" she asks with concern in her voice.

"No idea, that's why I came here, to see if you knew."

She shakes her head and takes a last look at the photo and gives the phone back to him.

"I'm sorry, but Alex never says where he takes them. I know it's not the perfect system, but it has worked up until now. What are you going to do?"

Hawk sighs and says, "I'll call the Forest Rangers and get some volunteers, we have to search the woods around where Maria was found."

He stands up and stretches his hand towards her, "thank you for your time. I'll get back to you if I need more information."

She shakes his hand and then gives him her card with her cell phone and office number.

"Good luck, and I hope you find them alive," she says, walking him to the door.

"So do I, but I have a gut feeling I won't. Something happened out there, and I think they are like Maria, dead."

Chapter 14

The following day the search party moves into the woods at the point where Maria's body was found. There are Forest Rangers, volunteers and some police deputies from other towns. A total of one hundred people begin to search the area. Hawk manages to get the use of a helicopter with infrared cameras that can see through the canopy and search for people.

Mrs. Read joins in the search against Hawk's advice. He doesn't know what they will find and he doesn't want her to be there if they find Alex's body. After four days in the wilderness it will have been chewed on by wild animals, not a pretty sight.

One of the surrounding Police Departments has a search dog, and he follows the tracks of Maria back from the road, but after a mile or so he loses track, and ends up sniffing any tree that looks good to piss on.

They search for three days without any luck. The weather is good, but it doesn't matter. Nothing is found, no bodies, no backpacks, and no clothes. Hawk is disappointed, he was sure they would find some kind of clue to what happened to the kids and Alex Read.

On the last day he is standing by the I20 just where Maria's body was found. An SUV drives up and stops in front of him. When the driver lowers the window Hawk recognizes him.

"Hi John, how's it going?"

"Good, I was just up at my cabin, I went looking for them up there also, but I saw nothing?"

Hawk has met John Kerry a few times around town, always a friendly man, a little off but friendly enough. He knows John went missing in the Amazon some years ago, and was found by fishermen almost dead three years later. He hasn't read his book, but he has seen it in the local bookstore, "My Years in The Amazon", a best seller.

"Where is your cabin, John?"

He points back from where he came, "about two miles back, and then up the mountains. You can't reach it by car, you have to hike up there."

"Oh, and how do you do it with Becky and Danny?"

"They love a good hike, and it's so peaceful up there. Sadly Becky doesn't have much time these days, but I like to go up there as much as possible."

They chat a bit longer and then John drives away. Hawk lights a cigarette and watches the SUV disappear around a bend.

John is whistling and laughing inside at the cop. After getting rid of the black kid's body, he went in search of the other bodies and buried them too. When he didn't find the body of the Latin girl he got a little worried. He went back and forth around the area where she had fallen, but couldn't find her. After a while he found her tracks and followed her. He was hiding behind a tree when the older couple stopped by the road. He had thought about killing them, and taking them and the girl with him, but changed his mind. There was nothing on the girl that could lead the police back to him.

There is no way the police or the volunteers will find them. They haven't even gotten close to where he killed the first kid, the blond girl. And they will most likely never get that far from the I20. For him to run hours on end through the dense forest is nothing, but the search party, they get tired after an hour of walking, only a few of the younger Forest Rangers have the stamina to keep going for longer times, but then it's the darkness. They run out of time.

His mind drifts back, to a time when fear was his only companion, and all hope of rescue was gone. He had run for his life, and lived alone for months in the jungle, living off whatever he could eat. He got diarrhea, and painful attacks of vomiting. He lost his mind and became an animal, a growling, snarling beast, killing and eating raw flesh just to stay alive, and to stay away from them. But they found him, and brought him back to their village. And that was only the beginning of his transformation into what he was today.

He comes back to the present and turns into his driveway, where he can see his son play catch with the neighbor's kids. He smiles to himself and wonders if his son would like to play catch with a human head that has just been cut off from the body. The kids in the village loved it.

Hawk calls Burt to tell him he's got the ID of the girl, but Burt says he will look into the girl's background, maybe there is something there that could explain who would go after her.

Hawk doesn't think Maria is the key to the missing kids and counselor, he is sure something happened to them, something they saw or heard up there in the mountains. The bolt is the key to everything, but the result from Seattle came back with nothing. It's a regular crossbow bolt which is sold by the thousands in stores around the country, no way to track it to the shop it was sold in.

Hawk is having a coffee with Friedman in the station when Doc Martin walks in waving a paper in his hand.

"You got to see this Hawk."

"What is it?"

The three of them go back to Hawk's office and sit down, Hawk says, "tell me, what's got you so excited?"

"I got the results from Seattle on the blood work I ordered."

"OK, what did they find, drugs?"

Doc grins and says, "but not the type you can buy around here."

Hawk sighs and looks at Friedman, who shrugs his shoulders, and then turns back to Doc, "OK, I give up, tell me."

"Get ready for this, they found Curare and something called Strychnos."

Hawk leans forward, and says, "I know what Curare is, but what is the strych-?"

"Strychnos. It's a poison, comes from a plant as does Curare."

"OK, and Maria had that in her blood?"

"Yes Sir, and that explains why I thought she died of a heart attack."

"How?"

"Well, I did some searching on the internet and both poisons can be mistaken as heart attacks."

"Uh-huh. We have a sixteen year old gang banger, who dies of poisoning, and the poison is not native to the US."

"Nope, it's found mainly in South America."

Friedman says, "makes sense, Maria was Mexican right, couldn't someone from her old gang have killed her."

Hawk nods, "it's a possibility", but then Doc says, "no, in the amounts they found in her blood, she died rather quickly after the poison entered her bloodstream. The guy I talked to guessed she was poisoned six to seven hours before she died."

"That proves it wasn't someone from LA. Six hours before she would have been deep in the forest."

"What about the twin brothers, the Rodriguez twins, they were from Nicaragua right? Maybe someone paid them off."

"It's a possibility. But what happened to Alex Read, Jenna and the black kid Marlon?" asks Hawk.

The three men are quiet for a while, and then Doc says, "the twins could have killed them too, but where are they now?"

"Good question, let's assume that's what happened. What do the twins do after killing everyone? They must get out of the area, and as far as I understand they knew nothing about hiking or living in the wilderness. Did they have help, a back up team who tracked the group and then pulled them out after they did the job on Maria and covered their tracks?"

Friedman and Doc shake their heads, and Friedman says, "an extraction team? Sounds a bit advanced for two kids, don't you think?"

"Mm, I do, but we have to look at every possibility. Anyway, keep up the good work going Doc, we'll talk later."

Doc leaves and Friedman goes out on patrol. Hawk sits at his desk, his eyes closed, thinking hard. After awhile he stands up and goes to lunch, food is what he needs, and a lot of sugar, remembering what Collins had said.

Chapter 15

Spring turned into summer and the little town of Green Tree was swarmed by tourists looking for fishing and hiking in the mountains. Small businesses around the town flourishes and Hawk and his deputies got their share of work. There are bar fights at night, and they are even called to a house where there is a Swingers party. The neighbors complained about the naked people jumping in the pool and screaming all night.

The investigation into the murder of Maria Santos and the disappearance of the hikers has stalled. Hawk has been in contact with Burt in LA a few times, but he hasn't found anything interesting in the files. Doc Martin has been talking to the lab, but they can't help either, all they can say is that the poisons used to kill Maria are uncommon and that they come from south of the border.

One afternoon Hawk and Friedman are sitting outside the police station in the sun. They have pulled out some comfortable chairs and are having coffee. Mrs. Winters is inside and Collins is on patrol somewhere. Hawk is in civilian clothes which are black jeans, a black tank top and a thin short sleeved shirt in gray. He

is half lying in the chair, enjoying in the warm rays from the sun when Friedman asks him, "do you think we will ever catch whoever did it?"

"Did what?"

"Kill Maria Santos."

Hawk is quiet and then opens his eyes and turns his head towards Friedman, "maybe, we just have to be patient."

"I'm not so sure, it's been months now, and not a single lead."

Sandy Holms is driving down the street slowly, looking for the police station. She sees it up ahead and parks by the sidewalk.

When she gets out she takes off her baseball cap and shakes her head, and her curly black hair falls down her back. She leaves the cap on the back seat and takes out a thin briefcase. She locks the car and walks up the driveway towards the main entrance. There are two men outside and it looks like they are sun tanning, she gets an irritated look on her face. When she comes closer she sees the man in civilian clothes has a scar around his neck and she wonders why the policemen next to him would be tanning with what is obviously some scumbag. She is good at reading people, and this guy stinks of trouble.

When she comes closer the uniformed man looks at her, but the other one keeps his eyes closed and ignores her.

"How may I help you?" asks Friedman.

He has never seen the young woman before. She looks like a lawyer, business suit in dark blue, flat shoes, and a briefcase in her hand. She is good-looking.

"I'm Sandy Holmes, I'm a Criminal Psychologist, well almost, I'm doing my Thesis for my PhD and then I'll be one."

"Uh-huh," says Friedman and leans back in his chair, Hawk hasn't moved a muscle.

Sandy becomes more irritated and she steps in front of the sun, and a shadow falls on Friedman.

"Excuse me, could you move a nit to the right, you are blocking the sun, " he says waving at her with his hand.

"I'm here to help," she says.

Friedman opens one eye and looks at her, and then asks, "help us with what?"

She looks at the other man with the scar and notices he is missing half an ear, Christ, this gets worse and worse. He is obviously some kind of gangster and his ear got cut off in a knife fight.

"If we could talk in private, please," she says and nods her head at the man with the scar.

"Anything you want me to hear, Chief Hawk has to hear too," says the uniformed man and points with his index finger at the other man.

"Chief Hawk?" asks Sandy with astonishment.

"That would be me. How can we be of service?" Hawk open his eyes smiling at the young woman.

She clears her throat and says, "well, like I said, I'm a student and writing my Thesis for my PhD."

"What does that have to do with us, " asks Hawk, sipping his now cold coffee.

"Well, you see, I chose to write about a string of disappearances and then make a profile of the possible offender."

"What disappearances?" asks Friedman, now sitting up.

She clears her throat again and opens her briefcase. She takes out a thick folder and begins to flick through the pages. She looks up at the two men and asks, "did you know that fifteen people have disappeared between here and the Canadian border in the last three years?"

Hawk and Friedman look at each other and then back at her, Hawk says, "no we didn't, how do you know?"

"When I had to decide what to write about I decided to look for unsolved crimes instead of profiling an already arrested serial killer, like some of my colleagues did. After deciding on the North Western part of the US, I went through all the missing people's reports for the past five years for the area, and guess what. I found something.

"That must have taken time," says Friedman impressed by the work she must have put into it.

"Yes, it did, but I'm sure these disappearances are linked, and there is one offender out there."

Hawk stands up and taking his coffee cup and chair with him, he turns to Holmes, and says, "let's talk inside."

The station is quiet apart from Mrs. Winter's typing. Holmes looks around in the reception area and realizes how small it is. There is a bench and a couple of chairs against the wall opposite the woman behind the desk, a few plastic plants in the corners. Hawk is standing in the door to one of three offices and signals for her to follow him.

Inside, he sits down behind his desk. Holmes takes a seat opposite him and Friedman hangs by the door.

"Tell me more about what you have found," says Hawk.

"Like I said, so far I have found fifteen people, but there seems to be no connection between them except they used the same road to drive to or from Canada, the I25."

"How come no one has been here asking questions, I mean, if they know where they disappeared, then I would expect a call from any other police station," says Hawk.

"I suppose the answer is that there is not much communication between the different police jurisdictions, this is a problem in the big cities too."

Hawk knows what she is talking about. When he was in LA there was always foul ups because the different precincts didn't communicate with each other. "OK, continue."

"The people who have gone missing are; a family with a small child and two teenage daughters, then several lonely travelers and the last report is about a couple that went missing about six months ago."

"You are saying there is no connection between these people?"

"None that I have found, their age range from ten to sixty five, white and all middle class, no previous connection to crime or law enforcement."

"What about their cars, have they been found?" asks Friedman from the doorway.

Holmes shakes her head, "no, no cars, no bags, nothing has been found. It's like they were snatched by Aliens."

"Where were they from?" asks Hawk.

Holmes looks through her papers and says, "Seattle, LA, Las Vegas, Portland and Boise, Idaho."

Hawks smiles at her and says, "I already noticed one common thing, guess what."

Holmes is looking down at her notes. She bites her lower lip and Hawk thinks she looks adorable, like a little girl thinking about a math problem. Then she looks up at him and says, "they are all going to or from cities in the U.S. None of them live in Canada."

"Yes. Could be a coincidence, who knows, but it's somewhere to start."

"Could it be a trucker who is taking these people?" asks Friedman.

"I thought about that, and it has happened before. There was a case a few years back in Texas, where a trucker would pick up hookers that he then raped and killed," says Holmes.

Hawk is leaning back in his chair, and is enjoying it all. After years of dealing with drunks, domestic violence and burglaries, this young woman walks through the door and hands him a real case, something to get his teeth into.

"Holmes, I think we need to find you a place to stay, and you need to buy some clothes or did you come prepared for a long-haul?"

"I got an overnight bag, that's all."

"Not to worry, Mrs. Winter will find you a room you can rent cheap and Friedman here will take you to some shops where you can get proper clothing."

"So you will look into this?" she asks with hope in her eyes.

"I think you are right, we have a killer out there, and I intend to find him."

PART 2

**The Amazon.
Four years earlier.**

Chapter 16

"Just look at that," says Julia.

John Kerry leans over her and looks out the window of the Boing they are in.

"The Amazon River, big isn't it, " he says.

"Yeah, and jungle as far as the eye can see."

"And somewhere, north of here is what we are looking for, " he says and pats her arm.

She continues to look out the window and Kerry turns to the man next to him in the isle seat.

"Hey Paul, time to wake up we are here."

The dark haired, muscular man stretches his long, big body and moans. Then he opens his eyes and looks at Kerry.

"Are we there?"

"Yep, we are landing in twenty minutes."

They will land in the town of Leticia in North Western Brazil. They had flown from Chicago to Brazilia, then on to Manaus and now they are finally there. From here they will travel downriver on the Amazon for what Kerry hopes is two days, but could be as many as four depending on the weather. After that they will find a smaller river and travel north for another three days, and then hike the rest of the way.

His two companions are undergrad students from the university, Kerry teaches at, Julia Camps is half Brazilian but moved to Washington State when she was five and Paul Hogan. Hogan is old for being an undergrad. At thirty five he is more than ten years older than Julia and five years younger than Kerry. He was in the army and after two tours abroad, he joined the DEA. After three years with them he got shot in the shoulder and his wife told him to choose, either the DEA or her. The choice was easy. He had been stationed in Bogotá for almost a year before being shot and there he found the pre-Colombian civilizations very interesting. He decided to get a degree and maybe even become an archeologist, and that's how he met Kerry.

Julia wanted to study Archeology, but she hasn't decided what era to focus on, but as Kerry's assistant and speaking Portuguese it was natural he would ask her to come along.

"Where to now?" asks Hogan picking up his big backpack and handing Julia hers.

Kerry points to the river and says, "we need a boat, and I figure the harbor would be a good place to start."

They get their bags and begin the walk down towards the harbor where they can see several canoes and some motorboats bobbing in the surf. The heat is almost unbearable and Hogan looks back at his professor and wonders if Kerry will make it all the way. He is severely overweight and sweat is already pouring down his face.

"Are you OK, Dr?"

"Yeah Hogan, I'll be fine, just give me a day or two to get used to the heat. Anyway, I look at this as a way to lose some pounds while doing something fun."

Julia shakes her head; she is also worried about Kerry. She is in great shape thanks to the campus gym and hours on the track. Her sleek body is firm and her muscle's play under her skin. She is not even close to Hogan's massive build, she looks at his back walking a few yards ahead of her and wonders what the man has been through. In Manuas he took his T-shirt off, while they were waiting for the flight to come here, and changed into another. His back and torso was crisscrossed with scar tissue and she looked away. Apart from that he is a pleasant looking man. Who is she kidding, she thinks, he is gorgeous.

Kerry and the others find their way down to the harbor and Julia asks around if there is anyone who could rent them a boat for a few days. She gets direction to one of the last boats on the old pier and when they get there Kerry doesn't like what he sees. It's an old barge, flat, and square, with a small cabin in the back, and just big enough for one man. There is no one on board so Julia calls out. There is some shuffling from behind them and when they turn around a small man with a mustache comes off another boat opposite the barge.

"Yes?" he asks, looking up at them under an old CAT cap.

Julia clears her throat and says in her best Portuguese, "we was wondering if you could take us downriver, we think three to four days would do it."

The man peers at her and spits on the ground. Then says something in a dialect Julia doesn't understand, so she says, "sorry, I didn't understand."

The man sighs and says in surprisingly good English, "I said what do you want to go downriver for, and why so far?"

Kerry steps up and says, "we are looking for a lost city or town, and the only way to get there is by river."

The man lifts his hand towards Kerry and waiving it in the air he says, "my name is Ortega, and I can tell you, there is no lost village or town or anything else around here."

"Well Mr. Ortega, we do believe there is, and we are willing to pay you for your service."

Before Ortega has a chance to answer the other man in the canoe says in English, "take the Gringos, Juanita is looking for you, and you know how she gets when she thinks you have been with someone else. This will give her time to cool down."

Ortega looks up at Kerry and nods his head slowly, "my friend is right, Juanita is no fun when she is upset, last time she came after me with a rusty machete, almost killed me, and for what? She thinks I run after every skirt in town."

Hogan laughs quietly and Ortega turns to him, "hey Mr. that is no joke, I don't. I just run after her sister, she is much better looking." He laughs and it turns into a cough attack. When he has his breathing under control he says, "OK, all on board, let's go."

Kerry and the others jump down onto the barge and soon they are moving into the big river. The water is muddy and it's impossible to see how deep it is. Some children run along the shore shouting something.

"Juanita's children, they are telling their mother, I'm leaving," says Ortega and spits overboard.

Kerry, Hogan and Julia sit down on the barge's flat deck, but after a while the heat is unbearable and Hogan takes out one of the tents which he ties between the cabin and the railing. They sit down under it in the shade and Kerry pulls out a map from his backpack.

"OK, we are on the way. It's not the most comfortable way to travel, but it will get us where we need to go."

Hogan uses his backpack as a pillow and lays down, "how sure are you about this?" he asks with his eyes closed.

Kerry knows full well that neither Hogan nor Julia are convinced about his claim there is a hidden town in the middle of the jungle. They came along to get away from the boredom of university life and get a paid vacation. He is OK with that; the cost of the expedition comes from his own bank account. He has used all his savings and part of his inheritance from his parents who died a few years back.

From deep inside his backpack he pulls out a leather bound notebook and opens it.

"We know the Conquistadors heard about the city of El Dorado, where supposedly the streets were lined in gold."

"Sure, and what did they find, nothing? Only insects, and death, but no gold. They would have been better off staying in the costal towns and pillage from the Indians," says Hogan.

"True, and almost all of them did. The few that came back, told of horror and several of them never recovered from the ordeal."

"Where did you say you found that letter?" asks Hogan.

Kerry takes out a folded paper from the notebook and opens it. "This is a copy of the letter I found when my wife and I were in Cadiz in Spain last year. I was doing research in that city because from there the Conquistadores left to the new world and they came back the same way. The letter was included in a collection of things left to the museum years ago. It turned out that it belonged to a woman whose long dead relative had received in 1565 from her cousin. The cousin had arrived in Malaga very ill, but before he died he sent the letter to her where he told her about an adventure that lasted almost a year. He and his fellow travelers found a town deep in the jungle. He never said how he got there, but there was a hand drawn map and comparing it to the general area I concluded the spot the man was talking about is north of the river we are heading to."

Hogan shakes his head, "sounds like a bedtime story, how do we know the letter is not a fake, someone needing beer money could have written it and sold it to the museum?"

Kerry laughs and says, "the people in the museum said it was real and I got permission to have it dated myself, and it showed the letter was real."

"Let's assume everything in the letter is true, and the letter itself is authentic, how are we going to find a small old town with thousands of square miles of jungle?" asks Julia.

"We ask for directions," says Kerry with a grin.

"What do you mean?"

"Where we are going the local indigenous people still carry on with their old customs, they tell stories. I'm sure a story about an old civilization will still be around. All we have to do is ask them, and with a bit of luck, they will lead us right to it."

Julia and Hogan stay quiet and Kerry follows their example and lies down, soon they are sleeping. The barge glides down the river slowly passing fishermen and children playing in the water.

Ortega stands by the helm and wonders what these crazy Americans are after, a town in the jungle, nonsense, there is no such thing.

Chapter 17

The journey down river was long and hot. After two days of watching monkeys, children and fishermen the excitement turned into boredom. Kerry spends much of the time with his notebook and different maps of the area. Julia and Hogan check their equipment so many times they can wake up in the middle of the night and say exactly where Hogan's blue socks are in his backpack. They had bought the equipment in the States before they left and Hogan was in charge of it. Since he had a military background Kerry felt safe leaving that part of the planning with him. Hogan got everything he needed except weapons. Kerry had told him he foresaw no reason to go in armed, but Hogan wasn't happy. He figured he could buy something along the way, maybe a shotgun, anything that could protect them from the four and two-legged animals.

"We are almost there, " says Ortega early in the morning on the third day.

Kerry is making a second cup of coffee on their gas stove and Hogan and Julia are brushing their teeth at the railing.

When they come back Kerry says, "Ortega is saying we have reached the first part of the journey on the river. We have to decide if we should ask him to take us the rest of the way or change to another boat."

"I like him, apart from cheating on his girlfriend, he seems like a nice guy, and he has taken us this far without any problems, " says Hogan.

"I agree," says Julia.

"OK, talk to him and see what he says Julia."

