

## Praise for Author Joni M. Fisher

A gifted story-teller, Joni Fisher writes with energy and passion that comes to life in her characters. *North of the Killing Hand* is an intricate and suspenseful read that grips the reader from start to finish."

--John Foxjohn, International, *USA Today*, and *New York Times* bestselling author

"*South of Justice* is a multilayered, intricate, and suspenseful page-turner you'll want to read in one sitting."

--Diane Capri, *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of the Hunt for Jack Reacher thrillers

"Past secrets test the bonds of family loyalty and a fledgling love affair. The unwavering strength of the protagonists, their commitment to the truth and to each other will have you cheering for *South of Justice*."

--Melissa Hladik Meyer, Author of *Good Company*

"Bottom line is: *South of Justice* is a multilayered romantic book that will grasp your attention and lure you to read it in one sitting."

--SeriousReading.com

"*South of Justice* is fantastic and fun—a crisp and suspenseful story. Fisher makes a wonderful entrance as a crime fiction writer. I can't wait for *North of the Killing Hand*!"

–Timothy D. Browne, M.D.

“Joni M. Fisher weaves a tale of passionate love, undying loyalty and enduring friendship between strong characters bound together and tested by deep-rooted principles. Curl up in your favorite chair with a tasty snack and a refreshing beverage—you won’t want to move until you’ve turned the last page of *South of Justice*.”

–Donna Kelly, Author of *Brass Chains*

“A fabulous start to an intense series with a large cast of characters I couldn’t help but love and cheer for. Fisher is a master weaver of intrigue and strong characters willing to go the distance to get things done while keeping their love strong.”

–K.D. Fleming, author and Golden Heart Winner

“Tightly written, complex characters, intriguing plot—all the ingredients for a great read! This debut book is a winner, and I am looking forward to more books in the future.”

–Diane Burke, award-winning author of inspirational romantic suspense

“I was intrigued from the very first chapter. It grabs your attention, and I loved the characters immediately. I believe I have found my new favorite author.”

–Kindle Customer

“Long-held secrets kept me turning the pages to the end. This is a great book to read for anyone who enjoys crime stories with a touch of romance. Also, the book has loyal friends, moral values and strong faith to make this an enjoyable and clean read. I appreciate books like this one.”

–Joann R. Greene, Goodreads Giveaway Winner

"*South of Justice* has an intricate plot with several twists and turns. Long-held secrets keep the reader turning pages all the way to the end. I really enjoyed reading *South of Justice* and recommend it for anyone who enjoys crime stories with a touch of romance."

–Luv2read

"I really enjoyed this book. It was well written and the twists and turns had me turning pages deep into the night."

–Vicki W Tharp, Author of *Don't Look Back*

"Well written book with great details and informative. The trial and the back story of the crime make me not want to put the book down. Great read, can't wait for the next one."

–C. Riecke

"Intricate plot with totally believable characters that draw you in and don't let go! Suspenseful and real."

–Clara Jane Sweet

**Also by Joni M. Fisher**

**South of Justice**

# **North of the Killing Hand**

**Joni M. Fisher**

North of the Killing Hand

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ISBN-13: 978-0-9972575-2-6 (Trade paperback version)

ISBN-13: 978-0-9972575-3-3 (eBook English version)

Original Cover Design by Damonza

Interior Formatting by Author E.M.S.

To Jessica Nicole Fisher Crisostomo,  
a gift from God.



## **Acknowledgments**

Deep thanks to critique partners from Kiss of Death and the Tampa Area Romance Authors who encouraged, corrected, and occasionally laughed at my flailing transition from non-fiction to fiction writing. Special thanks to authors: Jamie Beckett, KD Fleming, John Foxjohn, Donna Kelly, Mary McGuire, Melissa Hladik Meyer, and Carol J. Post for their unflinching, wise advice. Special thanks also to brave beta readers: Dawn Anderson, Kim Addington, Doris Arrington, Cyndi Boswell, John M. Esser, Carol Faulkner-Davis, Chuck Davis, Caryn L. Frink, Terri Johnson, Audrey Nettlow, Cheryl Riecke, Suzanne Roustio, Carol Speyerer, and Martha Walker for taking my long journey to publication as seriously as I do.