Kerry and Hogan watch as Julia talks to Ortega and soon realizes from the tone of his voice and her pleadings that he is not interested.

Julia comes back to where they are sitting under the tent and sighs when she sits down, "he won't do it. Says he needs to go back and take care of Juanita and

her kids. The good news is that he knows a guy where we are going, and he thinks he can help us out."

"Sound's good," says Kerry and begins to pack.

Hogan gets the tent down and they stand by the railing when the barge slowly comes into a small quay on the right side of the river.

They say goodbye to Ortega, who turns his boat around and heads back to where he came from. As he waves to the Americans, he gets a feeling that they might not come back from where they are going. A chill runs down his spine, but he shakes it off and gets ready for his confrontation with Juanita.

They find the man Ortega talked about. He could have been his twin brother, he even wears a cap, but this one says Ferrari and is bright red.

Again Julia is the one talking and when she is finished the man who presented himself as Ortiz shakes his head.

Kerry walks up to them, leaving Hogan with their equipment, "what's he saying?"

"He says he knows where we want to go, It's a small village, maybe a hundred people in total, but he says they don't like what they call foreigners."

"What? They don't like white people?"

Julia translates and Ortiz chuckles, and then says something.

"He says they don't like anyone who isn't from their village. Last year they chased a team from a nature magazine out of the village and shot at them with arrows, seemingly the arrows were the children's so they had no points, but it scared the team." Kerry thinks about the information and says, "tell him we will pay top dollar, all he has to do is drop us off and come back two weeks later to pick us up."

Hogan is sitting on a stone wall looking around. There are quite a few people around, mostly men going to and from boats up to the little town above the river. As he sits there he notices almost all of them are carrying some kind of firearm, a revolver or pistol in the front of their pants or a shotgun over a shoulder. Another thing he notices is that several of the younger men have expensive looking watches and gold necklaces. Drugs, he thinks, these people smuggle drugs downriver from other smugglers from the border to Colombia and Ecuador. This far back from the user a kilo of Cocaine should be as cheap as buying a pack of cigarettes.

He is brought back from his thoughts by the arrival of Julia and Kerry.

"He'll take us, and pick us up in two weeks," says Kerry, and then continues, "we are leaving in an hour."

Hogan jumps down from the wall and says, "I'll buy us some water, wait here."

He walks up the sloping road towards the town and finds what he is looking for, a general store. When he walks in the room is dark and there is an old fan in the ceiling. The store is filled with canned goods. In the corners are rolls of rope, and fishing gear. He walks over to a desk and knocks on it to wake up the man sleeping on a stool which is leaning against a floor to ceiling shelf behind him.

The man opens his eyes and immediately picks out a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pockets and lights one, then looking up at Hogan he asks in broken English, "what do you need?"

Hogan isn't sure how to get what he needs and decides to be direct, "I was wondering if you have any guns for sale?"

The man takes a long drag on his cigarette and says, "guns are illegal, I can't sell them."

Hogan has been around and puts two hundred Dollars on the counter. The man looks at the wad of twenty Dollar bills and scratches his head. Then he comes around the counter and walks over to the entrance door and locks it. He walks past Hogan and disappears into a back room. After five minutes he is back with an old suitcase in leather. He places it on the counter and opens it.

Hogan looks inside and feels his hopes vanish. In the suitcase is an assortment of pistols and revolvers, most of them are rusted and scratched. He looks through the collection and decides on a Smith&Wesson revolver. It's a 44 Magnum with a six inch barrel. He checks it and decides it's good enough. Looking at the man he asks, "you don't happen to have a shotgun by any chance?"

The man shrugs his shoulder and goes back to the room where he got the suitcase from and comes back carrying three rifles which he places on the counter.

Hogan picks up a pump action Remington and checks it. He then adds another fifty Dollars and asks for ammunition. After another trip to his stash the man gives Hogan four boxes of shells.

After thanking him and buying some bottles of water Hogan leaves the shop and walks whistling down to the quay where he finds Kerry and Julia waiting for him on the boat and Ortiz working on the engine.

"What did you buy?" asks Kerry and points at the package Hogan places next to his backpack.

"Insurance, I like to go into uncharted territory with something to protect me with."

"OK, but you carry it, I know nothing about guns," says Kerry.

"I can shoot, an ex boyfriend of mine took me to a shooting range a few times, what did you buy?" asks Julia.

"A shotgun and an old revolver," says Hogan.

"Cool, I'm comfortable with both."

Ortiz gets the engine going and slowly backs out of the quay and turns the boat downriver. Hogan is pleased to see this boat has a cabin and it's a lot faster than the barge. They make themselves as comfortable as they can after stowing away their gear. Hogan and Julia are up on the deck and Kerry stays below in the cabin. It doesn't take long before he is up on deck moaning about the heat down below.

There is not much to see along the river apart from more children and miles and miles of jungle along the banks. Hogan finds a fishing rod among other things in the cabin and makes himself comfortable against the railing. Ortiz laughs at him and through Julia says he doesn't think he will catch anything since they are going so fast. Hogan tells him he doesn't expect to catch anything either.

Both men are wrong, after a while the rod bends and when Hogan reels in the line there is a Catfish on the end. He guesses the weight at around twenty pounds and is pleased with his catch. Julia translates and Ortiz says they are in for a very good dinner.

After enjoying the catfish, the three Americans fall asleep on the deck, and Ortiz in the cabin. They have laid anchor in a small cove and the jungle surrounds them. As they sleep eyes watch them from behind trees and vines. They are both

of the four-legged variety and the two-legged. Just before the sun comes up a dark shadow crawls over the railing and on quiet feet move to where the white people are sleeping. He looks down at them and his nose twitches a little, the smell is different, like nothing he has smelled before. He reaches out and touches the clothes the bigger man is wearing, and it makes him stir. As silent as he came on board the shadow goes back the same way he came. When he meets with his friends he tells them what he found and they agree to follow the newcomers. Even though their transport is fast, the shadow and his friends know ways that makes them faster, and they can travel at night.

Chapter 18

Hogan wakes up and crawls out of the tent. The sun is just coming up over the treetops and the heat is already oppressive. There is no wind in the air and it feels like he could cut the humidity with a knife. He looks around and sees a couple of canoes on the water a hundred yards away. There are two men in each, and he thinks they are fishing.

He finds Ortiz in the cabin who gives him a chipped cup with strong coffee. Hogan goes back on deck and leans against the railing sipping his coffee.

"Good morning, where did you get the coffee?" asks Kerry coming up behind him.

Hogan points with his thumb towards the cabin and says, "Ortiz. When you come back, I have a couple of questions for you I was thinking about last night."

Kerry walks off and when he comes back the two men lean against the railing and Kerry asks, "what was the question?"

"Actually, I have a couple. You said the letter you found in Cadiz was in a museum, so how did you get access to it to do tests?"

Kerry says, "good question, the museum thought of it as a minor item in their collection. Letters from that period are not uncommon and therefore I was allowed to take it with me, and they had one of their curators go with me."

"OK, but why put all your money and time on that letter. There is nothing in it to prove what the man who wrote it says is true."

Kerry doesn't say anything at first just sips his coffee, then turning to Hogan he says, "have you ever used your gut feeling?"

"Sure, during combat and as a DEA agent."

"OK, I'm using my gut feeling. There were too many details the man writing it couldn't have known without actually being there. In those days Wikipedia and the Internet didn't exist."

"Like what?"

"He describes plants, trees and the different animals that only live in this area, so he had to have seen them to be able to write about them, right?"

"Mm, but he could also have heard it from someone else and then written it down like if it was him being there."

"I don't think so, or I don't want to believe so. Maybe I'm an adventurer and a romantic, but in my mind he was here and saw what he saw. All we have to do is ask around and we should be able to find the same place."

They hear a sound behind them and when they turn around Julia is coming out of the tent. Her hair is in disorder and her face is pale and she looks tired.

"Rough night?" asks Hogan.

"I had this strange dream that we were being watched, " she says rubbing her eyes.

"From where? The shore?" asks Kerry.

Julia looks out over the river and a flock of colorful birds, leaves the trees and fly across it, just above their heads. She follows them until they disappear into the jungle on the other side, then turning back to the men she says, "no, the person or persons were on the boat, looking down at us while we slept."

"Impossible, I'm a light sleeper, if an ant walks past me I'll wake up," says Hogan and throws the sludge of coffee overboard and then continues, "I'm getting another cup, anyone else?"

"Yes, please," says Julia.

Kerry shakes his head, but gives his empty cup to Hogan who goes looking for Ortiz. He finds him at the helm getting ready to start the engine. When he sees Hogan he says something and Hogan turns around, calling to Julia for her to come and translate.

After a short conversation, Julia says, "Ortiz says that from here he can go faster and if we are lucky we could be at the drop off point late tomorrow afternoon. He wants to know what we thought about the visitor we had last night?"

Hogan looks at her and before his eyes, her face goes pale again, and she looks him in the eye with a questioning look.

"Ask him what he means, what visit?"

When Ortiz has finished a long explanation Julia calls for Kerry to join them and when he arrives, she says, "Ortiz says there is a tribe out there," she points at the jungle, "who don't really interact with the tribes along the river. They are very shy and prefer to hide in the jungle, but sometimes at night when they think everyone is sleeping they will come out and look around in the camps or villages. As far as he knows they are harmless, but if you ever happen to see one of them in, it might scare you."

Kerry asks, "why would it scare someone?"

Julia asks Ortiz, and then translates, "apparently they have tattoos and some kind of disfigurement in their faces."

"Uh-huh, great now we have little Indian monsters sneaking around at night, " says Hogan with a sigh."

"Does he know where they come from?" asks Kerry.

Ortiz shakes his head when Julia asks him and then says something. Julia's eyebrows go up and she turns to Kerry, "he doesn't know for sure, but he has heard story's about them since he was a kid. They are about a tribe living deep in the jungle, underground, and only coming out at night. It's like the local boogie man."

Kerry thanks Ortiz and the three Americans go back to their tent. Just as they arrive the boat slowly moves out to the middle of the river, and Ortiz increases speed until they feel like they are flying over that flat surface.

"Why the look?" asks Hogan

He is watching Kerry, who is in deep thought flicking through his notebook. After a minute or so he looks up at the other two.

"There is a note in the letter, about some Indians the man who wrote it saw. He never interacted with them, it was more like he saw them passing, or if he past them at some point. Anyway, he describes their faces as similar to rabbits?"

Hogan laughs and says, "what? Big teeth and pointy ears? "

Julia giggles, but Kerry looks serious, he searches for a page in the notebook and reads from it, "their faces were narrow and their noses twitched like a rabbit." He closes the book and looks at them.

"So, they have deformed noses, no big deal, "says Hogan.

"I guess not. I just thought it was interesting that we got a visit from someone who could be a relative to the people who lived here around five hundred years ago, don't you?"

Chapter 19

The following evening just as the sun is setting they come around a bend in the river and up ahead they see a small village. They are no longer on the Amazon, but a day and a half up a branch going straight north with a few twists and turns on the way. The river is much narrower. Hogan estimates it's about two hundred yards across. During the last few hours it has become shallower as well and Ortiz has had to slow down to a near crawl not to run aground on the sandbanks sticking up around them like little islands.

Ortiz calls and waves them back to where he is at the helm. When they get there he says something to Julia and she translates, "Ortiz is saying he will drop us off at this village. He cautions us to be careful and not to act upset whatever happens. There should be a couple of people who speak some Portuguese. There was a Missionary here a few years ago, and he taught the locals until they threw him out."

"Why did they kick him out?" asks Hogan.

"It turned out he was one of those religious men who can't keep their hands from young boys and girls, he was lucky to get away alive," says Julia after asking Ortiz.

"That would explain their suspicion against white people," says Kerry and the others nod in agreement.

They are let off on a sandbank and after helping them with their gear Ortiz turns the boat around and heads back downriver. They watch him for a while, and Julia feels uncomfortable about being almost alone in the jungle. She turns around and follows the men up the bank where there is a group of Indian children waiting for them. When they reach the top she sees they are not children, but

adults, armed with bows and arrows. Their hair is cut like a bowl and some of them have piercing and their faces are painted. They don't look friendly. She looks at Hogan and Kerry as they whisper to her to say something. Julia clears her throat and says in Portuguese very slowly, "Good evening, we come to learn from you, does anyone understand me?"

The group of men just stares at her, some of them fingering their weapons. Julia feels cold sweat running down under her armpits and down her spine. She tries again, "we come in peace, looking for help." She realizes she sounds like a movie character and blushes.

"Go away, leave us alone," says an old voice behind the group.

Julia stretches her head to try to see who spoke, but it's too dark now and the only light comes from inside the huts behind the group. The jungle is coming alive, the night creatures begin their music.

"Please, we can't go back. You saw that our boat left."

There is a movement in the group and it parts, letting an old man through. He has no weapon, but a stick he uses as support. His hair is still black, but his face is wrinkled. He stops in front of Julia and asks, "Who is in charge?"

She points at Kerry, and the old man says, "he doesn't speak, so he can not be in charge. And no woman can be in charge either."

He makes a clicking sound with his mouth, and it sounds like he is taking pity on them, like they were lost sheep with no leader.

"He doesn't speak Portuguese, but I can translate," says Julia.

The old man looks up at her, he is almost a head shorter than her, "ah, he needs a woman to do his job for him? Useless man, we should just kill him. We can use the big one to work for us, and you," he says, looking her up and down, "you I can sell to the river pirates."

Julia decides not to translate the last parts because she can see how Hogan is gripping his weapon hard in his hand. The last thing they need is a shootout with these people.

"We will only stay one night, and then we will leave you in peace."

The old man turns around and says something to the men around him, they burst out laughing and then the old man turns back to her and says, "very well, you can stay here, on the river bank. Tomorrow we shall see if you leave, and that is if the alligators haven't eaten you during the night."

He turns around and the group follows him laughing all the way until they disappear into the different huts.

Julia tells Hogan and Kerry what was said, leaving out the parts where Kerry was insulted and Hogan was to be turned into a slave.

"That went pretty well, I thought," says Kerry while unpacking a tent from his backpack.

"Yeah, hopefully we are alive in the morning and not crock food. I suggest we sit guard in four hour shifts. Julia starts then Kerry and finally myself."

Julia cooks soup from cans while the men set up the tents and hang the mosquito nets. The jungle is alive with sounds around them. Whoever thought animals slept during the night are wrong. The day animals do, but then their friends wake up as the sun goes down, and they are even louder than their day friends.

After eating, Julia sits down with her back against the bank thinking that if they are attacked by an alligator it will most likely come from the river. The two men lay down in their tents and soon she can hear them snoring. She is too nervous and a little scared to sleep so sitting guard is fine with her. She even considers the idea not waking up Kerry and do a double shift.

The moon comes out and lights up the scene in front of her. Across the river, she can see some big animals drinking and an alligator comes up to the surface a few yards away and stares at her. It doesn't swim closer, but instead floats downstream. She is just about to open her water bottle when she hears a light sound behind her. She whips around with the gun ready to shoot.

"Good evening," says the old man from before. He is sitting about two yards from her. His legs are crossed and he is picking his teeth with a thin twig. She is shaking from the fright of seeing him so close. How did he get there without her hearing him? He is old and uses a stick for god's sake, she thinks.

"Hello," she says.

He sits there in silence and looks at her until he is finished picking his teeth, and then says. "One of the few good things that missionary taught us, dental hygiene, very important."

She smiles at him and he smiles back showing a few gaps between his teeth, so much for his dental hygiene.

"I'm sorry if I came on hard before, I had to do it in front of the others. I know you are not religious people trying to push your god and ideas on to us."

"I liked the part about making my friend a slave, I didn't tell him about that."

"Good, I don't think he would have appreciated it, and looking at him, I figure he is a good warrior, not like that fat man."

"Well, the fat man is an intellectual, he studies and learns things."

The old man is quiet, but after a while he says, "we have a man like that, and he is even older than I. Sometimes I sneak off in the night to go and see him."

Julia is confused; she thought Indians lived in tight knit groups where the elder were revealed for their knowledge.

"Why doesn't he live with the rest of the village?"

The old man sighs, and says, "because he is a stubborn old man, and doesn't want to come and live in this century."

Julia giggles, this guy is too much, she thinks, and asks. "Why is he stubborn?"

"He believes in old stories and is sure we will be attacked by the Skin People."

"Skin People, who are they?"

He shrugs his shoulders and says, "hundreds of years ago, there lived a people in these areas that would take the skin of their enemies and use them to make dolls that they worshipped. At least that's what the old man says, and he heard it from his father who heard it from his and so on."

Julia moves closer to him and asks, "so you don't believe in the old stories?"

"It's all rubbish, they never existed, and even if they did, they would be long gone by now. It's just his way of making himself feel important and scare the children."

They sit in silence for a while and then he asks her, "what do you need help with, are you lost?"

"No, we are looking for a lost town. Supposedly it was built by a tribe hundreds of years ago, and then they just disappeared. Kerry, the one you call fat, has studied our old stories and is sure that the town is around here somewhere."

"Tomorrow I will take you to the old man, he might be able to help you, but don't mention to him I was here tonight. By the way, my name is Tuki."

"I'm Julia, good night and thanks."

He stands up and walks away, suddenly he is gone, no sound, no shadows, nothing, it is like he was never there.

Chapter 20

"Kerry, Julia time to go, we have people waiting for us."

Julia opens her eyes and stretches like a cat. Her arms are shining with sweat already and her clothes are sticking to her body. She looks at her watch, 8A.M. The sun has been up for almost two hours and it's already stifling hot and the humidity is like a blanket over her. Kerry is sitting up and his face is already red from the heat. He looks at her and asks, "how come you look so fresh in the morning, I feel like a wet towel?"

She laughs and stands up, grabbing her backpack next to her and opens the tent. Outside, she sees Hogan standing, looking up at the riverbank. She turns her head and is not surprised to see Tuki and his band of men standing there waiting for them.

"Good morning," she calls up to him.

He doesn't answer, but waves to her, and then continues to just stand still.

After packing away the tent the three of them make their way up and join the group of Indians. Julia leans into Kerry and says, "I had a talk with the old guy last night, his name is Tuki and he came down while you two were sleeping."

"Did he say anything interesting?"

"He is taking us to some wise old man who might shed some light on the town we are looking for. He also told me about a people he calls the Skin People. Supposedly they are not around anymore, but they were a few hundred years ago. They might have been the people who built the town."

"See, I knew it was a good idea to bring you along, with your female charm you get all kinds of good information," says Kerry.

Julia shakes her head. They are in the village now, but she thinks the word village is wrong. It's just a collection of huts, made of clay with palm leaves for roofs. She can see a few women sitting outside cooking over open fires and the ever present children running around. The women are topless and most of the kids are naked. The men have a loincloth and some of them have their torsos filled with drawings. She doubts its tattoos, more likely some kind of paint made from fruits. The colors are red and black, and the drawings are straight lines or circles.

Hogan is walking between two Indians and he towers above them, he looks down and realizes that if he had a beer can he could stand it on one of the men's head, and it would be the perfect height. He is big and muscular, but these men

are thin and sinewy. They are made for long distance walking. He looks back at Kerry, who is shuffling behind him. His face is dripping sweat and his T-shirt is soaked through. Tuki must have seen him look and says something.

"Julia, what did the old man just say?"

She laughs and says, "something about Kerry carrying the weight of three men inside his clothes."

"Hey, it's not my fault I like to eat and drink good wine," moans Kerry.

They have left the area with the huts and entered the proper jungle beyond them. There is a track, but it's hardly wide enough for Hogan. His shoulders scrape against veins and trees, and all around him there are insects buzzing and he even sees a snake in a tree. Above him there are hundreds of birds in different colors. Down at ground level there is not much light, the thick canopy made of layers upon layers of trees and bushes doesn't let the sunlight all the way down. It feels like he is walking in dusk or dawn.

Kerry is struggling, and he promises himself that when he gets back home, he will join a gym and lose some weight, especially if he ever decides to go on another expedition. He thinks about the Conquistadors who came here hundreds of years ago, dressed in heavy armor and cutting their way through the dense jungle with swords. He wonders what they thought about as they moved further and further away from the river and into the unknown. Gold most likely, that was what brought them here in the first place, the rumor of riches beyond their imaginations, cities with streets of gold and the opportunity to bring some back.

Tuki suddenly stops and says something to his men. They step aside a little so the three Americans can move up the line and soon they are standing next to him. He looks at Julia and pointing to his men he says, "they will wait here, I will take you from here, it's not far, just a few hundred yards, but the old man prefers not to have a lot of people around him, and the men don't like to be around him either."

Tuki walks off and the others follow him. They continue on for what Hogan feels is an eternity, but in reality can't be more than half an hour, then suddenly the trail stops and there is a small clearing in front of them. The sunlight is shining on a small hut with a brook and they can hear the sound of running water. To the left of the hut there is a garden with flowers and small bushes, on the other side is a similar patch and Hogan sees what he thinks are potatoes growing and some other vegetables. There is an old man sitting on the ground outside the hut, he doesn't look at them, but says something to Tuki who turns around and translates to Julia.

"The old man said to get lost, and he hopes the jungle eats us."

"Friendly, isn't he," says Julia.

"Don't worry, he is always like that in the morning, he becomes better during the day. I will tell him who you are and then I'll wave you over, stay here."

Julia tells the others what Tuki has said and they all hang back while Tuki approaches the sitting man. After some discussion which at one point becomes very heated and Tuki has to step back quickly when the other man pulls a spear from behind him.

"Jesus, he is a feisty old thing, isn't he," says Hogan

"I guess he is at that age when you just want to be left alone with your memories. My grandfather was like that, he lived to be ninety-five and during the last five years he was a pain in the ass," says Kerry, leaning against a tree.

Julia looks up and says, "Slowly move away from the tree Kerry, very slowly."

He does what she says and then looks up. Above him on a thick branch there is a green snake and its head is slowly moving down towards them.

"Christ, that thing almost bit me," says Kerry shivering.

"I guess it's poisonous and would have killed you within an hour or so, let's be very careful where we step and what we lean against," says Hogan.

"Time to go," says Julia, who has seen Tuki wave at them.

They approach the old man and sits down in front of him like Tuki, hunched down on the soles of their feet. Kerry can't balance his heavy body and sits down completely. The old man coughs and spits out a big glob of phlegm which hits a centipede walking past him.

Tuki says, "Julia, I have told him what you have asked me, and I will give you the short version of what he said."

"Why not the long version, might be important information?"

He chuckles and says, "trust me, half of what he says are bad words which I don't even know how to translate to Portuguese."

"Fine, short version it is."

"He says that when he was a child the tribe didn't live here, but three days walk north of here. There he and the other children were told of a people who lived in a town in the jungle. The way it was told makes him believe it was another few days walk from where they were. These people were much more advanced than our tribe. Their dwellings were built of mud bricks, and they had water systems to bring water from a river into the town where they grew their food. They would hunt and fish, but they were an evil people who prayed to a god who wanted blood and human sacrifices to be pleased. They would hunt the neighboring tribes and kill the women, men and even the children in drawn out rituals. They called them the Skin People, because they would tear off the skin of their victims while they were alive, their screams would please the god."

Julia holds up her hand to indicate he should wait while she translates to Kerry and Hogan. When she finishes Tuki continues.

"They became so good at this they would poke their victims with their spears first to hear them scream and then, according to the pitch would then skin them in order to make music out of their sounds. This they called *The music of the skin*."

"So what happened to them?" asks Julia.

"There was an earthquake, and the town sank into the ground. It happened at night so most of them died in their sleep. The few that survived ran into the jungle and the tribe disappeared. Some say their god was not pleased with their gifts and that's why they sent the earthquake to punish them; others say it was a good god who made it happen, to clean the earth from these monsters."

Julia translates again to the others and this time Kerry asks, "what about the people with the deformed faces? The man who wrote the letter talked about them."

Tuki listens to Julia and then turns to the old man and speaks. They discuss back and forth for a while and then Tuki says, "the man you are talking about

most likely saw a member of the Skin People. It must have been one of the survivors, he was lucky to get away."

The old man said something and Tuki translates, "he is saying that if you go looking for them, be careful, sometimes what you are looking for is not what you find."

Tuki thanks the old man who just mumbles something, coughs and spits again. Then he goes into his hut and disappears.

When they reach the group waiting for them Tuki says to Julia, "from here on you are by yourself. I have told you what the old man said, and you know more or less in what direction you must go. Look for a river and the town should be close, but remember it sank, and it might be impossible to find. I will send one hunter with you, but he will only take you as far as the river."

He says something to a young man, who steps forward. Tuki says his name is Laka, or at least that's what his name sounds like. Julia, Hogan and Kerry, thank Tuki for his help and following Laka they head into the jungle.

Kerry turns back and says to Julia, "what's your take on the old man, is he telling the truth, or is he just bullshitting?"

"I don't know, he seemed serious, but you never know."

"I think it was just a bedtime story to scare him and the other children. Imagine making music by skinning people. That's just absurd," says Hogan, walking last in their little line.

"It wouldn't be the first time people use the human body to create sounds; they have found flutes made of human bones and even skulls used as drums in some ancient burial grounds. Music was and still is a big part of worshipping. Just think about our own religions, all of them use music before, during and after the service," says Kerry.

"But there is a difference between singing a psalm and skinning people," says Hogan.

The trail snakes its way up on a steady incline and soon they stop talking, needing all their strength to walk up the hill in the heat and humidity. Laka doesn't show any signs of fatigue, he keeps the same pace going up as on flat ground and after a while they have to ask him to slow down by using sign language. While they drink some water and catch their breaths Laka watches them, his eyes are friendly, but he doesn't say anything. Even if he did, they wouldn't understand him anyway.

When they are ready, he picks up his machete and continues hacking away at the vegetation clearing a path for the others. And so it continues, they walk for hours, stopping on the way to drink and rest. When darkness begins to fall Laka finds a clearing, it's no more than twenty square feet, but he hacks out some more space and they can raise one tent. It will be a tight fit for the three of them.

After a dinner of cold food from cans they crawl into the tent and wrap mosquito netting around them, Laka stays outside and as the fire slowly burns out the night creature's wake up.

Julia can't sleep, the sounds from outside are too loud, and inside the tent it is too hot. Hogan and Kerry are snoring and after a while she gives up. Wrapped in the netting she creeps outside and finds Laka awake and smoking some kind of home made cigarette. She has no idea where he got it from since he didn't carry

anything with him except the machete. She sits down opposite him and he smiles at her, offering her the cigarette. Her first reaction is to decline. She has never smoked before and she has no plans of starting now, but under the circumstances, she thinks she should accept the offered cigarette, or Laka might take it as an insult.

She inhales carefully and the smoke is sweet and pungent. First, nothing happens so she takes another drag and slowly a weird feeling comes over her. It's like she is floating, the sounds fade away and the only thing she can hear is her heart and her breathing. Laka takes the cigarette away from her and takes a deep drag, then smiles at her and nods his head. She feels like she is grinning like an idiot, and when she touches her face, it feels numb, like after being to the dentist. She is sure she has saliva coming out of her mouth, but looking at Laka she sees he hasn't, and realizes it must be some kind of hallucination. Her body relaxes and before she knows it, she slowly lies down on her side with eyes closed, and the last thing she sees is what looks like a pair of eyes above and beyond Laka's head.

Chapter 21

The following morning Julia is awake as the sun comes up. Laka is around preparing breakfast for himself, there are several fruits on a leaf and what looks like roots. He offers it to her, but she declines pointing at the tent.

When she sticks in her head, she is met by the awful smell of old socks and dirty men.

"Hey, wake up guys," she says and then pulls out her head.

Hogan is first to come out, he stretches his long body and then sighs. Looking at Laka he says, "that looks like a very healthy breakfast, do we have anything?"

"Yeah, in my backpack there is some dried fruit and cold canned food."

Hogan finds two packages of dried fruit which he eats quickly, and by the time he is done Kerry comes out. "Jesus, I slept badly, the ground is uneven and I bet it slopes downwards, because my head feels like it contained all the blood in my body.

They clean up and pack the tent and take off after Laka, who as usual is going too fast for them, the only thing holding him back is the constant hacking at the jungle.

After a few hours they reach the top of yet another hill, and Hogan finds a tree which he says he will climb to look around.

"Be careful, if you fall and break something we will leave you to the insects, just for being stupid," says Kerry, looking up at him as he climbs the thick branches. Laka is sitting on his haunches looking up at the man climbing the tree. He is slowly shaking his head like if he was saying the man is an idiot. Julia has to agree and when there is a snapping sound and they hear Hogan swear her heart skips a beat expecting to see him fall to the ground, but nothing happens.

After what feels like an eternity, he comes down and jumps to the ground.

"What did you see?" asks Kerry.

"Jungle and more jungle."

"Oh, OK, that was informative," says Kerry and sighs.

"Wait, I did see something interesting. It looks like if we are on the edge of a volcano."

"There are no volcanoes around here," says Kerry in an irritated voice.

"I know, and I didn't say there were, all I said was that it looks like it. What I meant was that there is a circular ridge, and we are on top of it. I'd guess it's about two or three miles across to the other side."

"So?"

Julia clears her throat and says, "Kerry, remember what the old man said, that the town had disappeared during an earthquake. If it did swallow a whole town, could it also have pushed up the earth, creating a circular crater?"

Kerry is quiet for a while, and then he says, "you are right, it could. That would mean we are close to where the town should be."

"Exactly, I think if we head down the side and then walk towards the other side, we would be in the middle of the ridge on our side. If we walk another mile and a half we should be at the center of the crater."

"And that's where we should start looking," adds Julia excitedly.

Kerry nods his head, and says, "I knew I took you guys with me for a reason other than company, let's get a move on."

Julia tries to explain to Laka where they want to go by drawing in the soft ground, he nods like if he understands and they set off again.

Going down is a lot easier than going up, and the other side of the ridge is not as steep and for some reason the jungle isn't as dense. There is almost no need for the machete and they make good time. When they reach the bottom, it's late afternoon and they decide to stay there for the night, starting what they hope is their final leg early the following morning.

They find a clearing close to a small river and Kerry points out that this could be the river in the old man's story. It's no more than twenty yards across, and shallow. The water is crystal clear and cool. They set up their tents, and this time Julia has her own. They bathe in the river, and the water is very refreshing and while Laka sits by the river bank looking at them, they splash water and scream like kids. When they come out Laka is gone, but after a while he appears again carrying what looks like a small pig.

"Wow, looks like we are in for a feast tonight, " says Hogan while watching Laka start a fire to roast the pig.

After eating they sit around the fire and talk about how to organize the search the following day. Laka is close by smoking his cigarette, but when he offers it to Julia she declines, making a circle with her finger to the side of her head. Laka laughs, and nods.

"I see you shared a joint with our guide last night," says Kerry with a grin.

"Yeah, he offered me some, but I don't think it was weed, it was something a lot stronger. The funny thing is, I felt very good in the morning, my head was clear and I felt relaxed."

"Mm, just be careful trying what he offers, our bodies are not used to the plants that grow here, and we don't want you to OD or have a bad trip, OK," says Hogan.

"OK, I'll be careful," says Julia, feeling a bit stupid.

"I figure the best thing to do tomorrow is to walk a grid over the area. The jungle here is not as dense as before, and we should be able to walk it in a straight line. I suggest ten yards between each of us. We will be within eyesight and communication. Look for anything on the ground that could have been man made, a wall, stones in formations, or even tools, like stone knives and axes."

They all sleep deeply that night, the ground is flat and they all have plenty of space. Outside, Laka is keeping watch, but he is not comfortable, there are no night sounds, it's like the insects are not there, and it makes his skin creep. The air is still, and a big moon shines down on him. He smokes as usual and for a moment he thinks he is seeing things, which sometimes he does, but he swears there are shadows moving around him. At first he blames it on the fire, but the shadows don't move like that, they move more organized, like if they were getting closer to the camp site. Suddenly he doesn't see them any more, they have disappeared into the jungle. He grabs his machete and holds it hard, and his knuckles turn white. He is scared, and decides that he will leave tomorrow. He will try to take the foreigners with him, but if they want to stay, it's their deaths. He is sure he will die if he spends another night in this place.

From inside the jungle several pairs of eyes are watching the lone Indian by the camp fire. They talk in whispers and wonder what he is doing there. Usually they have to walk for days to find other human beings to hunt, but this night, the prey has come to them. The white people in the tent make them shake with excitement. They have never seen one, only heard stories about them from the elders. How they scream different than the other brown people in the jungle. Their screams make the song of the skin better, clearer and more beautiful, and are sure to please the god. They decide to move back underground, their prey will still be there in the morning.

The last one to disappear into the ground pulls a cover over the hole, and from above, there is no way to tell there is a door leading down. They scurry along tunnels passing ruins of old houses and streets. Then they turn left and right hurrying along another tunnel until they see the light.

There is a big room, it used to be a house, but now it's just a space. In the ceiling there are thick beams made of mahogany keeping the earth from falling down on them. Around a blazing fire are at least thirty people, short with narrow faces and flat noses. Their nostrils twitch as they look at the band of hunters who have just come from above. They tell the group what they have seen and they all become excited. It has been months since they caught a prey and now they have four.

An old man sitting on a log says something, and the rest quiet down. He is very old, and has seen many things, he warns the younger men to be careful with the white people, they have weapons that can kill at a long distance and that make terrible sounds. They are big, and strong, and very clever. The young men say they are not afraid and can move like shadows among the trees.

The old man nods his head, but continues to warn them to be cautious, to be careful, and don't underestimate the enemy.

As he lets the young men plan the attack, the old man looks beyond the fire and there against the wall are several statues. They are made from branches tied together by rope made from plants. They have a human form, with a head, arms,

and legs. Strapped to them are skins, now rotten and old. But when he looks carefully, he can still see the form of a nose, an eye socket and fingers. He smiles, soon he will hear the music again, the sound that pleases the god who a long time ago let his proud people almost die. He stands up and walks around the fire up to the closest statue and touches the skin. It's hard and brittle, like dried leather. His fingers run along what used to be an arm, up towards the neck, and then further up to the head. He remembers this one, even though it was more than thirty summers ago. He had been close to a river, many days walk from their hideout. He had come upon a group of people, three white and two Indians. He and his friend had waited for the night, and snuck into the camp. They had chosen this one, because she was small, no more than a child. They had killed the others swiftly with poisoned arrows, and then dragged the screaming child back to their hideout. There they had given her a juice made from fruits and other plants and she fell asleep so they could easily carry her back.

When she woke up, she was tied to the sacrificial structure, she was hanging from ropes attached to her wrists and ankles, and there was a noose around her neck. As his people gathered around the structure, the child screamed in a language they didn't understand. The old man had ripped off her clothes, and exposed her body. She had developed breasts and there was a patch of pubic hair. He decided she was older than he had first thought.

When he made the first long cut from the base of her neck down to the end of her spine, she passed out and only woke up when he began tearing the skin of her back with small incisions while two men pulled the skin away from her body starting at her spine and moving out. As she screamed he lifted his head and sang along with her, using ancient words that only he knew, and he hoped they would please the god. The crowd watching was humming and somewhere drums began to beat as the girl began to scream even louder. When she became quiet and limp, most of the skin from her torso and arms was hanging around her hips.

Looking at the statue the old man smiles and walks back to the fire. The group has disappeared and he is left alone with his memories of the different songs he has heard during his lifetime.

Chapter 22

"I think I have found something," shouts Hogan to Kerry and Julia.

He can hear them pushing through the bushes and small trees coming closer to where he is standing looking at the ground. They sound like two elephants coming at him, and he decides they would never make it as soldiers.

"What is it?" asks Julia when she arrives breathing hard.

Hogan waits a few minutes until Kerry arrives, his arms and face have some scratches from branches and he is sweating so much his shirt is completely soaked. He leans against a tree trunk to catch his breath.

It is already past midday and the jungle is hot and humid, they spent the morning walking their lines, but found nothing. Then they moved along further to the East and began again, and now Hogan has found something.

"Look, see that sticking out of the ground?" he says, pointing at a piece of dark wood.

Julia kneels and touches the wood, it's hard and black, like if it had been burnt. It's square and about ten inches in diameter, and it's sticking up about a foot from the ground. The end is smooth, like it had been sawed off.

"What do you think it is?" asks Hogan.

She touches the end and says, "could be a beam from a structure."

Kerry kneels beside her and takes out a knife. He scratches the wood until it becomes light. Standing up, he says, "looks like it was burnt at some point. Maybe there was a fire, and the building it was supporting came crashing down, burying it."

"Just my thought, it's possible that it happened during the earthquake if there were fires."

They are quiet for a while thinking about what their discovery means.

"OK people, this is the first evidence we have of a construction of some kind. We need to take a sample of it with us for carbon dating," says Kerry.

"I'll get Laka's machete, we can use that to hack away a piece," says Hogan and walks away.

Kerry and Julia sit down on the ground and drink some water. Julia looks at the tree tops, high above her and says, "you know Kerry, you were right. I honestly didn't believe in the story, but this could be the evidence we need."

"Let's take it nice and easy, that piece of wood could be anything really, we won't know until we get it back to the States."

Hogan arrives at the camp site but can't see Laka anywhere. He calls out his name, but doesn't get a response. It's eerily quiet, no insects, no birds, just the heat vibrating in the air. He looks around and finds the machete on the ground on the outskirts of the camp. He makes a last walk around to see if he can figure out what made Laka leave, but finds nothing.

"Our guide is gone, but he was good enough to leave his machete," he says when he comes back to where Kerry and Julia are waiting.

"What do you mean, gone?" asks Julia.

"As in, he is not there. I called his name, but he didn't answer and there is no sign of a struggle. Maybe he got bored and went for a walk?"

"Maybe, but we won't know until he comes back," says Kerry.

Hogan hefts the machete in his hand and after taking aim chops off a few pieces from the beam. Kerry collects them and puts them in his pocket. Then he bends down and takes hold of it and moves it back and forth. It won't budge it's stuck hard in the ground.

"I think it is still attached to the original structure, and that's why it won't come out," he says letting go of it.

"Let's continue looking, we might find something else," says Julia.

They line up again and begin the search moving slowly and keeping their eyes to the ground. The find has boosted their energy and they keep looking until it begins to get dark, but find nothing else.

Back at the camp, they look for any signs of Laka, but find none.

"I think he went back and left us here," says Hogan while taking off his boots.

"Why would he do that?" asks Julia.

"Maybe something spooked him, this is a weird place you know, all silent and I don't know about you, but I have had a feeling all day that someone or something was watching us."

"Funny you should say that, I had the exact same feeling in the morning. I was walking along and when I stopped to tie my boots I thought I saw something move among the trees," says Kerry, sitting down next to Hogan.

"Did you see what it was?" asks Hogan.

"No, but I don't think it was an animal."

"I don't like it. We should head back to the river now while it's still light."

"No, it would be too dangerous when it gets dark. We could get lost or fall into a swamp. It's better to wait until the morning," says Kerry.

"I agree, let's make a fire and this night we share the same tent, and keep guard. It's important we stay together," says Hogan.

They look for dry wood and collect as much as they can, and as darkness falls Hogan lights the fire. He heats up a couple of cans and they eat some of the food they brought along. They don't speak much, each one in their own thoughts.

Just outside the ring of light, eyes are watching them and whispered words are said. A group of five hunters spread out in a ring around the Americans. They crawl forward like snakes on the damp ground edging closer and closer.

"I'm off to bed," says Julia and stretches her lean body.

"OK, I'll take first watch," says Hogan and adds, "get some rest Kerry, I'll wake you up around midnight."

Kerry nods and disappears into the tent after Julia. They shuffle around a bit and then they lie down and almost immediately fall asleep.

Outside Hogan throws more branches on the fire which flares up and he moves in closer. Not because it's cold, but the light makes him feel safer.

One of the hunters is three yards behind Hogan, he watches while the man moves a bit and then settles down. The machete is on his right side close enough to reach quickly. The hunter pulls a tube about two feet long and made of a wood from his side as slowly as possible. It is already loaded with a dart five inches long and thin as a needle. At one end there is a cotton type fiber, which gives it stability. He places the tube in front of his mouth and silently draws in air through his nose. When his lungs are full he takes careful aim and blows.

"Fucking mosquitos, all day and not a single insect, and now I get bitten," says Hogan and rubs the spot on the back of his neck where he just got bit. He looks into the fire, but keeps his hearing on maximum alert. While he looks at the flames they begin to slow down until it's just a wall of orange and red light. Suddenly he feels drowsy and when he tries to stand up, he loses his balance and falls to the side. His breathing is labored and saliva is dripping from the corner of his mouth. He can't move his limbs, so when a shadow kneels next to him and a face with a twitching nose appears in front of him, he can only scream inside his head.

One hunter ties the big man while the others circle the tent. One of them opens the flap and takes a quick look inside. He turns to his friends and nods his head,

one of them step forward and then both of them lever their blowguns at the two bodies inside. When the darts prick their skin, they don't even move, they just lay still.

As the three bodies are carried away into the jungle one of the hunters kicks the fire until it's gone, then he turns around and hurries after the others. He is smiling to himself and wonders what the old man will give him as a reward for bringing not one, but three humans to be sacrificed.

Chapter 23

Kerry comes out of unconsciousness with a splitting headache. His mouth is dry and he can hardly swallow. He manages to conjure up some saliva and coughs a few times.

He is lying on the ground, and he can't move his hands or feet. He looks around as much as he can and sees some light further away. He tries to shout, but only a horse whisper comes out. With some effort he manages to roll over on his stomach, but that doesn't make it better. He tries to roll back on his side again, but he is too weak.

Then he hears the drums, a slow rhythm coming from the light. He lies there listening, but the rhythm doesn't change. He tries to scream again and this time some sounds come out of his dry throat. He is just about to scream again when he hears a sound, it's a shuffling sound, like someone walking, but dragging their feet. It comes closer and suddenly he sees two pair of feet next to his face. Strong hands grip him by his elbows and pulls him up. He looks around and sees two dark skinned men. Their faces are narrow and their small noses twitch as they smell him.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

They don't answer him, but begin to lead him towards the light. He can't walk since his feet are tied and they have to carry and drag him along. They are a lot shorter than him, but strong.

When they reach the light Kerry sees it comes from a large space, like a room, but the ceiling is so high he can't see where it begins. He looks around and sees more people. They all look like the two men who have carried him there. They have loincloths and the women's breasts are bare. There are some children running around naked while their mothers call to them in a guttural language he doesn't understand. He guesses there are fewer than a hundred of them, some sitting down others standing. At the far end of the room there is a structure. It looks like a square about eight feet tall and ten feet wide. It must be anchored to the floor because he sees no ropes that could be supporting it.

The two men beside him, lead him towards it and as he comes closer a man stands up from where he must have been sitting next to the structure. He looks very old, with only a few strands of white hair coming off his head. His skin is grayish and he is walking with a cane made of some kind of white material. He is very short, no more than five feet which makes him even shorter than the rest of

his people. As he comes closer to the man Kerry sees that the cane he is leaning on is made of a human bone and wood. The two men let go of him and he falls to the ground where he lays at the feet of the old man. He looks down on him and then says something to the two younger men. One of them bends down and cuts the rope around his feet with a knife made of stone, flint maybe. Kerry manages to get up on his knees where he stays looking up at the old man.

The Indian studies him for what seems like an eternity, then says something in the same guttural language as the women used.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand you," says Kerry.