# North of the Killing Hand



1

August 3, 2002

Fourteen-year-old Nefi Jenkins settled into her perch thirty-four feet up a strangler fig tree, shaded by the canopy of the top branches. From her favorite place, she enjoyed a bird's eye view of the Amazon from the Juruá River that wrapped the west and northern boundaries of the tribe's territory, to the denser jungle to the east, and the swamp to the south. Her parents didn't know of this place because they had not asked. Experience had shown her that forgiveness was easier to gain than permission. She did not want to be lectured about every injury and fatality from falls suffered in human history.

On a clear day, she could locate other tribes by smoke columns where women cooked at the center of other settlements. At the center of her village, surrounded by a dozen wooden huts with palm-frond rooftops, Mali cooked for Nefi's family and her own.

Nefi longed to travel, even just to visit other tribes, but in August, the river ran low. Father said he refused to go out in August because the boat was too heavy to tow, but Nefi believed the real reason was his fear of anacondas that draped themselves on branches over the river like braided hemp ropes thrown from a ship. Father said anaconda did not live back in the states. He promised to take her there, but every year changed to 'next' year.

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Nefi sighed. Each year grew longer, and this was the longest month of the year.

Birds scattered from trees along the riverbank west of the village. Nefi dug her father's binoculars from her satchel to investigate the disturbance. A human-made bird call sounded. A warning. Moments later the seven other children of the village dashed to their hiding places.

Had the Matis crossed the river to hunt?

She leaned forward to see around leaves into the center of the village where three men with rifles faced Mali. The small elderly woman turned toward Mama and Papa, who walked toward the strangers. The shortest man pointed to Papa. Nefi focused the binocular lenses on the stranger's face. The Pirarucu Man.

What kind of fool came to trade this time of year? He probably got his boat stuck in the shallow river. City dweller.

The Pirarucu Man pointed to the ground. Mama and Papa knelt. A chill ran up Nefi's spine. He did not seem like a man who would ever ask for prayer. Nefi widened her view to see Mali step toward Mama and Papa. The Pirarucu Man raised his rifle and shot twice.

Nefi sucked in a deep breath. Mama and Papa slumped over. A tiny cloud of smoke rose from the rifle. A howl roared out of Nefi as if by sound alone she could scare off the Pirarucu Man.

She lost her balance and fell four feet onto a wide branch below, striking it hard enough to cut off her scream. Clinging to the branch, she watched Papa's binoculars fall thirty feet before the rare and unmistakable sound of breaking glass marked the impact.

She shimmied to the tree trunk, hugged it, and slid to the next lower branch. The tree blurred, forcing her to blink repeatedly. Her mind spun. Her feet and arms worked on sense memory as her body scrambled down the familiar smooth-skinned fig tree into the cavernous wall-like folds in the trunk. Gasping and wobbly among tree roots that arched waist-high around her, she rubbed her eyes to clear away the nightmare images flashing in her mind.

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Stepping over the shattered binoculars, she ran. Crashing through knee-high ferns and tree roots, she tore a fresh path back to the village. Her bare feet slapped the hard-packed mud. She trampled ferns and flowers, sending small creatures scuttling out of her way. She panted. Her heartbeat drummed in her ears. Small branches scratched her arms and her face. Stumbling over roots and vines, she groped her way upright and charged on. She raced to her village, to home, to Mama, to Papa, praying the binoculars lied.

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### 2

August 8, 2002

The more twenty-one-year-old Vincent Gunnerson thought about his mission, the more heroic it sounded. He and two others were tasked with a privately-funded mission to go to the Brazilian jungle to pick up the fourteen-year-old niece of U.S. Senator Jenkins. The girl's parents had been murdered, leaving her stranded. Four hours into the jungle it seemed a tame assignment.

Vincent was second in a line of three men hiking northeasterly through waist-high brush and towering trees in Serra do Divisor National Park on the Brazilian side of the Amazon rainforest. Ruis Ramos led the way along a worn pathway. Vincent waved off a cloud of gnats, caught the toe of his boot on a tree root, and stumbled. He gasped, inhaled a bug, and then his rifle barrel smacked him in the back of the head. Good thing only Blake saw it.

Being that kind of friend, Blake Clayton laughed.

Vincent coughed out the bug.

"Just a walk in the park, eh?" Blake muttered from behind Vincent.

Their leader Ruis Ramos had suggested this mission would be fairly easy.

So far, Vincent believed him. "Did you expect paved walkways?"

"I expected something better than a critter trail in a national

park.”

Ruis called back, “We’re almost there.”

*There* being that spot on Ruis’s map labeled Queimado Hill. *There*, where they were to meet the Brazilian officials for a briefing and to plan their combined search for the girl who disappeared from her village right after the shootings.

Vincent had accepted the mission immediately though he spoke neither Portuguese nor Spanish. If anyone asked, he was prepared to say he was in it for money, for bragging rights, for something to do before starting college in September, and for a letter of recommendation from Senator Jenkins. Though he would never admit it, his true motive was to be like his father, a man who daily risked his life to save others as an officer in the NYPD. Rescuing a recently orphaned American citizen from the heart of the Amazon rainforest seemed like the most heroic use of the summer.

He didn’t know Blake Clayton’s reasons for going, but he was glad to have him along. After serving in the Marines with him, Blake was like the older brother Vincent always wanted. At six foot even, age thirty, redheaded, with 220 compact pounds of bone, muscle, and integrity, Blake had the soul of a poetic clown. They had separately applied to Berkeley College and were accepted. So why not take on one last mission before starting college?

Ruis, a former U.S. Navy lieutenant with special operations training, was five foot nine and thirty years old. Though shorter than Blake and Vincent, Ruis had movie-star good looks and justified confidence. He had assumed leadership of the mission because he spoke Spanish and a smattering of Portuguese. Vincent just knew Ruis was the kind of guy who slept in Kevlar.

The men arrived at a trailhead that opened onto a hilltop. Standing at the peak of Queimado Hill along the bank of the Moa River in Southwestern Brazil, Blake set his backpack on the ground. Vincent followed suit, keeping his M-16A2 rifle hanging from its strap over his shoulder. He walked to the cliff’s edge.

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Blake approached Ruis. "How do the park rangers know when to meet us?"

Ruis planted a hand on Blake's shoulder. "Let's not call them that."

Blake raised his eyebrows. "Okay."

"IBAMA," Ruis said, "stands for the Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e dos Recursos Naturais Renovaveis."

How anyone got the acronym IBAMA from *that* mystified Vincent. Even in Portuguese, the letters didn't add up right.

"This agency is chronically underfunded and outmanned," Ruis added. "It fights poachers, slash-and-burn farmers, squatters, drug runners, fires, illegal loggers, guerillas, and eco-terrorists over an area larger than California and Texas combined. Occasionally they also rescue lost tourists and arbitrate quarrels between tribes." Ruis's hand dropped off Blake's shoulder. "If nothing else, let's respect them for their high mortality rate."

When Ruis returned to the trailhead, Blake bowed his head.

Vincent didn't believe Blake meant to insult the local officials. If given a few more minutes, he too might have called them park rangers.

Blake stepped up to the cliff edge beside Vincent.

The foliage had been thicker on the trail side of the hill than it was looking eastward. From this vantage point, the Amazon terrain had widely-spaced trees. The Adirondacks looked more like a jungle than this. Morning fog rose from the land like steam, as if the land itself was sweating, but the breeze at the cliff chilled. It felt like one-hundred percent humidity. The sun glowed with blurry borders through drifting layers of smoky fog.

Ruis's voice caused Vincent and Blake to face the trailhead. There Ruis greeted two short, solidly-built men in uniform. They shouldered ancient, dusty rifles that looked unreliable in a firefight. Everything about the two Brazilians seemed gritty and dust-covered except for their brightly colored IBAMA agency patches.

Ruis introduced Officers Raposo and Machado.

IBAMA Officer Raposo came up beside Vincent and waved his arm out toward the expanse of the sparse forest below. "*Mirante.*"

Vincent scanned the flat valley below. "That's *Mirante*?"