The man keeps watching him and talking, but when he realizes Kerry can't understand him he signals to the two men and they grab Kerry's elbows and stands him up. The old man walks around the structure and the two men follow with Kerry between them.

Directly behind the structure stands, what Kerry first believes are some kind of ornaments, maybe statues, and as he gets closer he realizes they are wood mannequins. The old man stops in front of one of them and points at it, then says something which Kerry doesn't understand. The old man gives an order and the two men lead Kerry closer, so close he is no more than a couple of feet to the closest mannequin. At first he doesn't understand what he is looking at but when it dawns on him his knees go weak and he manages to say, "Oh god."

The old man laughs and nods his head. Then he points at the mannequin with his cane and says something else.

Kerry is not listening; he is looking at what is in front of him. Hanging loosely over the wood mannequin is a skin. He recognizes the arms, and legs of a human being. There are a few tufts of what looks like black or brown hair on the head. The eyes are empty and in some parts the skin has dried up and looks brittle. He realizes it must have been here a long time. There is no smell of rotten flesh emanating from it.

The old man gives another order and the four of them walk around the structure where Kerry is thrown to the ground. The two men stand on either side of him, and the old man walks up to the center of the structure.

He begins to talk. His voice starts low and grows as he becomes more and more excited. Suddenly the crowd roars and the beat of the drums increase. Kerry feels movement behind him and when he turns around, he sees the crowd parting and two groups are walking towards him. As they get closer he sees two men hauling Julia between them and behind, two others are dragging Hogan along. When the first group passes, he tries to say something to Julia, but is hit in the back of the head and falls to the ground. The crowd has begun to chant to the rhythm of the drums and Kerry can see Julia's mouth open like if she was speaking, but he can't hear anything over the noise.

The two men throw her to the ground to the right of the structure and wait for their comrades to bring up Hogan. Once they arrive with him, they place him kneeling on the floor below the structure. Two men cut the ropes holding his arms behind his head, and then tie other ropes to each of his wrists. A third hangs a noose around his head. When they are done, they take careful aim and throw the ropes holding his wrists through rings made of a metal hanging almost half way up on either side of the structure, and the third man throws the rope from the

noose over the top beam. The old man calls out and the three men begin to pull on the ropes and as Kerry watches in disbelief, Hogan is hoisted first upon his legs, and then slowly up in the air. His arms are pulled away from his body towards the rings in the beams and his body weight is almost entirely held up by the noose. He tries to kick and struggle and his mouth opens and closes when he tries to scream. When he is hanging about three feet from the floor, the three men tie off the ropes on the beams.

Kerry looks up at his friend and he can see how his face is turning red from the lack of air and the blood in his head. He looks at the old man, but he only laughs and points at Hogan hanging from the structure.

While Kerry looks on, two men tie more ropes to Hogan's legs and then a third cut the ones tying them together. His legs are spread apart and tied to another set of rings in the structure. He is now hanging like a giant X from his neck.

The old man comes forwards and then checks the rope connected to the noose, he loosens it a little and Kerry can see that Hogan can now breathe a little. But what has also happened is that his body's weight is almost completely held up by his outstretched arms and legs.

Julia is on the floor looking up at Hogan, she can't help it, but she urinates and the warm liquid spills out on the floor. One of her guards sees it and laughs at her saying something to the old man who comes over to her. He bends down and dips his finger and then smells it with his twitching nose. He licks his finger and then says something to the guard who laughs.

Back in front of the structure he holds his arms high above his head, and when he lowers them slowly the noise and the drums die out and the room is silent, only the sobbing from Julia and the moans from Hogan can be heard.

He is floating in the air and there is an excruciating pain in his arms, shoulders neck and legs. Hogan opens his eyes a little and through the tears he can see a vast room. It's in semi darkness, only lit up by fires in the corners. He blinks a few times to clear the tears and sees Kerry sitting on the floor below him. Behind him there are scores of little brown people looking up at him in awe. Their eyes are wide open and some are slowly rocking back and forth. He hears a voice and looks down as much as he can. The rope around his neck makes it hard to see what's directly below him. He sees a small man looking out over the crowd and then he turns around looking up at him. He says something Hogan doesn't understand and two men carry a wooden bench from the left and places it behind Hogan. Then the man walks around and disappears from his view.

Julia watches as the little man steps up on the bench and now his head is just below the hanging Hogan's shoulders. He sticks his right hand out and one of the men who carried the bench gives him a long curved knife. It doesn't glimmer, and it looks to be rusted. The man says a few words and then places the knife against Hogan's skin at the nape of his neck. The room is completely silent, only the crackle from the fires can be heard. Tears roll down Julia's face as she looks up at Hogan. He has a vacant look on his face.

Kerry closes his eyes, he doesn't want to watch, but the guards beside him sees it and forces him to stand up and while two of them hold him in a vice a third guard comes up behind and uses his fingers to pry his eyelids open.

Then the old man moves the hand with the knife downwards, and Hogan screams. At first, it's only his voice echoing, but soon others join in and it doesn't take long before the entire room is humming along with the screams.

A pool of blood is forming below Hogan and at a signal from the old man two men climb up on the bench with him. They have smaller knives in their hands. Then Kerry hears a ripping sound, like if you tear a shirt apart. Hogan howls even louder and the response from the crowd is deafening. The entire room is howling with him.

Kerry manages a quick glimpse at Julia, she has passed out and is lying in the puddle of urine. Kerry's head is turned back to Hogan and when he tries to close his eyes the guard viciously rips them open again, forcing him to see his friend skinned alive. Julia comes too when she is hoisted up in the air. She looks down and to her right and a little in front of the structure is a red body. She realizes it's what is left of Hogan. Kerry is forced to look up at her and she can see tears coming down his cheeks, he mouths the words "I'm sorry" to her and she closes her eyes.

Kerry vomits when he hears the first scream emanating from her mouth, and then everything goes black and he slumps down.

The old man cuts along the spine of the young woman, her skin is soft under his touch and he smiles at his fortune. He had almost lost control of his tribe. Now he has three sacrifices in one night, and his power is restored. As the two men on either side of him begins to pull the young woman's skin away from her spine as he changes the angle and in turn cuts the skin so it comes off the flesh. He glances at the fat man on the floor, soon it will be his turn.

Kerry comes to just when the knife begins to cut into his skin, he is about to scream when there is a loud crack, he doesn't know where it came from, and then he hears it again, and suddenly everything crumbles and he falls forward.

Green Tree Present Day

Chapter 24

Hawk is watching TV late at night; well that's what he calls it anyway. He is smoking and drinking bourbon and the TV is on. His living room is hot and even though all his windows are open there is no breeze through the house. He is naked apart from his boxer shorts. He reaches for his glass and sips the amber colored liquid. It burns when it goes down and he smacks his lips.

During the last two days he has spent with Sandy Holmes showing her the town. Mrs. Winters found her a room to rent at one of her neighbors. Their son who is in Afghanistan built a small cabin on his parent's lot for himself, and they have let Holmes rent it for almost nothing.

He took her up to where Maria was found and they hiked in the woods around the area for an hour or so without finding anything interesting. This morning she had left for Seattle to meet some friends and would be back the next morning. Hawk likes her, she is smart and inquisitive. She had asked him about his work in LA, but hasn't asked about his ear or the scar around his neck and throat.

Hawk stands up and turns off the TV. Taking the glass and the bottle with him, he walks into the kitchen and leaves the glass in the sink and the bottle on a shelf.

While he brushes his teeth, his other hand runs along the scar tissue from the rope and he remembers how it felt like when the rope tightened and he didn't get any air. He shivers, spits and drinks some water from the faucet.

In his bed he lies naked with his hands behind his head, and then he reaches up and turns off the reading lamp above him. The room is in complete darkness, and there are no sounds. This is the time he hates. Before he falls asleep the memories of Vivian and Victor comes back. Sometimes he can see them lurking in the dark corners, staring at him with accusing eyes, "I'm sorry," he mumbles before turning into a fetal position. His body shudders while hot tears run down his cheeks.

Chapter 25

"Hawk!"

The sound of his name comes through to him and he opens his eyes.

"Hawk, open the door."

His body is shiny from the thin film of sweat covering him. He stands up, but has to hold on to the wall. Shit, too much to drink last night, he thinks, while trying to keep from having to sit down again. His stomach makes threatening movements and he quells a need to puke. He shakes his head and looks for something to wear.

Grabbing his jeans and a shirt he quickly dresses and then walks barefoot through to the living room and opens the front door.

The sun is so bright he has to step back and cover his eyes. Christ, I'm turning into a vampire, he thinks while trying to focus on the person standing before him.

"Rough night, Chief?" asks Holmes and steps inside.

"Uh-huh, something like that."

She walks into the kitchen and he follows with heavy steps. He pulls out a chair and sits down, resting his head on his arms, all he wants is to go back to sleep. He can hear her pouring water in a pot and then the sounds of cups and the fridge opens and closes. Silences, then the sound of an egg being broken and soon the smell of fried egg and bacon float in the air.

Holmes sits down opposite Hawk and looks at him. His hair is all over the place, and there is the smell of alcohol coming from his pores. She reaches across the table and shakes his shoulder lightly.

"Hey, wake up. Breakfast is on its way. We need to talk."

He lifts up his head and looks at her through bloodshot eyes. God, she is cute he thinks, and then his head falls back on his arms.

"Hawk, you need to pull yourself together," she says while getting up.

She takes a plate and finds a fork in a drawer. She places the egg and bacon in front of him and goes back to the stove and makes a cup of instant coffee. When she places it close to his nose, she finally gets a reaction.

"That smells good," he says in a dreamy voice.

"Christ, how much did you drink last night?"

She steps back and sits down on the chair again. One hand grabs the coffee cup and he raises his head, and slowly takes a few sips. Then a couple more and finally he sits up straight looking at her.

"What time is it?"

"Just after nine. I went by the station, but Mrs. Winters told me you hadn't come in yet, so I figured you were still at home."

He looks at the plate and picks up the fork, using it to cut the egg. He eats slowly without talking and when he is done, he pushes the plate away and takes the coffee cup.

"What did you want?" he asks after drinking some of the hot black liquid.

"On the way back from Seattle I had an idea, and I was hoping to run it by you and maybe Collins and Friedman too."

"Uh-huh, what kind of an idea?"

"Well, it's easier to show you. I suggest you take a shower and get dressed, I'll wait outside."

He slowly stands up while holding on to the table with both hands. His legs feel wobbly, but the food and strong coffee have cleared his head a bit. He smiles at her and attempts a weak wave before slowly crossing the kitchen and heading to the bathroom.

Holmes washes the cups and the plate and then walks outside into the bright sunlight. She sits on a small bench in the garden and waits for him. She knows he has a serious drinking problem, her father had it too. She could tell the signs from the first time they met. His hands were trembling and he had this fragrance of alcohol fumes coming from him. He wasn't drunk, but he had been drinking the night before. She closes her eyes and turns her face to the sun, the rays burn her face, but she likes the feeling.

Hawk, takes a hot and then cold shower. Afterwards he dresses in a clean shirt, jeans and straps on his service pistol. Checking himself in the mirror, he is OK with what he sees and taking his keys from the small desk by the front door he walks outside.

She is beautiful where she sits on the bench, she is wearing slacks and sandals, her hair is in a bun on top of her head and a few strands of hair falls down on either side of her face. She has a light make up and a white blouse. It's so thin he can see her bra under it.

"OK, I'm among the living, let's go, " he says.

She turns towards him and puts on a pair of big sunglasses she has kept in her hand. She stands and walks over to him and asks, "are you feeling any better?"

"A little," he says and unlocks his car with a remote. Inside, he leans over and opens the glove compartment and takes out a big bottle of Tylenol. He shakes out three tablets and swallows them dry.

"Give me twenty minutes, and I'll be perfectly fine," he says grinning at her.

"We'll see, call Friedman and Collins and tell them to meet us at the Library."

When they arrive at the Library, the two deputies are already waiting for them.

"Morning Chief, " they say in unison.

"Yeah, good morning. How come you got here so fast?" asks Hawk.

"I was at the station and Collins was driving back from the Anderson place."

Turning to Collins he asks, "what happened?"

They begin walking up the steps into the building and Collins says, "they reported a burglary, so I went over and had a look."

"Did you find anything?"

"Broken glass, and the Andersons saying they were missing some bottles from their bar. I figure it was kids looking for free booze."

Hawk has to stop half way and take a breath, the others stop too, and Friedman asks, "are you OK Chief?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine. I had one of those nights, you know."

The two deputies look down and nod their heads.

Holmes is curious how they can be so calm about their boss drinking so much and almost feel sorry for him.

Inside the Library they find it empty apart from Mrs. Sweldon, the librarian.

"What can I do you for you Chief?" she asks with a smile.

"I don't know, it's the young lady here who needs something, we have just been invited."

Mrs. Sweldon turns to Holmes and asks, "yes?"

"I need large scale maps of the area and a computer with internet access."

The librarian nods her head and gestures for them to come along. They follow her down a corridor between high shelves filled with books. Holmes looks at some of the titles and most of them has to do with wildlife and camping. She realizes she is not in the Library of Congress, but the lack of classic literature is shocking. She leans close to Collins and asks, "don't people read books about things other than wildlife?"

He chuckles and says, "sure, some of us read Playboy, but to be honest with you, people around here just are not into reading a lot. They have grown up with the wilderness on their doorsteps and that's what they like."

She shakes her head, she loves to read. Back home, she doesn't have a TV, just her computer and shelves full of books.

They arrive at the end of the corridor and there are several big tables in a semi circle.

"We use this for different clubs that we have here in town, " Mrs. Sweldon says to Holmes.

"Oh, like book clubs, maybe?"

Mrs. Sweldon laughs and says, "I wish, no, we have the Salmon Club, the Rifle Club, the ATW Club and a few more, and they all get together here. I think it will suit your purpose. Over there are a couple of computers and I will bring you the maps you need."

"Thank you, is there a printer?"

"Sure, under the first computer, just make sure there is paper, if not, let me know, and I will bring you some."

She walks off and the group makes themselves comfortable. The deputies take off their night sticks and flashlights and place them on a table. Hawk sits down in a chair and stretches his arms and legs. Holmes turns on the computer with the printer and while it boots up, she pushes two tables together.

"Here we go," says Mrs. Sweldon when she comes back holding a big rolled up map in her hand.

"This should do it, just return it when you are finished." She gives the map to Holmes and walks away leaving them alone.

Holmes places the roll on the two tables and using the night sticks and the flash lights she anchors the corners so it won't roll up again.

"Like I said to Hawk before, I had an idea last night, which I would like you to consider."

"Shoot," says Collins, who is standing next to her leaning over the table.

Holmes takes a pencil from a holder next to the computer and uses it to point on the map.

"We are here, and this is the stretch of road between us and the Canadian border. Somewhere along it fifteen people have disappeared. The questions are; did they all disappear at the same place or did they get taken at different locations?"

No one talks, Hawk stands up from his chair and comes closer looking down at the map.

"Well, that's less than 50 miles, you could drive it in under an hour," he says.

"Exactly and most of the way it runs along the Colombia River, and a river is a good place to get rid of bodies. How deep is it?" asks Holmes looking at Hawk.

"About 40 feet," says Collins.

"OK, imagine you need to dump a few bodies, if you had a small boat or a canoe you could go out at night and just drop them overboard after weighing them down," she says.

Hawk scratches his head, and looks at Collins and Friedman.

"What do you think, you guys have lived here all your lives?"

The deputies look at each other and then Friedman says, "I guess it's a possibility, but the road passes close to the river and there is not much of concealment, I mean the forest doesn't grow all the way to the river bank, there are several hundred yards of empty space between."

"He is right, plus, there is traffic all day and night, not much, maybe, compared to the big highways, but there is a steady stream of cars and trucks. But, that doesn't mean it can't be done." adds Collins.

"Let's say the killer dumps the bodies in the river, but where does he kill them? Close to the road or does he take them somewhere where he can be alone with them?" asks Hawk, feeling a bit better.

"That's the big question, what kind of a killer is he? Does he kill them directly or does he torture them, or does he rape the women, we don't know yet?" says Holmes.

They are quiet for a while, each in their own thoughts. Holmes sits down in front of the computer she turns it on.

"I'm going to print some maps of the area from Google. Then I will tell you my thoughts."

The men settle down around the table and when she is done Holmes sits down and places a few prints on the large map.

"I think he or she takes the victims deeper into the woods, and when he or she is done with them dumps the bodies in the river."

"What makes you come to that conclusion?" asks Hawk leaning in closer.

"Remember we talked about it possibly being a truck driver?"

The three of them nod.

"Well, a truck driver would have to park his or her truck at least for a while to grab his victim, and if there is more than one it would take longer time, higher risk of being seen.

"Why do you say he or she?" asks Collins.

"Because we can't be sure if it's a man or a woman we are dealing with."

"The little I know about serial killers is that they are mostly white males between thirty and fifty, and usually have above average intelligence," says Hawk.

Holmes shrugs her shoulders, "OK, let's say he is a white male. Still, the truck guy doesn't feel right to me."

"What if he kills them in the truck, I mean, he knocks them over the head, and places them in the truck? Then drives to a more secluded area where he kills them," says Friedman.

"That's a possibility we have to take into account," says Holmes, nodding her head.

"Why do you think he takes them somewhere else?"

Holmes looks at Hawk and says, "because of what happened to Maria and how you found her. She was killed by a poisonous crossbow bolt, and she was found at one of the few places where the forest grows almost all the way up to the road."

"So?" asks Hawk, and the other two look at her.

"I think he hunts them."

They stare at her and then Collins says, "why?"

"For the same reason people hunt animals, for sport."

Chapter 26

Kerry is in the basement of his cabin. Soft music is playing from a portable CD player and he is changing the blades on his scalpels. When he was taught the art of skinning by Maguya they used a simple long bladed knife that had been with the tribe for years. It was hard to keep sharp and the skin often broke because they had to pull more than cut. These scalpels make it much easier to separate the skin from the flesh.

He puts his scalpels away and walks up the stairs. Looking at the mannequins he starts with the two teenage girls by the dinner table. He carries them down to the cellar and leans them against the wall. Then he goes back up and does the same with the others until they are all against the wall. He steps back and looks at

them, he smiles and walks up to Katie and arranges her hair a little. He has to hide them because his wife and son are coming the next day. He will go back down to town and the following day they will drive up together and spend a day or two in the cabin. He will take his son fishing and his wife will potter around her garden. He will play the happy father and the adoring husband, just as he has done every day since he came back.

He sighs, he feels he can't breathe sometimes, all the people around him, the cars, the radios, the TV's making noise. He wants to be back in the jungle, moving in the shadows with the other hunters, looking for prey, kill, tear and listening to the sound of skin ripping apart. He has his hideout, but he has to be careful, even though his mind tells him he needs to kill more. Is it his mind, or another voice telling him? Sometimes he doesn't know.

He looks at his watch, it's time to go. He turns off the lights in the cellar and up in the cabin he makes a last check that everything is as it should be. He changes the sheets in their bed so his wife doesn't ask about the smell. He opens the windows and then makes himself a cup of tea and takes it outside. Sitting on the porch sipping his tea he sees a deer coming out of the woods. He can't understand how people can hunt such a beautiful animal, what's the point? His phone rings, and he looks at the screen. It's the number of his house.

"Yes."

"Hi honey, when will you be back?" his wife asks in a sweet voice.

"In a couple of hours."

"OK, don't be late, I'll have dinner ready for you."

Kerry puts the phone back in his pocket. Dinner, he remembers how he and the hunters could go days without food when they were looking for their next sacrifice. All they did was drink water and eat some fruit they found on trees and bushes. He laughs to himself remembering the stomach pains and diarrhea he would have during the first month before his body got used to the new foods.

He finishes his tea and takes the cup inside and washes it. Then he closes the windows, and sprays some disinfectant with a flower smell to it in all the rooms. He double checks the door to the cellar and it's locked.

On the drive back to town, he whistles and smokes a cigarette. When he passes the police station he sees Chief Hawk and his deputies walking up the path and with them is a young woman. Kerry slows down and looks at her. She is beautiful, her skin has that luscious glow to it, and just as he passes, she turns her head, and looks at him. Even though he is almost fifty yards from her, he gets goosebumps, and for a second he has a vision of the young woman hanging from his structure, while he is running his scalpel down her spine.

Chapter 27

"Who was that?" asks Holmes looking after the truck driving away.

"Mr. Kerry, a strange man, I feel kind of sorry for him," says Collins.

"Why?"

"Well, he used to be a professor at a big university, but during a trip to the Amazon he and the two students he was traveling with got lost."

"Well, he is back now, so they must have found him."

Collins nods his head and then says, "yeah, they did find him, after three years."

"What? He spent three years alone in the jungle, and just walked out?"

Hawk comes back down the path, "what's the hold up?"

"Collins was telling me about Mr. Kerry, who spent three years in the Amazon."

"Yeah, amazing. Imagine being alone in that godforsaken place for such a long time, and then you are found."

Holmes shakes her head, "it would make me a little strange too, I suppose."

"Let's go inside," says Hawk and leads the way.

"We agree the perpetrator must have a base in the forest along the I25?" asks Hawk.

They are in his office. He is behind his desk, Collins and Holmes are sitting in front of him and Friedman is leaning against the door.

"Yes, the question is, how do we find it?" asks Friedman.

"That's where these print out's come into play. Using Google maps I could zoom in on an area and look for buildings. These are just samples, but as you can clearly see there are small buildings here, here and here," she says pointing at three white squares close to the river.

"Sure, they are boathouses I guess," says Collins.

"The point is, if we start from where Maria was found and move inland following a straight line into the forest there is a possibility we might find some kind of construction, maybe a cabin, a hut, anything where our killer could be."

Hawk smiles and says, "the group Maria belonged to were missing for three days. In that time you can move quite a long-distance even through the forest. We are talking a very large area to search."