Raposo spoke rapidly with Ruis in Portuguese that sounded like Spanish with a German accent which made Vincent all the more grateful Ruis handled the translation.

Ruis said something that made the IBAMA officers laugh then he said, "*Mirante* means overlook."

Vincent nodded at Ruis. "And a beauty it is."

The two IBAMA officers smiled at the view. Unlike Vincent and Blake, the officers had not broken a sweat. A chorus of trills, twitters, whoops, hoots, whistles, squeaks, and squawks, clicks, and chirps sounded as birds and frogs joined in to celebrate the day. Despite the variety of noises from the trees, Vincent couldn't spot a single creature in the dense vegetation.

Ruis handed cold bottles of water to the IBAMA officers. While the officers drank, Ruis told Vincent and Blake, "I'm going to plan our search with these gentlemen. It'll go faster and smoother if I don't have to translate."

Vincent could take a hint. "That works for me."

Blake nodded. Ruis then spread a topographic map on the ground in the center of the clearing. The IBAMA officers each took a knee along the edges of the map.

Vincent used binoculars to scan the area below. "Brazil," he said to Blake, lowering his binoculars, "has seven thousand miles of beach."

"Try not to think about it," Blake said.

They were almost too far inland for Vincent's imagination to conjure coconut-oiled women sunning themselves on topless beaches hundreds of miles away. Almost.

Blake sighed. "Maybe we'll see some genuine Indians."

Images of male Indians in loincloths obliterated all fantasies of beach beauties. A flash of color flitted overhead toward the trees. Vincent located it in the canopy where a branch swayed. There in

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black, gold, and orange glory, a toucan repeatedly snapped his oversized beak. The bird looked just like Toucan Sam on the cereal box. His father had loved that cereal.

A squeal from Raposo's radio scared off Toucan Sam. Raposo tuned his radio until a voice came through weak but clear. The device looked like an ancient field phone, like the kind shown in old war movies. Perhaps this *was* old war surplus equipment sold to an agency in a third-world country. Lowering his radio, Officer Raposo spoke to Ruis.

Vincent raised his eyebrows.

Ruis asked Vincent and Blake, "Do you want the good news or the bad news?"

Maybe they found the girl. "The good news," Vincent said.

"IBAMA officers have arrived at Nefi's village," Ruis said. "They are interviewing the villagers and searching for evidence."

"And the bad news?" Blake asked.

"The investigating officers will probably be gone by the time we reach the village." Ruis resumed studying the map.

To locate a fourteen-year-old girl in the vast Amazon River basin was a daunting challenge. They were starting out with disadvantages of time and distance. The murders had occurred five days earlier. But how far away was this village? Vincent stepped up behind Ruis to get a better look at the map.

The two IBAMA officers knelt on either side of Ruis around the map. A penciled line ran from *Cruzeiro do Sul*, where they had landed earlier that morning in the southwest part of Brazil, to their present position at Queimado Hill in the Serra do Divisor National Park.

On the map, Officer Raposo swept his hand toward settlements along the Moa River, a tributary of the Juruá River. It flowed north-northeast into the Solimoes, which emptied into the great Amazon River. Officer Raposo pointed to a settlement on the Juruá River labeled in the smallest letters on the map. He then set his fingertip farther northeast along the river, to an area surrounded by dark

green, and then Officer Raposo said the only thing Vincent understood. *Casa Jenkins*.

Of all the places in the Amazon, this area looked the least inhabited. On the flight to Brazil, Vincent learned from Ruis that the rivers were the main form of transportation in the rainforest, but as August was winter—the dry season—the shallow river meandered through six-hundred miles of canyons and flood plains. The river was too low to navigate by boat from their starting point to the smudged fingerprint that marked *casa Jenkins*; however, the river was deeper downstream from the target village to the north. How long would it take to hike *that far*?

Ruis and the IBAMA officers pointed to different spots on the map. Officer Raposo spread his hand over the map of an area west of the Juruá River and spoke in emphatic tones. The other officer had crossed himself before he sat back on his legs. Vincent stepped up to the map. The discussion continued in Portuguese or Spanish, he couldn't tell the difference. The men then stood.

The officers offered Ruis one of their ancient field radios. Ruis then removed his Motorola 9500 satellite phone from a waterproof bag.