"I thought about that. I think we should draw a line from where the group entered the forest and from where Maria was found, where those lines cross, that's the furthest we should look, I'm sure we will find the killers camp within that triangle."

"OK, use Collins, Friedman and I need to get out and do our duty, we will see you back here at 5P.M."

When Hawk and Friedman has left, Holms asks Collins, "what duty?"

He chuckles and says, "they are going to the lake to check so there is no underage drinking."

"Oh, I see."

"At least that's the excuse we use for resting our eyes on some beautiful young women in bikinis."

"I knew it; you are all a bunch of perverts."

"Just kidding, they are actually checking on the kids, but they will also drive around town, and up and down I25 for a few hours. Anyway, we can have Mrs. Winters to print out the maps we need. I'll get a couple of magnifying glasses, so you can live up to your name."

"What name?"

Collins grins at her and says, "Holmes, I'll be your Watson."

"Very funny."

Hawk is behind the wheel in the department's only SUV. It's an old Ford Bronco that should be replaced, but there is no money right now. He changes gear and starts the climb up the slope which continues for a mile and a half before it begins its descent. He picks up the radio and calls Collins.

"Where are you?" he asks.

After a bit of static Collins answers, "at the gas station south side of town."

Hawk smiles, there is only one gas station in town, and it's on the South side.

"Seen anything interesting?"

"No, just the usual tourists and Mr. Lawrence out on his horse."

"Mr. Lawrence?"

"Yeah, you know the old Canadian Mountie who moved here a few years ago."

"Of course I know who he is, but I thought his horse died last year."

"I guess he bought a new one. How's the lake?"

Hawk who has just reached the summit before driving down stops the Bronco and takes out a pair of binoculars from the glove compartment. He scans the beach and then says, "same as always this time of year, packed and a lot of hot women."

"You know Chief, it's unfair that you should have to strain your eyes at your age. It's better if I check the beach in the future."

Hawk chuckles and says, "that's exactly why I do it, the women feel safe with an older man watching over them, not some young buck that easily gets distracted by the first bikini he sees."

He can hear Collins laugh and then his voice comes over the radio again, "over and out, I'll see you later."

Hawk puts the Bronco in gear and slowly drives down the road. It twists and turns all the way down, he is lucky and no one is coming up the other way. If there would be another car he or the other driver would have to back up so the other could pass.

He parks by the little kiosk, and waves to Jenny and Lauren. They are Mrs. Winters nieces and works in the kiosk, selling sodas and ice cream. They are both in their mid twenties and he is sure most of the men come here to look at them, not for the actual swimming.

The beach is no more than a hundred yard long, and the water isn't especially clear, but since the lake is shallow it maintains a nice warm temperature. Hawk has swam as late as mid October and the water was still nice.

He walks among the sunbathers and chit chats with a few people he knows. He checks on a couple of groups of teenagers making sure they have no beer in their coolers and is just about to return to the Bronco when he hears someone call his name. He turns around and sees Mrs. Walker waving at him from under a tree on the edge of the open area.

He walks over and when he is within talking distance he says, "Hi Mrs. Walker."

She is a good looking woman in her late forties and she is one of the teachers at the local school. Her husband died a few years ago in a car accident and now she lives alone with her teenage son.

"Hello Chief, I just remembered something when I saw you walk by, and I thought it might interest you."

She taps the blanket she is sitting on indicating he should join her which he does. Without looking at him, but keeping her eyes on the water in the distance she asks, "did you ever find out who killed that Latin girl on I25?"

"No, we have no clues to who did it."

"Mm, that's what I thought. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I heard from someone that she was hit by an arrow of some kind and it was poisoned."

Hawk looks at her in surprise, "how do you know that?"

"Oh, you know, us women getting together to gossip. Anyway, I'm not telling you how I know; all I want is for you to confirm it."

Hawk thinks about it and decides he can do what she wants and says, "yes, what you have heard is correct."

She turns back to him and her eyes are dark blue, almost violet, "before my husband died, we took a trip around South America and one of the destinations was the Amazon River. We took a small cruise and spent a couple of days on it stopping at villages along the way. It was very interesting, apart from the mosquitoes."

"OK, and what does that have to do with Maria?" asks Hawk a bit irritated.

"Well, in one village there was like a small museum, actually it was more like a mud hut with a sign, but the gentlemen who ran it, an old German, was very nice and he showed us some of the weapons the tribes of Amazon use. Almost all of them use some kind of venom or poison together with a dart or arrow."

"OK, we know there was Curare in Maria's blood."

"Ah, you see. Now, who around here has been to the Amazon lately?"

When she asks the question she looks at him and raises her eyebrows.

Hawk shakes his head, he knows who she means.

"C'mon Mrs. Walker, why would Mr. Kerry be running around the forest shooting crossbow bolts at teenagers?"

"I have no idea, but it is your job to investigate, isn't it, Chief?"

Hawk stands up and is about to say goodbye when she takes his hand and with a seductive smile she asks, "when are we having dinner together Chief?"

"I'll let you know," he says and walks away.

Back inside the Bronco he smiles, Mrs. Walker is a very attractive woman, but she is a little complicated to be with. He has heard through the grapevine about a man who dated her for a while, and she drove him nuts wanting him to dress, and talk like her dead husband. He puts the SUV in gear and drives up the slope. He takes a look at his watch and sees it's time to go back to the station. Maybe Holmes and Friedman have found something interesting. Holmes, now she's a different story. He could have dinner with her every night of the week, and maybe throw in a couple of breakfasts in bed. To bad she is much younger than him, and after seeing him at his worst this morning, she will assume he is damaged goods, which he can only agree with.

Chapter 28

Becky is watching her husband playing with Danny. They are on the floor in front of the TV in the living room and Danny is beating his father in some kind of Formula 1 game. Sometimes she wishes he had stayed away and never came home. Things are so different now from what they used to be. Before they would go out to dinner or for long walks, now he is either in the cabin or locked in his study typing on another book. She sighs and goes back to the kitchen to wash the dishes.

Kerry is bored, but he has to play with Danny, that's what normal fathers do, don't they? He glances at his son and wonders how he would do in the jungle among wild animals, snakes, spiders and other more or less dangerous creatures. He remembered the children in the tribe, how they from a young age, were taught how to use the blow darts, bows and arrows and knives. Every day in the jungle is a day you have to survive. He decides Danny would last less than a week. Becky would maybe last a bit longer, since she is smart and has a lot of common sense. The thought of selling the house and moving did cross his mind when he first came back, but then he realized it could never happen.

"Honey, would you like some coffee?" asks Becky from the kitchen.

"That would be lovely, just let me finish this race and I'll be right with you."

"Oh, C'mon dad, we have only played for an hour."

"And you have beaten me every time, " says Kerry chuckling.

In the kitchen he finds Becky at the table with two steaming cups and a plate of chocolate chip cookies. He takes one and they melt in his mouth, she is a fantastic cook he has to admit.

"What time do you want to leave tomorrow?" she asks.

"After breakfast I suppose, maybe around 9A.M."

"OK, I better put Danny to bed or he will not wake up."

They sit in silence for a while and when she has finished her coffee she places the cup in the sink and he can hear her try to convince Danny it's time to go to bed.

Kerry stays in the kitchen and looks out into the night through the windows. Sometimes he has this crazy thought about killing them, and just taking off in the middle of the night. It would take at least a day or two before someone would realize they are dead. He would be long gone by then. The problem is that he would need money, and selling the house would be one way to get some serious cash. He has money from the royalties his book is making. Thinking about his book makes him depressed. It's all lies and half truths. It was Becky's idea to write it and at the time he thought it would be a good idea. Then after writing the first page he realized he could never tell the truth about what had happened to him. No one would believe him. If they did, he would get in serious trouble. One evening they were watching an old movie on TV and it was about a professor who makes up an entire tribe using his girlfriend and kids. He films them in his backyard and people actually believe this is a missing tribe. He decides to do the same thing, so the next day he begins to write again and using a fake friendly tribe that take care of the poor white man he writes a best seller. The only truths in the book are the settings and the wildlife scenes. He gets invited to Talk Shows and makes some good money along the way, but he has this sour taste in his mouth when he thinks about those years.

When he came back from the Amazon he analyzed what he had gone through, and when he realized he needed the rush of the flaying and began planning and building the cabin he read a few books about psychology. They were about hostages and people who had been kept in captivity for long periods of time. He had no illusion about what had happened to him in the jungle during those years, he had become one with the tribe, what he first thought was barbaric behavior became comfort and security. In the books he read the authors often talked about the Stockholm Syndrome, where the hostage or the captive feels with their captors, and slowly forms a bond with them. At one point the captive believes he or she is safe with his captor against the evil forces outside, usually the police. In Kerry's case it was not the police, it was the jungle itself. He had to stay safe and the only way to do that was to become one of them. The only problem was, he loved it. The death of Hogan and Julia slowly vanished from his memories, and even during those times he would walk up and look at their drying skins hanging from the wood mannequins he felt nothing. That would have been the old Kerry, the new and improved Kerry was a hunter, a warrior, who could move through the jungle like a Jaguar and kill without blinking an eye. He was thin, but strong, and all his fat had disappeared because of healthier food, and much exercise in the form of hunting. Physically, he had never felt as good as he did during those years. Now he had gained more weight, but he was still impressive, and he knew it.

He leaves the cup on the table and walks up the stairs to his and Becky's bedroom, she is already in bed and he can hear from her breathing she is sleeping. Thank god for that, he thinks. They don't make love the way they used to, and it's all because of him. Sex just doesn't seem so exciting anymore, he doesn't have the urges he used to, now he gets off pulling the skin down the back of a human being, his manhood goes hard and sometimes he actually climaxes while doing it. It doesn't matter if the victim is a man or a woman, it's the sound and the feeling of doing it that turns him on. He remembers how some of the tribe's men would either masturbate or have sexual intercourse with a woman while the Old Man flayed a victim. All eyes were turned towards the wood construction, but in the silence before the screaming began, Kerry had heard the heavy breathing of sex all around him.

Chapter 29

"Here are the Pizzas," says Friedman, walking into Hawk's office carrying two large boxes. He places them on a chair he has brought with him and the others take a break from what they are doing.

The office is in a mess. There are half empty coffee cups everywhere and the walls are filled with prints of the forest around the area Maria was found. On each wall there is a note saying what area is being shown and what relation it has to the I25. There are three laptops all connected to one printer and Collins, Friedman and Holmes have been on them for hours. Hawk has mostly sat quiet at his desk

thinking. It's almost eleven at night and they have decided to eat and have a last brainstorming session before they go home to get some rest.

"OK people, what do we know?" asks Hawk, sitting up a bit straighter.

"Friedman and I have spent hours on the blowups we have printed, but haven't found a single construction that could be used as a hideout. We haven't found any building at all," says Holmes with a sigh.

"I think we are barking up the wrong tree here Chief, the idea of it being someone local and keeping a hideout sounded good in the beginning, but I'm not so sure anymore," says Friedman, biting into a large slice of pizza.

"Meaning what? We are back to truck drivers?" asks Collins, sitting down on Hawk's desk.

"I don't believe in the truck driver theory, I still like the local mad man better," says Hawk.

"But we haven't found anything yet, and there are not many more places to look," says Holmes.

"Maybe we are looking at this from the wrong angle. We assume the hideout can be seen from the air, what if it's hidden? What if the killer has disguised it and you can't see it from above?" asks Hawk.

The others are quiet chewing on their pizzas, then Collins says, "OK, that is a possibility, but how will we find it if it's hidden?"

"He supposedly killed Alex Read and three other kids, plus Maria, and we found no trace of them during the search. He has to be able to move fast at night in the forest. Imagine for a second that you have just killed five people. He obviously found four of them, but what did he do with them?" asks Hawk.

More silence, then Friedman says, "cut them up, and spread the body parts around, or even took them to one single hiding place."

Hawk nods and says, "If it was me, I would collect all the bodies and bring them to one place, there I would cut them up and bury them, deep. Remember, there was at least twelve hours between Maria was found and the search party was on its way. That's plenty of time to cut up and get rid of few bodies."

"Sure, but what about the weight of a dead body, and that night it was raining. What kind person can carry four wet bodies for maybe miles at night in the rain and then chop them up and hide the parts?" asks Holmes

"I think we all have to think about that, I'm going home, we meet here again tomorrow morning, and I want each of you to come up with a profile of a person that could do what Holmes just described."

Holmes stays behind with Hawk to help him tidy the office, they collect all the coffee cups and the pizza cartons and put them in big trash bags, when they are done Hawk turns off the light and heads out.

In the parking lot Holmes stop before getting in her car and says, "are you serious about believing in my theory, or did you just say so to make me feel better?"

Hawk thinks back to what Mrs. Walker said. He decided against telling the others, wanting them to keep their minds open and he himself does not actually believe Kerry could be their killer. He just doesn't match what Hawk new.

"Yeah, I do believe in what you think."

She smiles and opens the car door, "hey Chief, no drinking tonight, we have an early morning tomorrow."

He grins and says, "I'm too old to change, but I promise I will be clearheaded and in the office before you."

On the drive back home Hawk makes a detour and drives by Kerry's house. The lights are turned off and he continues down the road. At the end he turns around and heads back the same way he came.

That night he doesn't watch his family on TV, he does have a few drinks, but he makes it an early night. Suddenly catching a killer seems more important than thinking about the past and self-pity.

Chapter 30

"Do you smell it?" asks Becky once they are inside the cabin.

"No, what are you talking about?" asks Kerry putting down their bags on the floor in the hallway.

Instead of answering Becky heads into the kitchen and checks the fridge and freezer. Then she walks around the living room and in and out of the bedrooms.

"I swear it smells a bit like rotten meat. I thought you had forgotten something in the fridge, or maybe a mouse had died in here.

"I can't smell anything," says Kerry and he isn't lying. The cabin smells like it always does to him, but it could be that Becky, not being used to being there so often, has caught on to something.

He opens the windows and asks her, "where is Danny?"

"I guess he is out back, he wanted to use his pellet gun," she says while carrying in the shopping bags to the kitchen.

Kerry walks outside and finds Danny around the corner. His pellet gun is leaning against the cabin wall and he is placing some pine cones on a big stone some ten yards away.

"Watch this dad," he says, kneeling on the ground and aiming at the cones.

He shoots and one of the cones fall over, he looks up at his father and says, "see, I'm a good."

"That you are, keep on practicing, I'll help your mother."

After putting the food away Becky changes into a pair of old jeans and a shirt. She heads for the shed where she picks up a few tools and then walks over to her garden. Kerry is watching her from the porch with a cup of coffee in his hand. The day is not too hot, and there are no clouds as far as he can see. The birds are singing and he can hear the buzz of insects. He sighs and wonders if this can be forever, of course not. It has to end somehow, and probably bad.

He walks into his bedroom and takes off his clothes, when he opens the wardrobe which has two mirrors, one on each door, to take out some working clothes his eyes catches the sight of his back. He stops and looks at himself in the reflection from the mirrors. He angles the door, he is holding a bit and he can see the line from his neck down to his buttocks. Under the lines is a scar, it runs

along his spine, but his family can't see it. Before he left Brazil he had a tattoo artist cover it under the line he also had the stitches tattooed into his wrists and ankles. When people ask him about them, he tells them it was a way to show gratitude to the tribe that found him. He closes his eyes and his mind drift back in time.

PART 3

**The Amazon.
Four years earlier.**

Chapter 31

He watches the big centipede crawl over his hand while he is lying completely still. Just as it is about to crawl onto a leaf, it changes its mind and walks up his arm. The little feet tickle his skin as the insect moves up towards his shoulder and from there over and onto his back. It tickles something fierce, but he has to lie still. He looks to his left by only moving his eyes, and there is Taku, watching him. He turns his eyes back at what they were both watching before the insect showed up.

They are hidden in the foliage on a slope and below them there are two young Indian women washing and bathing in a small river. They are about two days march from the sunken town. Kerry has been with the tribe for more than two years now. He still thinks in English and dreams in the same language, but he now speaks their native language as well. It's a very simple language, the pronunciation was hard to learn, but once he got it, it was easy to learn the words. He doesn't miss Hogan or Julia, they are just an old memory, of a different time and a different Kerry.

When the wood structure broke under his weight the old man assumed the god was not pleased with his selection of sacrifices. Luckily for Kerry the old man decided he was a gift from the god and that he should be taken care off.

The first months were hard on Kerry. He still missed Hogan and Julia and hated the tribe for what they had done to them. He would sit in a dark corner just watching the little Indians scurrying around like roaches. No one approached him, and no one talked to him, it was like if he didn't exist to them.

The old man would let him out into the sunlight once in a while, and the way he was kept under control was by binding one of his feet to a pole they drove into the ground, and then let him walk in circles. Kerry enjoyed the fresh air and the light, but one day he stepped on a snake and it bit him. When he screamed and fell down, one of the younger men happened to be close by and came running. He quickly killed the snake with a branch and then carried Kerry down underground. They were met by a couple of women who began screaming after the young man had told them what had happened. They quickly carried Kerry to a fire close by and one of the women disappeared, but came back with an old woman who knelt next to Kerry. She took his leg and put it over her's, and then she inspected the bite and said something to the young man who ran up to the surface again.

The pain was horrible, Kerry felt like someone had lit his blood on fire, and he screamed. When the young man came back, he was carrying several kinds of

plants. The old woman quickly threw them into a clay pot with water which she placed over the fire. A few minutes later there was a sickening smell coming from the brew. She took the pot from the fire and poured half of the liquid along Kerry's leg, from the knee downwards. He screamed again as the boiling br burned his skin. Then the old woman said something and the young man forced Kerry's mouth open and the liquid was poured into his mouth, and that's when he passed out.

When he woke up his throat was hurting, and he could hardly swallow. The burning pain in his leg was gone, but his skin felt like if he had been in the sun for hours. After a while a young Indian girl knelt beside him and with careful movements spread some salve on his leg. Then she gave him a clay cup with water, and when he drank it, he tasted something sweet in it. It must have been some sedative because she had hardly moved away before Kerry felt his eyes close and he drifted off to sleep.

He spent a week resting his leg and eventually he could stand up and move around. When he felt strong enough, he ventured up into the sun. One day he met the old man. He was sitting in the shade under a big leaf and waved him over. When Kerry sat down next to him, he began to talk, and didn't stop for a long time. Kerry didn't understand a word what he said, but he felt it was something important. When the old man stood up, he put a hand on Kerry's head and looked him straight in the eyes, then said something and simply walked away.

After that, life changed drastically for Kerry, he was no longer teetered at a pole, but could walk around as he pleased. The hunters would watch him with respect in their eyes. One day one of the young men took Kerry by the arm and led him into the jungle. After walking a few yards the young man whose name was Taku held up a bamboo tube and a small dart. He showed Kerry how to use the weapon and gave it to him to try, and so began a close friendship that grew out of respect for each other. Taku taught him their language and customs, they spent hours practicing with the bamboo tubes and bow and arrow until Kerry was as good as any of the other hunters. During this time Kerry lost a lot of weight and after just a few months his skin was dark brown, tanned by the sun and muscled. He could run for extended periods of time, jumping from logs to branches and down on boulders, never stopping to catch his breath.

One evening Maguya, who Kerry learned was Taku's grandfather, his own father had been killed a few years earlier during a raid, sat Kerry down by the wooden structure and began telling the story behind it.

The more he learned, the more amazed Kerry became. The tribe had been around since the time of the Conquistadors and that's when they began their human sacrifice. It all began as a way to scare off the invaders. In the beginning they would catch a few invaders and skin one of them, and letting the others go to be a warning to others that may come after. This didn't work so they just began to kill all of them. The Chief of the tribe at the time was old and very wise. He figured that if they could warn the invaders off before they even came close to their town, they might be left alone. He ordered mannequins to be built and on these they would put the skin of the soldiers they killed. The plan worked and they were left alone, but the people of the tribe thought that their god was the one who had

helped them, and now he needed human sacrifice to keep the invaders away, and so began the constant hunt for new skins.

Kerry understood in the back of his mind that these people were primitive and could not be trusted. But at the same time he felt an enormous gratitude for them and even their evil god for letting him live. As time passed, he became increasingly sure that what had made the construction break and by doing so saved his life was a miracle granted by their god. Maybe he was meant to one day leave and return to his home to bring with him the knowledge he had and bring it into modern civilization.

Chapter 32

The centipede eventually leaves and Kerry and Taku go back to watch the women below them. Through sign language they agree to an attack and move away silently, close to the ground.

Kerry is close to the woman furthest away from the river and he aims his bamboo tube and sends the dart on its way. A couple of seconds later the woman is on the ground. She twitches a little and then she is still. Taku has done the same and the two of them hoist one of the women each up on to their shoulders and begin the two day march back to the underground village.

The first time Kerry was invited to cut the first long incision he was terrified. He had watched it being done on a few occasions, but doing it himself made him shake with terror. Not because he was afraid of death or killing, he was afraid he would make a mistake and damage the skin.

The old man invited him up onto the bench and gave him the knife, and a smile. Kerry looked around the body of the young woman he had brought the previous day and below him, he could see his tribe, his family and his friends look up at him. Taku is standing in the front row and gave him a reassuring smile. The others nod their heads as the drums began and soon the room was filled with their beats.

The woman before him can't be more than a teenager; the other is most likely her mother since they look alike. She will be scarified the next evening. The one hanging has gone quiet now, after screaming and crying since she was hung.

Kerry took a hold of the skin in the nape of her neck and pulls it upwards making it tight against the flesh. Then he placed the point of the knife under his hand and pressed hard until the knife penetrated the skin. The young woman gasped as the first trickle of blood rolled down her back. Kerry took a deep breath and in one movement using all his strengths and weight he cuts her open all the way down to her buttocks.

The crowd cheered and the drums increased the speed of their rhythm. The old man patted him on the back and together they began to flay the girl. Kerry pulled at the skin while the other man made short or long cuts depending on what was needed. It didn't take long before the skin of her torso and arms were hanging around her waist. Kerry and the old man stepped down from the bench and

continued their work until the girl has been stripped of her skin and is hanging as a bloody lump of meat from the ropes.

That night Taku presented his sister to Kerry, saying that she is his to have. She is a gift that Kerry has earned, and he gladly took the young woman to bed with him that night.

Life among the tribe was good, he and Taku continued to go out on hunting missions going further and further away from the safety of the underground town. Sometimes they went as far as a week to find suitable prey to bring back.

On one of these missions they happened on a group of white men and women. They were on a boat on a river almost ten days walking from the underground town. Taku saw them first and signaled to Kerry to hide. They watched the group for a while and then began to move in closer, inch by inch they crawled along the jungle floor.

When they were just a few feet from the water they stopped and continued to watch for almost an hour. The boat was anchored about fifty yards out and they could see the people on board drinking and eating. There were three men and three women, and their white skin was turning pink under the sun. A few of them jumped into the river and Kerry wondered if they knew there were water snakes in the area. He hoped there was no-one around because he wanted this prey.

When Taku signaled him, they moved into the water and began to swim out to the boat, keeping just their heads above the surface. When they were ten yards away, they split up, Kerry swam to the stern and Taku to the bow.

Kerry pulled himself up and took a quick look around and saw the people were still busy drinking, they hadn't noticed him yet. He lined up his blowgun and when he shot the first dart he saw how the young woman in a bikini slaps at it as it hit her in the neck, thinking it was an insect. He shot two more darts and watched as the first woman sat down, saying something to the others. They walked over to her, but when they got to her, she had already slipped down in the chair. Her friends dropped one by one, and Kerry moved in closer.

Taku had shot the other three from the bow and they got a closer look at their prey.

Two of the women seemed to be in their early thirties, but the third is much younger, maybe in her late teens. The three men are middle-aged, overweight and one of them was wearing glasses.

As they began to move the young girl closer to the railing Taku lifts his head and listens. Kerry heard it too, the sound of people moving through the jungle, white people he figured, by the noise they were making.

"Hey! What are you doing?" shouted a voice further down the riverbank.

Kerry turned his head and saw a dark skinned man with a hat on his head. He was waving a rifle over his head. Where did he come from?

Taku grabbed the young girl and was about to throw her over the railing when the first shot rang out and Kerry felt the bullet passing close to his head.

He grabbed Taku and was ready to jump in when the second bullet struck him in the head and he fell into the water.

Taku grabbed his friend and tried to swim to the opposite bank, but when he got to the middle of the river the current was too strong and with an anguished scream he watched as Kerry was pulled along and away from him.

He turned his head back to the boat and now the man with the rifle and his friends were on it. A shot rang out and the bullet hit the water dangerously close to Taku. He dove under and swam as hard as he could and surfaced only a few yards from the riverbank. He climbed up and ran into the jungle.

"Did you see that?" asked Mike and lowered his rifle.

"Yeah, I have never seen anyone swim so fast before," said Danny leaning against the railing.

"Hey, we need to go back, they are all unconscious," said Mark, kneeling by the people lying on deck.

"I could swear the guy I hit was white," said Mike, looking downriver, but he couldn't see the body.

"Really? A white man?" asked Mark, now standing up.

"I think so, or maybe the light was playing games with me." He turned around and went to the wheelhouse where he started the engine.

The boat slowly glided away on the water as Taku watched from the jungle. He had tears in his eyes, and had no idea how to tell his grandfather Kerry was gone.

Chapter 33

Kerry wakes up while he is airborne, going down the twenty foot waterfall. He lands on his back and all the air in his lungs are forced out. When he surfaces he tries to breathe, but only manages to swallow water, and then the pain hits him like if someone had put a nail through his ankle.

A small tree floats by him and he manages to grab a branch and through clenched teeth, he pulls himself onto the trunk where he coughs out more water until he can breathe properly again. The searing pain in his ankle is still there and he figures he has twisted it when he hit the water. Looking around he notices this part of the river is much wider and by looking at the sun, he realizes he is moving South towards the Amazon River. For a while he considers his choices, but he is too weak to swim ashore. He touches his head and when his fingers touch his skull where the bullet grazed him he screams and for a second his vision blurs. When the pain has subsided, he decides his best alternative is to hang on to the tree and maybe with some luck reach the river bank further down.

All through the night he drifts and above him the moon is clear and the silvery water reflects it. The jungle is full of nightlife on either side of him and sometimes he sees giant bats chasing insects out over the water.

He has crawled further up on the trunk and by twisting his good leg between some branches and holding on to others with his hands he is sure he won't fall off. Eventually he sleeps.

He floats on the river for two more days, before he sees a human. He is too weak to scream, but he manages to kick with his good leg and the two fishermen in the small plastic boat sees him and turn their boat towards him.

When they reach him, they try to talk to him in Portuguese, but he just shakes his head. Then in English he says, "help me."

"Ah, are you American?" asks the younger of the two.

Hearing his native language after such a long time feels strange to Kerry. He has to think before he answers trying to formulate the words.

"Yes, help me. My ankle is hurt," he manages to say in a hoarse voice.

The young man hands him a bottle of water before helping him over into the small boat.

Kerry finishes the bottle lying down on the only bench, and the old man starts the engine and the boat speeds across the calm water.

Their village is not far away and when they reach it, the older man drives the boat up on the sand beach and calls to some other men nearby.

Between them, they carry Kerry up into the village and to his surprise Kerry sees a church. When they reach the portal one of the men knocks on it while Kerry leans on the other. After a while it opens and a priest steps out.

"Father O'Brian, we found this man on a tree in the river, he is injured. He is American," says the young man who gave Kerry the water.

"Oh my, get him inside."

Kerry is carried through the small church and into the priest's private quarters where they put him on a bed. After thanking the men the priest turns and looks at Kerry.

"My name is Father O'Brian, what's yours?"

"Kerry, John Kerry. I think my ankle is broken or at least twisted."

"OK John," says O'Brian and sits down on a chair at the foot of the bed.

He places a pillow under the swollen foot and carefully touches it. When Kerry moans he says, "I don't think it's broken, but badly twisted. You should be OK in a couple of weeks."

O'Brian takes a closer look at the man lying on his bed. He is naked apart from a loincloth, and his skin is tanned dark. His hair is cut short like if someone had placed a pot over his head and cut around it. He has seen this before among some of the tribes. He has simple body paintings on his arms and legs, forms and animals. On the right side of his chest there is a square with the lower crossbar missing. From the top crossbar there is a line drawn to what looks like a stick figure hanging by its neck. O'Brian shivers and looks away.

"Are you hungry, or thirsty?" he asks while looking for some bandages to wrap the foot and ankle with.

"Both, I don't know for how many days I was on that tree, two or three maybe."

"How did you end up on it?"

Kerry doesn't know what to say, so he lies, "I can't remember."

"These body paintings tell me you spent some time with a tribe somewhere and the color of your skin suggests it was more than just a weekend, months or even a year."

O'Brian begins wrapping the bandage around the foot and Kerry gasps when he lifts it up.

"Yeah, I lived with a tribe up north for some time, I'm a professor, and was doing some research."

"Uh-huh, well, I have lived in this village for four years now and I have never met any tribe who uses that style in body painting, and what is that on your chest? It looks like someone is hanging."

Kerry looks down at his chest and says, "you are looking at it from the wrong perspective, from here it's like a square U, and it's a hunting symbol. See, like a trident."

O'Brian looks at it and he sees what Kerry means.

"Where are you from, originally, I mean?"

"LA," lies Kerry.

"And you went to live with this tribe all by yourself, no other researchers?"

"No, just me, I took a sabbatical, and just left. I thought I'd find myself, that kind of thing."

O'Brian finishes what he is doing and stands up. Kerry looks up at him and says, "thank you, if it's OK with you, I would like to rest now."

"No problem, I'll wake you up in a couple of hours and you can have something to eat."

The priest leaves and Kerry is left alone. He looks around and sees a big crucifix above the bed and on the opposite wall are some paintings showing religious motifs. He snickers.

There is a small desk with a lamp and a laptop, against the wall opposite the door. There is no window, he notices which makes the room dark.

Lying there staring at the ceiling, he realizes he will not be able to go back, he has to stay with the story he has made up. Most likely the priest will get him sent back to the US. The thought of having to go back scares him. He wants to stay in the jungle, with Taku, but most of all, and he doesn't want to stop sacrificing to the god. He sighs and turns on his side careful not to hurt his ankle, and then he drifts off to sleep.

A couple of hours later O'Brian returns with a tray. On it is a big bowl of stew and a glass of fruit juice. He knocks on the door before he enters. He finds Kerry sleeping on his side and staring back at the priest is a long scar starting from the nape of Kerry's neck going all the way down along the spine and ending somewhere under his loincloth. He stands there looking at it. Whatever made, it must have caused horrific pain he thinks.

He places the tray on his desk and calls Kerry's name. The man turns over and looks up at him.

"I got through to Manaus, there is a helicopter arriving in a few hours to take you back. You can eat and drink and then I'll help you out to the helipad. You are lucky they had a helicopter available. Soon you will be back with your friends and loved ones," O'Brian says with a smile.

Kerry doesn't smile, he just nods his head and looks up at the ceiling. He knows he cannot change anything; he is too injured to make a run and try to get back to Taku and his people. What concern him the most is how he will be able to serve the god back home. Then he smiles when he realizes he has a long way to travel and he is sure he will come up with a way to stay faithful.

O'Brian takes one last look at the man before leaving him alone, and for some reason, he has a feeling of dread, something deep inside him is telling him that this man should not be returned to civilization.

Green Tree

Present Day

Chapter 34

Holmes parks her car and walks around the main house to the guesthouse. The evening is warm and she can smell flowers in the air. She opens the door and steps inside.

After dropping her laptop on the bed she takes a long shower and wrapped in a towel she warms a soup on the little stove.

The kid who lives here and is now in Afghanistan has quit an impressive home theater set up. There is also a game console and a Hi-Fi system which would make most people jealous.

As Holmes slowly eats her soup, her eyes fall on the 42" LED screen on the wall. She was told by his parents that she can use it anytime she feels like. She looks for the remote control and finds it in a drawer and when she turns it on she is impressed by the clarity of the picture.

She pours some more soup into her bowl and continues eating while watching a TV show. After a while the news comes on and then the weather forecast. Nice and sunny for the next few days say the pretty announcer and then shows a satellite picture of the State.

Holmes stares at the screen and then quickly gets up and looks for her laptop. While it's booting up, she looks around the LED screen and the game console.

"I knew it," she says, pleased with herself and pulls a cable from behind the console.

She connects it to her laptop and then to the LED. The big screen changes and her own Desktop screen comes up. She looks around the room until she finds the WIFI box and then copies the code onto her computer and waits until it connects. She pulls up Google maps and a minute later she is looking at the stretch of I25 that interests her. The clarity of the picture is a lot better and she can zoom in close and maintain the clear picture. Slowly she drags the map moving it north, while looking at the right side of the road. On the third pass she finds it. It looks like a small parking area, but when she drags the map a little bit more to the right, she can see a trail between the pine trees. At the police station they had missed it, the screens were too small and the definition was not high enough. Slowly she follows the trail and then after what seems like a couple of miles it stops.

She leans back in the chair she is sitting in. Maybe I'm wrong, maybe it's just a short trail and nothing more, she thinks. She zooms out after pinning the end of the trail, and on the screen, it shows the trail ends in the middle of nowhere. Ahead is just miles and miles of pine forest and to the sides the same.

"Shit," she says and stands up.

She makes a cup of tea and returns to the chair and her laptop. She zooms out even more and can now see the Colombian River to the left or to the West and the road leading north all the way up to the border to Canada. She zooms in on the

pin and again she is looking at the spot where the trail ends on the LED screen. She slowly drags the map in a straight line down and continues staring at it. Maybe the trail continues, but she can't see it due to the thick forest. Zooming in as much as she can, she tries to force her eyes to see beyond the branches. Slowly she moves the map down, and there. She can see what looks like the ground, and as she follows it, the trail continues. She goes back to where she found it and adds another pin. Then she zooms out.

She estimates that from the first pin to the second there is at least a mile long gap. She zooms in to the second pin and continues following the trail through the trees. It ends in a clearing a few hundred yards on. She zooms in as much as she can and there it is, the corner of a cabin and what looks like flower beds outside. She adds another pin and then zooms out so she gets the I25 on the screen.

"You smart bastard," she says out loud.

The cabin is so far in the woods there is no way of seeing it from the main road, and if you would turn off and follow the trail it just ends. No one would know it continues further on and ends at a clearing.

Holmes looks at her watch, not even 9P.M yet, she picks up her cell phone and dials Hawk's number. He picks up on the second ring.

"Are you sober?" she asks.

"Good evening to you too Holmes," he says and adds, "yes, I'm sober, why?"

"I found something and I think you and I should go for a road trip tomorrow. Pick me up at 6.30AM, and bring hiking clothes."

"May I ask what this is about?"

"I found a trail, and a cabin in the forest, I think we should check it out at first light."

"OK, I'll see you tomorrow."

After hanging up Hawk returns the bottle he was holding to the shelf in the kitchen and settles in front of the TV. He wants his drink, but he has to stay clear, and for some reason it feels important to him that Holmes finds him sober and professional the following morning. He likes her and doesn't want her to get the wrong impression of him, but thinking back to the morning he figures she already has.

Before going to bed, he finds some hiking clothes including some heavy boots a water canteen and a big hunting knife. He places everything in the living room and goes to bed.

Chapter 35

Kerry can't sleep, it happens sometimes. He lies awake in his bed, completely still and looking up at the ceiling. He glances at the clock on the bedside table, only 6.30A.M. He can hear the first birds outside and there is light coming in from behind the drawn curtains. He has been awake all-night, but doesn't feel tired. He can hear Becky sleeping beside him and her breaths are shallow. He carefully pulls the sheet from his body and gets out of bed.

In the kitchen, he makes a cup of coffee and a sandwich. He takes it out on the front porch and settles down in one of the chairs. Looking out over the clearing he can see the morning fog coming off the grass. The sun hasn't cleared the treetops yet leaving a slight chill in the air. He hears a sound and looks up. The same deer as the other day is coming out of the woods, at least he thinks it's the same. He watches it as it slowly lowers its head and eats something from the ground.

* * * * *

"Ready?" asks Hawk.

"Yes, lead the way," says Holmes.

They have parked his car at the end of the trail next to a big truck. Holmes walks around it and looks inside.

"Whose do you think it is?"

"It's John Kerry's," says Hawk, without looking at it.

"You mean the weirdo who was lost in the Amazon."

"Yes him. He told me he had a cabin up here somewhere; he takes his kid and wife to it once in a while."

"Shit, so this could be a waste of time. I mean, if it's Kerry's cabin I found then there is no point in going looking."

Hawk mulls it over, and he remembers what Mrs. Walker said. He takes a deep breath and tells Holmes what he knows.

"Interesting, but it doesn't prove he is our killer," she says, leaning against the truck.

She looks good jeans and a flannel shirt. She is wearing a baseball cap and her hair is inside keeping it away from her face and shoulders. She is not wearing any makeup, but her skin has a healthy pink color to it.

"You are right, but it makes it worth taking a closer look at him and his cabin. If we move in slowly we can hide and do some surveillance on him."

They begin to push through the undergrowth trying to make as little noise as possible.

"What do you expect to see, Kerry, carving up bodies? He might have his wife and kid with him," asks Holmes.

Hawk turns around and looks at her, "I just want to have a peek at how he is around his family. Whenever I see him, he is all smiles and friendly words, but he might be different around his family."

She nods her head and they continue. They have to walk slowly, but she notices that what first looked like just regular undergrowth has been cut back a little. She can see clear marks on some branches where they have been either sawed or cut to make it easier to get through.

Finally, they reach the trail again and they stop.

"How far is it to the cabin from here, did you say?" ask Hawk.

"A few hundred yards, the trail is pretty much straight from here on, just a couple of small bends."

"OK, let's get off the trail and move into the woods." He looks to his right and the sloping hill. "We can go up here and with some luck find a place where we can hide and look down at the clearing and the cabin."

They slowly and carefully walk up the hill making sure they don't step on any dry branches. They reach a place where a big pine tree has fallen and the roots are a tangled mess sticking up in the air. Hawk moves closer and looks down the hill, "perfect, from here we can see the cabin. And if I'm not mistaken Kerry is on the porch."

Holmes walks, hunkered down, up beside him and takes out a pair of binoculars from her backpack. After focusing them, she says, "that's him, he has a cup with coffee I think. I can't see anyone else around, they must be sleeping. He is only wearing a pair of boxer shorts."

They settle in with their backs against the roots and continue to watch the man below them. He doesn't do anything exciting, just sits and sips his coffee. The sun comes up from behind the treetops and begins to warm their bodies.

"He is getting up," says Holmes.

Hawk sees how Kerry stands up and stretches his arms above his head, "I wonder where he works out? Maybe he has a gym at home?"

"Must have, it would take months to get a body like that, " says Holmes, looking through the binoculars.

Kerry turns around and picks up his cup from the table, and as he walks inside Hawk hears Holmes gasp.

"What?"

"Did you see that?"

"See what?"

"The line on his back," she says and lowers the binoculars.

"What line, what are you talking about?"

He has a black line, like a tattoo along his spine. It starts at the nape of his neck and disappears into his boxers. It's about an inch wide, the oddity is it looks like stitches."

"So? He has a tattoo, many people do, and it doesn't make him a serial killer."

"True, but most people have pictures or texts, not just a thick black line down their spine," she says, watching the door Kerry went through.

* * * * *

Kerry fills his cup again and walks out on the porch, and just as he is sitting down there is a bright light to his left. He doesn't turn his head, just keeps watching the area where he thought it came from. There it is again, a quick flash of light. Binoculars reflecting the sun, someone is watching me, thinks Kerry. He drinks some of his coffee and wonders who it could be. Police? Possible, but why? He has done nothing that would make them suspicious? Maybe hunters? It's not hunting season, maybe lost tourists, having a peak at the local man having his morning coffee? It's one possibility.

He finishes his coffee and walks inside, closing the door behind him. In the living room he opens the windows and turns on the TV and then mutes it, not to wake up Becky and Danny. He is worried that the smell has come back during the night and Becky will make an issue out of it.

He is restless. He walks around the cabin without doing anything, just walking back and forth. What he needs is another sacrifice; he needs to have a body hanging and him skinning it. His thoughts go back to the woman he saw outside

the police station, her skin seemed flawless, so soft and beautiful. He knows the god would like it. The problem is how to get her. He could stalk her and find out where she lives, but in the small town there is always a risk of being seen, and he has worked hard to preserve an image of a responsible member of society. He sighs and realizes he can't take her, but that doesn't stop him from wanting, actually needing another victim. He decides to send Becky and Danny home early. It's Sunday and there are always people driving back and forth on the I25.

He stops walking and looks out the window and wonders if the people who were watching him are still there. Walking back to the hall where he takes a pair of binoculars from a shelf and goes back to the middle of the living room. From here he can see the entire hillside, and starting from where he remembered the flashing light coming from, he begins scanning the trees. It takes him less than five minutes to locate them. They are sitting and leaning against a fallen tree, and there is some undergrowth covering them, but not enough.

"Ah, Chief Hawk, how nice of you to come for a visit, and you have brought that lovely lady with you, " he says to no one special.

"Who are you talking too?"

Kerry turns around and finds Becky standing there in her pajama.

"Oh, no one special, to myself, I guess," he says lowering the binoculars.

"But I thought I heard you mention Chief Hawk."

"Nonsense, you just woke up. Listen, I'll make you and Danny some breakfast, and then you should head back to town. I'll clean up around here and come down a little later."

Becky might still be sleepy, but she knows what she heard, and she is sure Kerry said something about Chief Hawk and a lady. But, she doesn't want to argue with him. She had made that mistake before and his anger scares her. He used to get angry like normal people do, but since he came back from Brazil his anger has changed, it's deeper, she can't really explain it, but when she looks into his eyes when he is angry she feels like she is looking into pure evil, and it scares her.

* * * * *

"They are leaving," says Hawk.

Holmes sits up straighter; she had dozed off in the warm sun. Looking down at the cabin she can see Kerry and his wife and kid carrying bags to a Quad parked outside.

"Where did the Quad come from?" she asks.

"Kerry brought it out from behind the house just a few minutes ago."

They watch as Kerry puts a couple of bags on it and then he and his family gets on it. When they disappear into the trees Hawk lowers the binoculars and looks at Holmes, "should we have a peek?"

"Let's wait a while to make sure they are gone."

She smiles when, a little while later, Kerry comes back alone on the Qaud. He parks it by the garden and walks inside.

"I guess he sent them home. I wonder why he didn't go with them?"

"Maybe the kid has school work and he stayed behind to clean up."

Hawk nods his head.

* * * * *

Kerry is down in the cellar caressing Katie's cheek and adjusting her hair a little. Then he goes from one mannequin to the next touching them and making sure they are OK.

"I'm sorry I can't bring you upstairs, but it's not safe. I will be leaving now, but I will be back soon, and I will bring a new member," he says, standing in front of the silent group leaning against the wall.

He turns off the lights, and locks the doors. Upstairs he walks through all the rooms, making sure all the windows are closed and locked. Outside he gets on his Quad and drives into the woods. He will have to take the Quad home since Becky took the truck. On his next visit he will bring it back on the truck bed.

Chapter 36

"Do you see anything?" asks Hawk.

Holmes is standing on his shoulders, looking through one of the windows on the side of the cabin. The window is set unusually high on the wall and the only way to look inside was her standing on his shoulders.

"Nothing interesting, just a living room, with a sofa, chairs and a TV. There is a kitchen to the left and two bedrooms ahead."