Ruis had briefed Blake and Vincent on it during the flight to Brazil. It uplinked to a series of sixty-six satellites, and it had a twenty-hour battery life. Ruis, of course, carried two fully-charged backup batteries along with the satellite phone in a waterproof bag.

The officers admired Ruis's fancy phone and put away their relic radios.

Both officers shook hands with Ruis, Vincent, and Blake then they headed back down the trail. Apparently, the Brazilians and Americans were conducting separate searches. It made sense considering the vast ground they needed to cover.

After the IBAMA officers had left, Ruis pulled a pencil from his shirt pocket and dropped to one knee by the map. "This," he said, jabbing at a place on the Juruá River, "is where the Jenkins lived. The villagers report that Nefi ran off on August third and left her

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family's boat behind. In that terrain, she could have traveled anywhere in this area." He drew an eighty-mile-wide circle on the map.

Vincent sighed. They were south of the area Ruis circled on the map.

"Both officers say she probably headed north along the river," Ruis said. "The water is deep enough there for a boat."

"Why did that officer genuflect?" Vincent asked.

"This area on the west side of the river is the Matis tribe territory." Ruis scowled. "Hostiles."

Vincent checked the scale on the map and estimated their position. "The girl has a two-hundred-mile head start on us."

"How can we catch up?" Blake asked.

Ruis smiled. "I'm hiring a seaplane to take us to Nefi's village."

Blake paled. The poor guy despised flying more than dental work. "Forgive me, Lord. I shouldn't have complained about the hike. So we go back to the park station?" Blake tucked a thumb under the shoulder strap of his backpack.

"The park we just hiked from?" Vincent asked pointing west to the trailhead.

Ruis reached up and gently nudged Vincent's arm southwesterly. Vincent dropped his arm to his side.

Blake shouldered his backpack. "I don't mind going back. I forgot bug spray."

"The seaplane can pick us up here, tomorrow." Ruis stabbed the map with his pencil to indicate a place downstream on the Moa River a day's hike away.

Vincent crouched by the map, casting his shadow over it.

Ruis tapped the map. "Officer Raposo believes her parents took her to Manaus for immunizations. If she heads for a city, this northern city is the most likely choice. Copies of her description have been transmitted to authorities all over the country. He said he'll contact us if he gets any news."

Vincent resigned himself to a day's hike to the spot on the map

where the seaplane would pick them up. He set his expectations low for the reliability of a seaplane in the Amazon. The nearest airport with a mechanic had to be a couple of hundred miles away. Commercial flights were spooky enough, but the idea of riding in a seaplane gave him chills. They were so small, like a car with wings.

Vincent waved his open palm over the north half of Ruis's drawn circle. "So we hike to the pickup point and fly to her village. After that, we follow the trail northeast and look for signs of her?"

Ruis nodded. Vincent and Ruis waited for Blake to weigh in. Blake nodded.

Vincent found encouragement in the fact that a girl raised here should fare okay if left on her own, but where were the men who killed her parents? And why did she leave the village?

Rising to stand, Ruis shook the dirt off his map. He folded it and tucked it in a plastic bag that he stuffed in his shirt pocket.

"I'm sorry to say we don't have any photos of the girl. Based on photos of her parents, she's probably tall for her age." Ruis dug something that looked like a string of beads from his backpack. He held it up. "Senator Jenkins said this is something the girl should recognize."

Vincent examined the leather and stone bead choker up close. "Looks handmade."

Ruis handed it to Vincent. "Show it when we encounter any girls."

Vincent said, "I'll be glad to." With that, he fastened the leather and stone bead choker around his neck for safekeeping.

"Maybe I should take it," Blake said. "We don't want to scare her off. Females trust me." Blake wagged his eyebrows. He had a kind of boyish Southern cowboy charm women responded to, but still...

"She's fourteen," Vincent reminded him. "Can you say jailbait?"

Blake patted Vincent's shoulder. "And you just turned twenty-one. Legal age here too, I bet."

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Ruis cleared his throat. His glare sent chills through Vincent. "I have to make a call." He stepped away from Vincent and Blake.