He lowers her and they walk together around the cabin and behind it they find the shed. The door is locked and there is no window, so they can't see what is inside.

On the other side of the cabin there are two more windows and when Holmes has a look inside she confirms that they are bedrooms.

Back at the porch, they sit down in the two chairs and Hawk puts his feet up on the table.

"So, what have we learned?" he asks.

"Nothing, Kerry is a family man who likes his privacy. Having the trail in two parts is good for home security, less chance of someone finding it and breaking in."

Hawk nods his head, "I guess he is not the killer."

She sighs and says, "we have no evidence that says he isn't."

"And nothing that says he is. Let's go back to the station and think this through."

They begin their walk along the trail back to where they parked the car. Kerry watches them make their way through the undergrowth and smiles as they disappear behind the trees. He stands up from behind the tree he was lying behind and follows them on a parallel line, but fifty yards above. He had parked the Quad and hid it from view and then he ran up the hill and waited.

Hawk and Holmes reach the car and when they drive towards the road on the trail, Kerry walks down and backtracks until he reaches the hidden Quad. He then drives back to the cabin and makes sure the policeman and the woman hasn't been inside. When he is sure he goes inside and after a while appears with a bag in his hand. He has taken his clothes off and stands naked in the sunlight.

After returning the Quad behind the cabin he takes off into the woods with his sloping gate, the bag is thrown over his shoulder and soon he disappears among the shadows.

Chapter 37

"I don't understand it, I checked the tires before we left," says Peter scratching his head and kicking the flat tire.

"Nothing to it, all we have to do is change it and continue," says his girlfriend, Jenny.

Peter walks around the car and opens the boot. After taking out their suitcases he lifts out the spare and the tools he needs. Jenny lights a cigarette and sits down on a boulder a few feet from the road. She watches while Peter loosens the bolts on the front wheel and then using the car jack lifts the car off the ground.

It's a beautiful stretch of road thinks Jenny, high pine trees on both sides. The sun is shining through the branches, making the forest look magical. She stands up and leans in through the open passenger window and takes out a bottle of water.

"Hold these, please," says Peter handing her the bolts that holds the wheel in place. She takes them in her hand and wanders back to where she was sitting.

Kerry is ten feet behind her laying flat on the ground. His bag is further behind him and in his hand is his blowgun. He has just loaded it with a dart and is taking careful aim at the young woman's neck.

"Hurry up, this place is full of bugs," says Jenny slapping her neck.

"There are no bugs. At least I haven't noticed any. I'll be done in a couple of minutes, you can bring me the bolts."

Jenny doesn't answer at first, so he repeats himself, "you can give me the bolts, honey."

No answer.

Peter stands up and turns around looking for Jenny. He sees her lying on the ground, the water bottle beside her and the water slowly spilling out.

"Honey?"

She doesn't move so he hurries over to her and kneels beside her. Taking her head in his hands, he tries to make her sit up, but she just falls back.

"Jenny, honey, wake up. What happened?"

"She is asleep, and will stay so until she meets the god," says a voice to his right.

Peter turns his head and what he sees makes him drop Jenny to the ground. There is a naked man standing a few feet from him, and he has a long tube in his hand. He looks at Peter, and says, "stay calm and I won't kill you."

"Who are you, and what do you want?"

Peter slowly walks backwards and the man takes one step closer and lifts the tube to his mouth. Peter feels a sting on his cheek and after a couple of seconds his knees crumble and he drops to the asphalt.

Kerry kneels and checks his pulse. He is alive, but unconscious, like his girlfriend. Quickly he loads the two bodies in the boot of the car and then finishes tightening the bolts. Just as he is about to start the car an SUV passes him and he breathes out in relief. A couple of minutes earlier and he would have been seen. He has to be more careful, he thinks.

He drives the car to the trail only a few miles away and then carries the bodies through the forest to where the trail continues. After loading them on the Quad he walks back and hides the car under the camouflage netting he keeps hidden under a rock. When he is sure it can't be seen even if someone would walk past, he returns to the Quad and the task ahead. He is smiling, almost chuckling to himself. The couple is young, maybe not even twenty yet, and their skin is so smooth.

Peter comes to and instantly feels agonizing pain shooting out from his arms and legs. His neck is stretched at an unnatural angle and when he looks down as much as he can he sees he is naked.

"Help!"

There is no answer just the buzz of a fluorescent light that is about to burn out.

"Jenny, where are you?"

No answer, he tries again, "Jenny!"

"Hey, stop the screaming, no one will hear you," says the man when he walks through a door to the right.

"Where is Jenny? What have you done to her?"

The man whistles and walks up to where Peter is hanging. Looking up at him, he says, "nothing, at least nothing yet. I thought she would like to watch."

"Watch what?"

"You."

Kerry touches the young man's skin and says, "it is so smooth, and elastic."

"Get your hands off me you fucking pervert and take me down from here."

"I can't do that, he wants you."

"Who wants me?"

"Him," says Kerry, pointing his finger upwards.

"You are insane, just get me down and we can talk about this."

Kerry slowly shakes his head and walks away and from behind a white plastic sheet pulls out a wheelchair.

"Jenny!"

"She can hear you, but she can't talk yet," says Kerry, pushing the wheelchair to where Peter is hanging.

Jenny looks up at him and sees he has tears in his eyes. She can't move since her arms and legs are tied with zip ties to the wheelchair. She has a cloth in her mouth and it tastes like some chemical. Kerry unties it and she breathes in deep, but her breath turns into a sob.

"Now, now, my dear, there is no reason to cry. This only hurts at first and then there is no pain, just pleasure, I promise."

"What are you going to do with us?" asks Jenny between sobs.

"I think it's better to show you, you wouldn't understand the beauty of it if I told you."

He walks over to a group of mannequins standing against the wall opposite her. He takes his time and eventually chooses the only black one and lifts it up. He carries it back to where she is sitting and when he stands it on the floor in front of her, she is surprised at how life like it looks.

"Meet Marlon, he is slightly younger than you are. Just look at how well he turned out, no sagging of the skin and I think I did a fantastic job on his eyes."

"What are you talking about?" asks Peter.

"He makes these, that's all," says Jenny with a smile and there is hope in her voice. Maybe this man is just lonely and wants some living company.

Kerry laughs and says, "that's right, I make them, and now I will show you how I do it."

He stands Marlon against the wall next to Jenny and walks over to a stainless steel bench. After moving some items around his hand comes up holding a scalpel.

"Now, this might sting a bit, but don't worry, the pain is pleasurable, " he says while walking back and grabbing a small stepladder on the way.

"Oh C'mon man, there is no need for this, please just let us go, " pleads Peter while Kerry places the stepladder behind him and steps up on it.

Leaning in close to Peter's ear, he says, "you might want to say good-bye to your girlfriend. From now on, the only thing you will be able to do is sing."

"What-"

Jenny watches with terror as the naked man cuts along Peter's spine from the neck all the way down to his buttocks in one swift move. There is little blood, but Peter's screams fills her head and she begins to cry knowing what is in store for her.

As the night falls outside, Kerry is in his cellar peeling of the skin from Jenny's body. Peter's skin is all ready in the vat and soon she will join him there. They sang beautifully as he slowly pulled their skin off their bodies inch by inch. She held out longer, he was just about to start with her legs when she sighed and then became still. Peter died while he was still working on his midsection.

Women are stronger than men, thinks Kerry. They had to be, at least when it comes to taking pain, after all they survive childbirth.

Chapter 38

Kerry parks the young couple's car next to Katie's and her husbands and then he gets out and locks it. There are another six cars parked there and he knows he has to change to another hiding place; the lot is getting too crowded.

The clearing is more than ten miles by car from the trail reaching the cabin, but through the forest is no more than one hour walk. Kerry checks his watch and sees he has to hurry up if he wants to be home for dinner. He had told Becky he would be back after just a couple of hours when she left this morning, but one thing led to another and now it's almost eight o'clock. He begins to run and it feels good. It reminds him about the times when he and Taku would race through the jungle together.

Becky hears the Quad before she sees it and when she steps out to greet her husband, she asks, "what happened, you took so long?"

"I tried to call you, but my phone was without battery, sorry."

Taking his arm, she leads him inside the house and asks him, "but what did you do?"

Hanging his jacket on a hook by the door and taking off his boots Kerry says, "the damn Quad broke down when I was going back from dropping you off. It must have gotten some dirt into the engine. I had to take it apart and clean it."

"Oh well, maybe it needs a good tune up, let's eat, I'm starving."

Kerry puts his arm around her shoulder and together they walk into the kitchen where Danny is waiting at the table. Kerry kisses his head and sits down next to him.

Looking at his family, he smiles at them and wonders how he could get rid of them without making a mess. He needs to dedicate all his time to the god, and they are distracting him.

* * * * *

"This is nice," says Holmes, looking around the pizzeria, she and Hawk are sitting in. The walls are covered with photos and paintings showing Italian motifs. There are vineyards, churches, small villages and a giant poster of the Coliseum.

"The pizzas here are just out of this world, " says Hawk, while looking at the menu.

The place is busy since it's still tourist season and around them are several tables with couples and a few with families.

A waiter comes over with a pad in his hand and asks, "are you ready to order Chief?"

"Yes, I'll have the seafood pizza and a glass of red wine."

"I'll have the fettuccini with garlic and giant shrimps," says Holmes.

When the waiter withdraws with their order Holmes leans forward and almost whispers, "what's next?"

"Good question. Kerry doesn't seem to be our killer, but we don't have much else to go on."

"I agree with Fieldman, it has to be him. There is no one else who fits what we know so far."

After they came back from watching Kerry's cabin they had had a short meeting with Collins and Fieldman telling them what they had seen. Fieldman thought that the way Kerry had hidden away his cabin made him very suspicious. Why go through all that trouble if he didn't have anything to hide? Just because he took his family there didn't make him innocent. Collins had agreed, saying that by taking his family there Kerry could just be using them as a ruse, making people think it was just the family's weekend place.

Hawk and Holmes had agreed. The problem was how to get in there and do a proper search of the property. After playing around with several ideas, they decided to think about it overnight and meet again the following morning. Hawk had invited Holmes to dinner and the two deputies had made encouraging sounds and a lot of thumbs up. They worried about their Chief, and wanted him to be happy.

"We need to get him away from town or at least away from the cabin for a long time. I'd say an entire morning or afternoon to be able to search it properly. The locks were standard so it should be easy to get in," says Holmes, before biting into warm crusty bread with garlic.

"I agree, the question is how?"

"Maybe we can call him into the station and have Collins and Friedman talk to him?"

"No, he would become suspicious, the man is clean, doesn't even have a parking ticket. He would smell a rat in no time."

"What about if someone called him and invited him to another town to do a reading of his book?"

Hawk takes his glass from his mouth and after swallowing the wine, he says, "that's not a bad idea. Even though he will figure out it was a bullshit story when he gets there, we would have him gone for almost a day. Good thinking, Holmes."

Their food arrives and they stop talking while enjoying it. When they are done, they order coffee and Holmes a slice of apple pie.

"Can I ask you a personal question Hawk?" asks Holmes.

He knows what she will ask, but says, "sure, go ahead."

"The scar on your neck, is it from what I think it is?"

"Yes, it is."

"Self inflicted or in the line of duty?"

Hawk touches the scar and says, "self inflicted, I tried to hang myself when my son died."

"I'm sorry. Is his mother around somewhere?"

"No, she died at the same time."

Holmes is quiet; she doesn't know what to say. She feels stupid for asking.

Hawk notices how uncomfortable she is and says, "look, it was a long time ago. I was working narcotics in LA, and some friend of a drug trafficker thought their boss would be better off if they shot the arresting officer. I was having dinner with my wife and son when the shooting began. My wife died there and my son was in a coma for a few days before he died."

"How did you end up here?"

"Life I guess. I was living in Florida with my father, and he basically kicked me out, telling me I was too young to be miserable. I found this job, and applied."

Holmes drinks some coffee and says, "so that's why you drink. You haven't gotten over them yet?"

"Yeah, I guess. It's only at night when I'm alone. I think I see them in the shadows watching me and accusing me for killing them. I drink so I can sleep."

Outside the evening is warm and when they get into Hawk's car Holmes lowers the window and asks, "would you like a nightcap?"

Hawk laughs and asks, "what's this? Are you suddenly supporting my drinking?"

"Maybe, I just think it's better to drink together than alone. What do you have at home?"

"Bourbon, it's the only thing I like."

"OK, that works for me, let's go back to your place and plan this mission to Kerry's cabin in detail."

That night they don't plan anything. After a couple of drinks Holmes wraps her arms around Hawk and says, "I like you, even though you are an old, suicidal alcoholic with half an ear missing."

"I just like you, for being you," says Hawk before kissing her.

It has been a long time since he was with a woman, and in the beginning he fumbles and Holmes laughs at his feeble attempts to take her bra off. In the end she takes off her clothes and his and together they lay down on the bed.

That night after making love Hawk lies on his back listening to the young woman sleeping beside him. In a whisper he says, "I'm sorry Vivian."

There is no response, the house is quiet, and to his great relief that night there is no one in the shadows accusing him.

Chapter 39

Holmes lies on her side trying to breathe like if she was sleeping. Hawk has been awake for some time and she was wondering if he would be awake until morning. When she is sure he is asleep she carefully gets out of bed and tiptoes out into the living room. Standing by the sofa, she tries to remember where she put her purse.

The house is quiet, and there is no sound from outside either. When she becomes used to the darkness she sees her purse on the floor by the door. She carefully crosses to it and picks it up. She locates her phone among makeup, keys, a packet of gum and some other items. She scrolls through the directory and when she finds the number she is looking for she presses SEND.

The signal travels through the roof and up into the sky where it bounces off a satellite and then continues down to earth, heading for a small village in the Amazon basin.

"Father O'Brian, speaking."

"Hi Uncle O'Brian, how are you?"

"Sandy! How wonderful to hear your voice, I'm fine and how are you?"

She walks into the bathroom and locks the door behind her, and then turns on the faucet and the running water drowns the sound of her voice.

"Fine, thank you. Listen, I have found Kerry, but there is a problem?"

"What problem?"

"He looks so innocent and there is nothing on him. The local Chief of Police and I went out to his cabin yesterday and we found nothing."

"Listen carefully Sandy, that man is evil. I know it now as I knew it the first, and thank god, the only time I met him. You can't give up."

"We will try to get him to leave town, and then go back and do a better search of his place."

"Sounds good, remember what I told you; Kerry will try to blend in, he will do anything to make everyone think he is normal, but he is not. He is damaged beyond repair."

Sandy sighs, her uncle always becomes too melodramatic when he talks about Kerry.

"OK. Uncle O'Brian, I will call you as soon as I have any news. Take care."

"You too my dear, and remember, be careful."

Holmes clicks off the phone and turns off the water. When she opens the door Hawk is standing outside.

"Who is Uncle O'Brian?"

He is in his boxer shorts, and he looks sleepy. His hair is a mess and he yawns while scratching his face.

"Oh, he is my uncle."

"Yeah, that much I figured, but why are you calling him at 5A.M. in the morning to talk about Kerry."

She tries to walk past him, but he puts a hand on her arm and stops her.

"I might be old and an alcoholic, but that doesn't make me stupid, and I don't appreciate you trying to make me look like a fool. Now, let's sit down and you can tell me all about Uncle O'Brian."

He leads her to the sofa and she sits down while he goes into the kitchen. When he comes back, he has two bottles of water in his hands. He tosses one to Holmes, who catches it one-handed and after opening it drinks half of it. Hawk is sipping his while watching her.

"Go on, I'm waiting," says Hawk, waving his bottle at her.

"First of all I don't want you to think I tried to deceive you or your staff, I do need your help."

"Uh-huh, continue."

"Well, Uncle O'Brian is my uncle from my mother's side. He is a priest and for the last eight years he has been working in the Amazon, as a missionary."

"Great, you have a priest in the family. Get to the part where you tell me why you two talked about Kerry."

"My uncle met Kerry."

Hawk leans forward and places the water bottle carefully on the table and asks, "he met him where?"

"In the Amazon, he works in the village close to where Kerry was found, and he attended him afterwards, before he was brought to Manaus."

"OK, your uncle is a hero priest, involved in saving a man's life."

Holmes shakes her head slowly, now comes the hard part. Uncle O'Brian had tried to explain it to the local police with no luck. He had tried to contact the FBI and they didn't even respond to his letters.

"Uncle O'Brian insists on Kerry being an evil man capable of horrible acts of violence."

"What proof does he have?"

"A tattoo, well a kind of tattoo anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"When they found Kerry, he had several body paintings and one of them scared my uncle. When he asked Kerry about it, he said it was just a painting the Indians who he stayed with had given him, it was nothing important."

"Yes?" Hawk sits back again thinking that the uncle has been in the jungle too long, and has made a believer out of his poor niece as well.

"Well, a few months later my uncle was doing his rounds among the other villages and on the last day he arrived at the village farthest away from where he is stationed. It's almost three days by boat up river and the Indians living there are very difficult to work with because of their distrust of the white man. Anyway, in that village an elder, a man named Tuki and him were talking and my uncle mentioned the man they had found."

Holmes clears her throat and asks, "could I have some more water please?"

Hawk gets up and when he comes back with a new bottle, she says, "Tuki told my uncle that he remembered a man that fit the description, but he was much fatter when he met him and he had two younger people with him."

Hawk yawns and says, "so far I haven't heard anything that would make Kerry a maniac."

Holmes ignores his sarcastic comment and continues, "Tuki called to another man and when he arrived, my uncle was told this was the person who had guided Kerry and his companions through the jungle. He had gone hunting early one morning, and when he came back to their camp they were gone. He waited until the sun began to set and went back to the village. At least that's the story he told his tribe."

Hawk can see how the day grows lighter outside and he takes a quick look at his watch, almost 6A.M.

"Do you mind if we continue this over breakfast, I'm hungry?"

They move into the kitchen and when Holmes has a cup of coffee in front of her, she says, "when my uncle asked about the tattoo he had seen on Kerry, Tuki took him to the Shaman. There my uncle drew it in the soil and when the Shaman saw it he went ballistic according to my uncle. He got up and started to dance around uttering what seemed like curses. It got so bad that Tuki had to have some of the men take the old man inside his hut and they returned to the village. Later Tuki explained that the Shaman had put a curse on everyone who was there at the time to protect them from the Skin People."

Hawk is cooking scrambled eggs and the aroma is making him even hungrier. He turns around and says, "some local boogie man scares the crap out of an old Shaman. Again, what does it have to do with Kerry?"

"It's here the story becomes interesting. Tuki told my uncle Kerry and his people were looking for a missing tribe. They had with them an old letter which described a town that supposedly had sunk during an earthquake several hundred years ago, and in this town lived a tribe called the Skin People."

"C'mon Holmes, you are an intelligent woman, educated and so on. You can't seriously believe this. What? Kerry and his companions met these Skin People and were abducted by them?"

Holmes begins eating as soon as Hawk puts a plate in front of her, and after a while she says, "no, what my uncle believes is that either Kerry killed his companions and ended up living with a tribe who continue with these cruel customs, or they all got snatched and for one reason or another Kerry didn't get killed."

"What customs are we talking about here?"

"Well, according to the old stories these people got their name because they flayed their victims as a sacrifice to their god."

"Flay, as in peeling the skin of them?"

"Yes, exactly like that."

Hawk is quiet for a while. He finishes his eggs and his coffee. Then he just stares out the window.

"What are you thinking?" asks Holmes, pushing her plate away.

He looks back at her and says, "I don't know what I think. Do I think it's possible a man who was in the jungle for three years and wrote a best-selling book about the friendly tribe who took care of him can turn into a serial killer specializing in flaying his victims? No, I don't, I'm sorry Holmes. This is just too much."

"My uncle read his book, and he says there is not a single tribe in that part of the Amazon that fits what Kerry describes. He says it's an amalgam of several different tribes. He made them up."

"Why would he do that?"

She is quiet and sipping her coffee, and then says, "I have no idea, but I want to find out."

"Uh-huh, one last thing before you do. How come you came here, to Green Tree?"

"My uncle told me Kerry's name, and I spent considerable time looking for him. By accident I found his book on the internet while searching for him."

"So, all this about doing a thesis is bullshit?"

She smiles at him and says, "no, imagine if I'm right and Kerry is a serial killer, that would make one hell of a thesis, don't you think?"

Chapter 40

"I'll see you later, honey," says Becky ushering Danny out the door.

Kerry waves at her and continues to read the morning paper. They take turns driving Danny to school and today is Kerry's day off. He is feeling very good, almost cheerful. The killing the previous day and the skinning have made him able to center himself. He knows it will only last a few days or maybe even a week, then the god will call to him asking for more, and he will happily oblige.

Becky is close to the school when Danny says, "mommy, I dropped my ball."

"Just wait until I park and I'll get it for you."

"But I want it now."

"You have to wait," she says and gets ready to turn left across the oncoming lane. There are no cars around and she slows down.

"No! I want it now!"

"Jesus," she says and reaches behind her seat trying to get a grip on the plastic ball. Her fingers find it, but then drops it again. She stops for the left turn and taking her eyes off the road for a second, she tries again to reach it.

Tom Harding is driving his eighteen wheeler as he always does, according to the speed limit and close to the centerline. He has had a few close calls when he was younger with kids running out or balls coming out of nowhere.

He looks at the radio and changes the channel, but when he looks up again the car that had previously stopped for a left turn is slowly rolling across his lane. He has no time to stop. He breaks as hard as he can and the wheels screech as they slide across the hot asphalt.

Becky looks up just in time to the massive front of the truck, but she has no time to scream. She just closes her eyes.

* * * * *

Hawk is on the phone and Holmes is driving. They are on their way to the police station where they will tell the others about Uncle O'Brian's story.