Vincent overheard Ruis arranging for more supplies and the seaplane. Vincent took a swig of water and tucked the bottle back into his pack. After adjusting the straps comfortably over his shoulders, he waited beside Blake for Ruis to finish his call.

Ruis swung his machete up to his shoulder as he led the way back to the trailhead. Vincent and Blake fell in line behind him. At the mouth of the trail head, Vincent elbowed Blake and cut in front of him, leaving Blake at the end of the line.

They were going deeper into the road-less nowhere. They could encounter poachers, guerillas, drug runners, hostile Indians, and who knows what kind of vicious wildlife. Vincent didn't know which he dreaded most, the flight in a seaplane or the idea that their connection to the outside world depended on a satellite phone.

They had brought along a few days' worth of food and water. He hoped it was enough to last until they caught up with the teenager.

Why did she leave her village?

\* \* \*

An hour after they left Queimado Hill while hiking parallel to the Moa River, Blake launched into conversation. "Two years ago, I learned that Vincent has a fierce intuition that's worth trusting. Tell him, Vincent. Tell him about the Osprey."

Vincent shook his head. *Not this again.*

"Ah, don't be modest," Blake said. "So we're stationed in Yuma, Arizona, in the spring of two thousand, and this brand-spanking new airplane arrives. It was one really ugly contraption, half helicopter, half airplane."

"The Osprey?" Ruis asked.

"Yeah," Blake continued, "And about that same time the Osprey arrives, we ended up escorting Senators around the base. Seems Congress wanted to close some bases, so the Senators went

on a look-see tour to decide which bases to keep and which to close.”

Ruis ducked under a low-hanging branch. “Heads up.”

Vincent stopped and backed up a step. The vine on the overhanging branch moved. He pointed it out to Blake. It looked like a pale green vine wrapped around the branch until it lifted its head and stuck out its forked tongue. Vincent stepped off the trail, crushing a small bush under his size fourteen boot. He took two more steps to resume the trail and Blake followed.

A few strides ahead, Ruis glanced back.

Blake resumed his story. “One Senator asked Vincent what he thought of the plane. So with his usual New Yorker diplomacy, Vincent tells him, ‘Sir, it doesn’t look aerodynamically sound. It looks like it was designed by a committee.’”

Vincent said, “You know Senator Jenkins was on that tour.”

“Was he the tall Senator or the fat one?”

Vincent answered, “The tall one.”

Ruis said, “Is that where you first met Senator Jenkins?”

“Yeah, yeah, but what I’m trying to say is that Vincent’s intuition was dead on. The Osprey took off with a full crew and a group of Marines. It crashed west of Tucson.”

Ruis scowled. “How bad?”

“Killed nineteen Marines.”

Ruis shook his head and resumed hiking.

“The other important thing to know about Vincent,” Blake said elbowing past Vincent, “is that he’s a living, breathing, two-hundred-pound human magnet for dangerous females.”

Ruis grunted. As he walked, his head swiveled slowly left to right, right to left, ever watchful.

“I’m telling you if we walked into a bar in Rio,” Blake said, “the craziest, most dangerous woman in the place would rise from her stool and stagger toward him. It’s uncanny.”

“How do you know Senator Jenkins?” Vincent asked Ruis in a blatant attempt to change the subject. Maybe Blake would take the

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hint.

"My father played poker with him. They served on the same ship," Ruis said.

"Wait a minute," Vincent called out. "Is your father Admiral Ramos?"

"Yes."

Vincent felt a bit slow-witted that he had not made the connection earlier between Admiral Ramos and Ruis Ramos. Having a Navy Admiral for a father was a big deal.

Blake sighed, no doubt resigned to having his story about the Osprey crash ignored. "So," Blake said to Ruis, "why aren't you going for a Navy career?"

"People would expect too much of me or nothing at all," Ruis added, "I applied to the U.S. Marshals Service. Senator Jenkins said he'd write me a recommendation letter."

"Sounds like a better plan than Blake's," Vincent said.

"Better than joining the rodeo?" Ruis asked deadpan.

Blake snorted.

"Blake said he was going to apply to colleges," Vincent said, "under affirmative action."