"Good morning Doc. Could you come by the station right now?"

"Yeah, I guess so. What's up?"

"There is something I want to ask you."

When he hangs up Holmes asks, "who was that?"

"Doc Martin, he might be able to give us some insight into Kerry's mental state."

"Really? Is he a criminal psychologist? And what's up with his name? Is he a skinhead?"

Hawk laughs and says, "no he isn't on both counts, but he is a very good doctor and I'm sure during his life he has done some psychology."

"Not to be a bitch or anything, but I'm a criminal psychologist."

Hawk looks at her and after a while says, "not yet Holmes."

At the station Fieldman, Collins and Doc Martin are waiting for them. After introductions they settle in Hawk's office and he tells a short version of what he has heard. When he finishes, they are all quiet.

Doc clears his throat and asks, "and how can I help?"

"I thought you might have some psychological training," says Hawk.

"Nothing formal, just a few courses over the years. Young Holmes here is the one you should be talking to."

Hawk sees how a smile grows on her lips and he says, "I want both of your opinions. Is it plausible that Kerry came back brainwashed and is now skinning people in our backyard?"

"If he lived for so long with those Indians and he was witness to the death of his companions, it is possible he had some kind of nervous breakdown, or a psychological trauma, but I'm not sure if that would result in turning him into a serial killer," says Doc.

Holmes clears her throat and says, "what about something like the Stockholm Syndrome. Maybe the terror of his situation was so horrible, that the only way he could cope with it was to become one of them, or at least accept their ways."

Doc nods his head, "it's a possibility."

"Wasn't that term coined after a bank robbery in Stockholm in the early 70's?" asks Fieldman.

"Yes, it was. But I'd say what Kerry went through if it is all true is much more terrifying than what happened to those hostages," says Doc.

"OK, we agree on that he could be what Holmes uncle says, but how do we prove it?" asks Hawk.

There is a knock on the door and Mrs. Winters come in.

"Chief, there has been an accident outside the school."

"Serious?"

"Yes, the caller said an eighteen wheeler hit a car that was turning into the school parking lot."

"Do we know who was in the car?"

"Yes, it was Mrs. Kerry and her son."

The room goes quiet, they all look at one another and then Hawk says, "Fieldman, Collins come with me. Get your ambulance Doc, and hurry."

"What do I do?" asks Holmes.

Hawk thinks for a second and says, "you are with me."

With the sirens blaring the three police cars arrive at the scene of the accident. There are several people standing around the car. Its right side is completely smashed in and the driver of the truck is standing next to it looking in.

"Oh god, they are dead, they are both dead," he mumbles to himself.

Collins and Friedman push the onlookers back while Hawk goes around the car and looks in through the driver's window.

Becky Kerry is in the driver's seat, leaning against the door and there is blood on the left side of her head. The boy is in his seat in the back. Hawk can not see any blood on him, but his head is at an awkward angle.

At that moment Doc arrives in the ambulance and after getting out runs over to where Hawk is standing. He leans in and checks Mrs. Kerry's pulse and then together with Hawk they manage to open the back seat door. Doc checks the boy and then stands up.

"They are both dead Hawk, Becky Kerry has a smashed skull, and the boy's neck is broken."

"OK, use Collins and get the bodies out of here, I will talk to the truck driver."

Hawk is about to go around the car to where the driver is leaning against his truck, when he sees Holmes standing by the police cruiser. He walks over to her and says, "I want you to think about how this could affect Kerry."

She nods her head and he walks over to the driver.

"Could you please tell me what happened."

He sobs and says, "I saw them, but they were standing still, and I figured they would wait until I past, and then drive into the school. I took my eyes from the road for just a second, and when I looked up the car was already on my side, I had no time to stop."

Hawk puts his hand on the driver's shoulder and asks, "what is your name?"

"Tom Harding."

OK. Tom, when Doc comes back, you should go with him. He will give you something to make you calm down. We will have the truck brought over to the police station, OK?"

Tom just nods his head. His eyes are vacant and he is shivering. Hawk pats him on the shoulder and then walks back to Holmes.

"Any thoughts?"

"Honestly, I don't know. It will come as a shock to him, but I have no way to tell how he will react. I just don't know how his mind works."

Hawk nods his head, and calls to Collins and Friedman. When they come over he says, "Holmes and I are going over to Kerry's house to break the news to him. This might be an opportunity for us to check out his cabin. The shock of what has

happened will probably make him stay at home. If I feel we should go, I will call you so you can keep an eye on him, and let us know if he is leaving the house."

"OK, Chief," says Collins.

* * * * *

Kerry is whistling as he gets out of the shower and walks into his and Becky's bedroom. He picks out a pair of jeans and a flannel shirt and lays them on the bed. He will go up to the cabin and take out Katie, Marlon and the others. They have been locked away downstairs long enough. The thought of having them back in their right positions makes him feel good. While buttoning his shirt he hears a car stop outside. He looks out the window and sees Chief Hawk and the young woman walking up to his front door. He stops what he is doing. What they want, he wonders? There is no way they have anything on him. When he hears the knock on the door he walks out and opens it.

"Good morning Chief, how can I help you?"

"Good morning Kerry, this is Sandy Holmes, I'm sorry, but could we come in for a while, we have something important to tell you."

In the car Hawk told Holmes not to speak while he breaks the news to Kerry. Her job is to observe him to see if she can read what he is feeling.

"Yeah, sure. Come in, would you like some coffee?"

"No thanks," says Hawk as he follows Kerry into the living room, Holmes right behind him.

They sit down and Kerry leans forward asking, "what is this about?"

Hawk clears his throat and says, "I'm sorry to tell you Kerry, but there was an accident."

Holmes watches Kerry's face, almost without blinking.

"Yes, so?"

"Your wife and son are dead. A truck hit the car when Mrs. Kerry turned left into the school grounds."

Holmes watching his face is not sure what she sees, the emotions pass so quickly, but first he seems on his way to smile, and his eyes almost have a look pleasure in them, like if some burden has been lifted. Then he starts to cry, tears running down his cheeks.

"Oh my boy, my poor little Danny, " he sobs into his hands.

Hawk takes a quick look at Holmes, who shrugs her shoulders.

Kerry is smiling into his hands, he is so relieved. He wants to jump up and scream of happiness. He is free, finally he is free to do what the god wants him to do, no longer is he tied down by societies ropes. He no longer has to pretend to be something he isn't. Kerry the respectable father and husband, the author and the nice guy, can finally disappear forever and be replaced by Kerry the server of the god. He sobs and looks up at Hawk.

"When can I see them?"

"Hm, well, I think later this afternoon. Doc has them, but I'll have one of my men stationed outside your house and he will take you over when Doc is ready."

"OK."

"Do you have any family, we could call, it would be better if you had someone with you?" asks Hawk.

"No, there is no one. Well, Becky has an aunt, but she lives in New York."

Hawk stands up and Holmes follows him as he walks towards the front door. When he is about to open it, he turns around and says, "I'm terribly sorry for your loss, Mr. Kerry."

John Kerry looks back at him, and after blinking his eyes, he manages to get some tears out and he says, "thank you Chief, I feel so lost. I have no idea what to do now. They were my entire life," he sobs.

In the car Hawk turns to Holmes, "what do you think?"

"Scary, very scary. First I thought I saw relief, then he pretended to come apart, and finally just now, he faked those tears."

"Mm, he might be a serial killer, but he is an awful actor. I'll call Collins to come here to keep an eye on him, you and I are going back to the cabin."

Kerry watches as the police car drives down the street and then makes a U-turn and comes back. When he is sure it's gone, he makes a cup of coffee and while sipping it he lights a cigarette and for the first time in years he smokes in the house. He will wait for the deputy to arrive and then play nice for a few hours. After that he needs to go to the cabin and be with his other family. There he will decide what to do with his new life.

Chapter 41

"It has been a long time since I did this," says Hawk, trying yet another lock pick on the door.

"I didn't know it was part of the police training to pick locks," says Holmes standing next to him.

"It isn't, it's one of those things you pick up on the way."

There is a faint click and the door swings open. Hawk stands in the doorway and listens. There is no sound coming from within and outside, they can only hear the breeze through the trees and some birds.

"Do you smell it?" he asks.

"A little, but I know what you mean."

They step inside and Hawk begins with the living room. Holmes walks into the kitchen and starts to open cupboards and looking in drawers.

"This place is spotless, no dust, and no dirt on the floor, nothing," she hears Hawk say from where he is looking behind the TV.

"Still, there is the smell. It must come from somewhere."

Hawk moves into the master bedroom. The bed is made with military precision; the corners are perfectly lined up. There are no clothes strewn around. The wardrobe is perfectly ordered. Shoes are on the floor, and clothes hanging in neat rows, everything on a hanger and according to color.

"He must be a pain in the ass to live with," says Hawk.

Holmes is in the boy's room and says, "let me guess, everything is in perfect order right."

"Yeah, even the underwear and socks are according to color."

"Same in here, his toys are all lined up on shelves, cars to the right, dinosaurs in the center and books to the left. Nothing is out of place."

They meet in the living room and Hawk sighs. "Do you have any ideas?"

"We have been here for half an hour, let's double check the bedrooms again. Maybe if we can figure out where the smell is coming from we might find something."

Together they go back to the master bedroom and standing in the middle of the floor, Holmes closes her eyes, and inhales deeply through her nose.

"I think the smell is stronger here than anywhere else in the house."

"You must have better skills than me, because to me it's the same."

"No, it's defiantly stronger in here," she says slowly turning around in a tight circle. Her eyes are still closed and he can see her nose flare as she breathes in.

"There, I think it's coming from over there," she says and opens her eyes. Her finger is pointing at the wardrobe Hawk checked earlier.

They open it and Holmes sticks her head inside. Moving some clothes hangers to the side, she says, "it's from in here. Help me take these clothes out."

Together they place all the clothes on the bed, and take out all the shoes and line them up against the wall. When the wardrobe is empty Holmes steps inside. She smells along the walls and then kneels down.

"It's coming from the floor."

Hawk kneels beside her and begins knocking on the floorboards. After a few knocks the sound changes, it's hollow.

"There is something down there, like a hole or something," he says.

Together they check the edges of the floor and it's Hawk, who finds the thin string along the floorboards. He pulls at it and the entire floor comes up.

"Christ!" says Holmes and takes a step back.

The smell coming at them is strong, and burns their eyes. Hawk gets up and they both walk back a few steps and look at the empty black hole in the floor.

"What do you think?" asks Holmes.

"Chemicals, and something else. Something rotten."

"I agree. Do you have a flashlight?"

"No, but there might be one in the kitchen"

While Hawk goes looking for the flashlight Holmes kneels by the hole and tries to see something. She thinks there is some kind of ladder or steps leading down, but she is not sure.

"Here we are," says Hawk, coming back. He points the strong beam of light from the flashlight down into the hole and they can see it's a ladder leading down.

Hawk pulls his weapon and says, "I'll go down first, you hold the light and I'll let you know when it's safe."

It's only five or six rungs and then he is standing on a concrete floor. He looks around in the gloom, but can only see shapes, a few tables and a chair.

"Come on down, " he calls up.

When Holmes is standing next to him with the light they can see they are standing in a rectangular room, all painted in white. On the wall next to the ladder is a switch and when Hawk turns it on the room is flooded with white light from several fixtures in the ceiling.

"OK, now what?" asks Holmes.

"Follow the stink."

He walks towards the other end of the room where there is a wooden structure. There is a metal ring on the top beam and two on either side beam. The entire thing is anchored to the floor with heavy bolts. The corners are reinforced with metal supports.

To the right along the wall there are plastic sheets hanging down from the ceiling. Hawk walks up to them and pulls one to the side.

"I think we found something."

Holmes, who has been looking at a stainless steel table on the other side of the structure looks back at him, and asks, "what?"

She walks over and when she sees what he is looking at she gasps, "are those-?"

"I think so, first I thought they were just mannequins, but look at this one. I swear that's a trickle of blood." He points at where the neck meets the shoulder. Holmes steps closer and looks carefully at the few drops of red. Then she tilts her head to the side, and steps to the right.

"What are you doing," he asks.

She doesn't answer him, instead she walks back to the table, she looked at before and when she comes back she has a stainless instrument in her hand. It looks like a long thin tweezers. She carefully places it next to the two red drops and presses down. A third drop appears.

"Shit," says Hawk.

Holmes gently pushes the tweezers against the mannequin and the tip disappears. She pulls it out and reinserts just one leg and then takes hold of the material and slowly pulls it to the side.

"What is that?" asks Hawk.

Holmes pulls a bit more and a few inches of the material come away and below is a white plastic.

"It's skin, real skin," she says and pulls a bit more.

"No, it can't be. It looks so perfect, if it was skin wouldn't it have been damaged by now?"

"I think he uses chemicals to cure it somehow. Look at these stitches; it must have taken him hours to do it. I'd say the entire skin from the head has been pulled over the mannequin's and then sewn on to the rest. He even added make up to cover the stitches.

Hawk looks at the eyes of the mannequin. They are dark blue, and her hair frames her beautifully.

"I think this is Katie. What I don't get is why would she still bleed, she has been missing for weeks, and if she has been dead that long there should be no blood," he says.

"Maybe the chemicals stop it from coagulating properly. It's only three small drops, that's all."

Hawk pulls away more of the sheeting, "look at this, there are even kids and teenagers here, all perfectly stuffed."

"We need to call this in," says Holmes, stepping away from Katie.

* * * * *

Kerry is looking out the window and watches as the deputy parks the police car on the curb and walks up to his house.

"Hi, I'm Friedman, I'm here to take you to Doc's for you to ID the bodies."

Kerry opens the door more and lets the man inside. As he walks into the house Kerry pulls a long kitchen knife from behind his back and stabs Friedman on the right side of the neck. He then turns the knife and rips it out, and by doing so opens a big wound. The blood squirts out in an arch, and Friedman gurgles while falling to the floor where he twitches a few times and then lies still.

Kerry watches the dead man for a second or two, and then grabs a backpack he put by the door earlier and walks out into the sunshine. He has made up his mind while waiting for the deputy. He will go to the cabin and get a few things before driving to Canada, and from there fly to Brazil. He will miss his family, but he can't take the mannequins with him, but he is sure the God will forgive him. He can always build new ones.

When he arrives at the end of the trail he sees a police cruiser parked there. He recognizes it as the same cruiser Chief Hawk had used when he came to see him earlier. Kerry is not carrying any weapons with him, he had left the kitchen knife by the body, but he has some hidden by the shed. He knows he is faster and stronger than most men. An alcoholic Chief of Police will not stand in his way.

* * * * *

"Do you hear that?" asks Holmes.

They are standing outside on the porch and Hawk is trying to get a signal on his phone so he can call the FBI.

"Yeah, it sounds like a Quad,"

"Could it be Kerry?"

He listens more carefully and then says, "I don't think so. It sounds as if it was driving away from us."

Holmes has to agree, the sound soon stops and the clearing is quiet again.

"Any luck?" she asks.

"Yeah, there is a weak signal," says Hawk, leaning against one beam on the porch with his phone to his ear.

Kerry is on the other side of the clearing, he had started the Quad, but then realized they would hear him coming, so he took his clothes off and began running naked through the forest. When he arrives, he is hardly sweating even though the day is warm. He lays down behind a tree trunk and watches the two people on the porch. The woman is walking back and forth while the man is talking on the phone. They must have found something, they both look a bit pale and the woman is biting her fingernails.

Kerry slowly crawls to his right and foot by foot makes it to the back of the cabin. He sticks his arm inside a dead tree trunk and pulls out a blow gun with four darts attached to it with tape. Back up.

"When can you be here?" asks Hawk into the phone.

The other person says something, and then Hawk says, "please, get here as fast as you can, this is serious. Meanwhile, I will have my people arrest Kerry."

"What did they say," asks Holmes when he hangs up.

"They should be here in a couple of hours, I'm going to call Friedman and have him wait for Collins, then arrest Kerry."

Hawk hears the signal go through but no one answers.

"Shit, he might have left the phone at the station, and I'm not carrying a radio. We have to go back to town and-"

Holmes sees how Hawk's eyes open wide, and then he slowly drops to the floor. He doesn't fall, it's more like if his legs give up on him slowly and he goes down. She stares at him, and doesn't understand what has happened.

Suddenly there is a sting on her cheek, and when she looks down, she can see a thin dart sticking out, and then it just falls to the deck. Suddenly her legs turn to jelly and everything around her begins to spin.

Chapter 42

Hawk's head is pounding when he comes to, and the pain is like small explosions inside and when his vision clears, he can see the wood structure in front of him and Holmes hanging from it. She is naked and her arms and legs are away from her body and there is a noose around her neck. Her face is red and she has a hard time breathing, but she is awake. Hawk is lying on the floor, his hands are tied behind his back and his feet are also tied. He tries to move, but the pain in his head is too strong so he stops. "Where is he?" he asks.

"Over there," she whispers back, her voice strangled. Using her finger, she points to the other end of the room.

"Here we go, I thought we could do with some music while we work," says Kerry, coming back and pushing a stainless table in front of him. There is a portable radio with a CD player on it. He parks the table close to the structure and presses play.

It is not music that comes out of the speakers, but horrible cries of anguish and pain. Hawk can not be sure if they are men or women, but one scream is defiantly a child's, it's higher than the others.

"Do you hear how they sing to the god?" asks Kerry picking up a scalpel from the table and walking around the structure. He climbs a small step-ladder and places his left hand on Holmes shoulder.

"Please don't do this," she pleads.

"And why not? Don't you want to please the god, don't you want to sing to his glory?"

"Hey, asshole, let her go, and take me instead," says Hawk.

"No, I want you to watch and most of all I want you to listen. When she is done singing, it's your turn, just lie there and wait."

Hawk can see the fear in Holmes eyes and she has tears trickling down her cheeks. Suddenly she wets herself and he can smell the urine as it splashes to the floor next to him. He closes his eyes and for the first time since the day Vivian and Victor died, he prays.

"This will sting a bit, but be brave," says Kerry placing the scalpel against the skin in Holmes neck.

The scream is deafening in the enclosed space, it overrides the screams from the CD, it burns itself into the bone marrow of Hawk. He opens his eyes and Holmes is looking down at him, her mouth is open and she is gasping for air. Her body trembles and there is blood dropping down on the floor.

"Now, that wasn't so bad now was it?" says Kerry, while stepping down.

He walks around over to the table and picks up another instrument. He holds it up and Hawk sees it's another scalpel, but not like any he has ever seen. The blade is much longer than a normal one. He would guess about six inches long and slightly curved.

"This is a special tool, it's great for skinning. Much better than that old steel knife I learned with."

Hawk knows he has to do something and fast. He tries to pull his hands free, but they are tightly bound and so are his legs. But when he wriggles around, he notices the floor is extremely smooth and he slides easily on it. When Kerry comes around the table and is about to walk past Hawk he uses his heels and pushes himself along the floor. He slides across the short distance to Kerry and hits him below the knees with his head.

"What the-", is all Kerry manages to say before he falls across Hawk onto the floor.

Hawk is ready and when Kerry falls, he crawls on top of him and with the only weapon he has, his teeth, he bites him in the neck, going for the jugular vein.

To late Kerry realizes what is happening, and instead of protecting his neck, he turns his head, looking for the scalpel he dropped giving Hawk the space he needs.

At first his mouth fills with the taste of the skin, then his teeth sink in a little, and then suddenly he tastes the coppery taste of blood. Hawk opens his mouth and takes a deeper bite and his mouth fills with blood as he ruptures the vein.

Kerry feels the pain of the bite, but he doesn't understand what has happened. Not until he hears the other man gurgling and spitting blood as he lets go of his neck. Suddenly his arms go weak, and he can feel the blood pumping out of his body. Kerry turns his head and faces Hawk.

"You would have done well in the jungle, you have the killer instinct," he says before he goes still.

Hawk looks at the man under him, the blood is still pumping out, but with less pressure, and then it turns to a trickle. He gets off him and looks for the scalpel.

He cuts himself a few times before he manages to cut the rope tying his hands, but the knife cuts through them easily and soon he can free his bound legs.

"Hey, hey, wake up, it's over," says Hawk while pulling the noose over Holmes head.

Her eyes flicker open and when she looks down, she can see Kerry's naked body lying in a pool of blood under her.

Hawk steps down from the little ladder and checks the wound on her back. It's not deep, but it follows her spine to perfection and ends just where her buttocks begin. He walks over to the wall and unties the ropes holding her up. He slowly lowers her and when she is on the floor, he unties her legs and arms.

After looking around, he finds her clothes and his and after getting dressed, he brings them over to her and slowly dresses her. The wound is bleeding so he covers it with a long strip of tape from a roll he finds on the table with the knives. It's not perfect, but good enough.

When he is helping her up, she says, "I'm sorry, I pissed myself."

He puts his arm around her to support her and says, "don't worry, I won't tell anyone."

He helps her up the ladder and through the cabin. When they are on the porch, he sits her down in one of the chairs while he tries to get a signal. His phone was still in his pocket of his pants where he had put it after calling the FBI.

They sit in the late afternoon sun, and Holmes takes his hand in hers. All around them is silence except the rustling of the pines. A deer walks out into the clearing and eats a little before going back into the shadows.

"This is such a beautiful place," says Holmes.

"It sure is, and I can see why Kerry chose it."

"And now what?"

Hawk turns to her and says, "when you are fixed up, you go back to university and write the best thesis you can."

"I don't know if I can," she says and tears form in the corners of her eyes.

"Of course you can, and you should. It will help you to process all your emotions. Trust me, I know about emotions, and I don't want you to end up like me."

She smiles at him and says, "why not? We can both become scarred alcoholics. My scar will be as good as yours, I suppose."

Hawk laughs and says, "I guess so, but I will still be better looking."

"Right."

[Ed. Note: The numerous errors in text have not been corrected.]