Ruis stopped and glanced at Blake. "Since when does being a red-head qualify as a minority under affirmative action?"

"If I didn't get in on the first try," Blake said with an accompanying glare to Vincent, "which I did, by the way, I was going to re-apply under affirmative action. I'm a white Christian gentleman. Whites are fast becoming a minority. And on television and in movies gentlemen and Christians are universally portrayed as hypocrites, wimps, and fools. If y'all ask me, it has all the hallmarks of discrimination."

Ruis took out his canteen.

Vincent said, "Be grateful colleges don't require passing a psych test."

"I should add *Southern* to the discrimination list. Southerners get treated poorly, too, if you ask me. My own friend," Blake said,

taking out his canteen, “himself a big-city Yankee, insists that rural Southerners are natural-born crazy.”

“As proof,” Vincent said, uncapping his water, “I offer a game called Cow Bingo.”

“That’s only once a year.” Blake downed a deep swallow of his water. “For a New Yorker, you sure have a long memory.” In a flagrant attempt to redirect the conversation, he said, “Ultimately, I plan to work for the FBI.”

“Get this,” Vincent said, waving his canteen, “after their high school homecoming football game, they mark squares on the field. Grown adults buy deeds to sections of the field. Then they bring out a cow. Yes, a cow. Crowds sit for hours watching the cow, hoping he’ll crap on their section of the field.”

“She,” Blake said.

“What?”

“Cows are female; bulls are male.”

“Excuse my ignorance of livestock.” Vincent placed his canteen over his heart.

“You’re excused,” Blake said.

Ruis swallowed a swig of water. “Why?”

“Raised in New York City,” Blake said, “the closest poor Vincent ever gets to livestock is at a barbecue.”

Ruis glowered at Blake. “*Why* would you pay to watch a cow defecate on a football field?”

Blake said, “The section with the biggest cow pie wins.”

“Wins what? Fertilizer?” Sarcasm did not look good on Ruis.

“In defense of my sanity as well as the spirit of the band booster’s fundraiser,” Blake said, “Let me explain that the winner gets a new pickup truck. It’s a fundraiser for the band geeks.”

Ruis glanced from Vincent to Blake, as if waiting for a punch line.

Pleased at making his point, Vincent smiled.

Blake’s shoulders slumped. “Y’all go ahead, mock small-town Southerners. Call us uncivilized, but we don’t shoot each other in

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traffic. No, siree. In my part of the country, if you're stranded on the roadside, don't be alarmed if a complete stranger stops to help."

Speckled sunlight pierced the high canopy. The three men hiked over knee-high thick tree roots and vines, through waist-high ferns and flowers, and emerged onto a wide flat plain dotted with trees. The lowlands smelled of rotting plants and smoke. Near the river where wildlife gathered, the stench of decay intensified. Blake pointed out a variety of animal tracks and scat in the muddy trail leading northwest. At day's end, at their pick-up point, they camped for the night. Ruis ordered Blake to serve as a lookout while Vincent gathered firewood. Ruis strung up hammocks and mosquito netting.

As Vincent dropped a pile of gathered wood, he noticed Blake standing stock still, staring at something large roiling the murky water in the shallows. A small branch fell into the water ahead of the disturbance. The ruffling of the water's surface stopped. Water flowed over the thing in the water, rippling over the uneven contours of its back. Crocodile. Blake slowly lowered his rifle to aim. A nose broke through the water. A second ridge appeared behind the nose. Two wide-set eyes opened half in and half out of the water.

"Hey, Ruis." Blake kept his sights lined up on the beast. "Is crocodile edible?"

Ruis's voice sounded about twenty feet away in the trees. "Tastes like chicken. The meat under the jowl is the best."

Of course, Ruis would know that. Vincent knew that unlike alligators, crocodiles were fiercely aggressive. He wondered how aggressive as he attached a flash muzzle to his own rifle barrel.

"Are you using the suppressor so you don't alarm the crocodile's friends?" Blake asked.

Vincent said, "What do you think the IBAMA officers would do if they heard gunshots?"

"Arrest us for poaching." Blake attached a bayonet to the end of his rifle. "I don't suppose anyone thought to get a hunting

license.”

“Is this for sport or food?” Ruis’s tone suggested he questioned his colleagues’ sanity.

“Survival,” Vincent said. “Don’t tell me these things are an endangered species.”

“Okay, I won’t tell you,” Ruis said.

“If he charges, shoot through the eye,” Blake offered. “They’re thick-skulled.”

Taking aim, Vincent chuckled.

“Yeah, yeah,” Blake said, “It takes one to know one.”

The crocodile slapped its tail in the water then it bared rows of sharp teeth. Ruis fast-pitched a clump of mud into the crocodile’s mouth. Its jaws snapped shut with alarming speed and force then it backed into the deeper water.

“Is a group of crocodiles called a nest?” Blake asked.

All three watched the croc ease downstream and sink out of sight. Vincent breathed easier.

Ruis holstered his handgun. “I believe it’s a bask of crocodiles. Or maybe a float.”

Shouldering his rifle, Vincent stared open-mouthed at Ruis and Blake. Their discussion had become absurdly academic. Ruis arranged sticks for a fire.

“I wouldn’t mind bringing back a souvenir claw or skull.” Blake removed his bayonet and tucked it back into his backpack. “Then again, those boys in U.S. Customs are not very sporting.”

Vincent suspected Blake was speaking from experience.

The men dined on MREs, the instant meal-ready-to-eat substitute Ruis brought. The MREs tasted slightly better than their packaging. Vincent ate facing the river. If there was one crocodile, there were more unseen, lurking in the murky river. Blake kept a lookout. High in the canopy across the river, a loud guttural call sounded.

“What is that?” Vincent said squinting in the direction of the sound. It sounded like a large animal.

## North of the Killing Hand

"That," Blake declared, "is a howler monkey."

Ruis and Vincent traded a glance.

"I watched a lot of National Geographic specials." Blake sat on a fallen log and placed his rifle across his lap. "Got the magazine, too. Here in the scenic Amazon you got your poison dart frog," he said, opening his left thumb from his fist, "you got leeches," he counted on his pointer finger, "you got tarantulas," he raised his middle finger, "you got goliath bird-eating spiders," he raised his ring finger, "you got Colombian giant spiders," he counted on his pinky. Switching to his right hand, he said, "and electric eels, piranhas, vampire bats, Caiman crocodiles, and anacondas," and having run out of fingers, he opened both hands. He stared at his hands as if trying to remember something.

"So you're saying we're not at the top of the food chain here?" Vincent said.

Blake dropped a hand to his rifle. "I'd say we're in the middle." His expression brightened, the way it did when he finished solving a puzzle. "I think *jaguars* are at the top."

"Looks like a leopard?" Vincent might have seen one at the Central Park Zoo.

"Kind of. Leopards aren't in South America," Blake said. "Jaguars are bigger. They can grow up to your weight class."

Vincent struggled to imagine a predatory cat that large.

"They kill with one leap." Blake gestured with both fingers splayed like claws.

Grateful for his rifle, Vincent stared at the river in the fading light. This reminded him of camping trips in the Adirondacks with his family when they told scary stories by the fire. Ghosts, zombies, and the unknown creature under the bed featured largely in his father's stories.

"I'm more concerned about mosquitos," Ruis said.

Vincent and Blake stared at him. Mosquitos?

"You are a strange man," Blake said.

"They spread Yellow fever, Hemorrhagic Dengue Fever,

parasites, equine encephalitis, and other you-don't-want-to-get diseases," Ruis said. "I'd rather die from a jaguar attack than Hemorrhagic Dengue Fever."

"Bigger bragging rights for your obituary," Blake said.

"Exactly," Ruis told Vincent.

"And here I was," Vincent said, "watching out for poachers, drug runners, and savage natives."

Having heard so many dangers in the jungle, Vincent sobered at the unspoken truth that a fourteen-year-old girl could be wandering alone through it. The most likely outcome, the one they avoided discussing, was that she was already beyond the reach of earthly dangers.

He looked up at the small clearing over the river. Blood red and orange streaks reflected the dying sunlight. With the new moon, the night was going to be pitch dark. The cacophony of bird calls faded to creepy silence. The sudden quiet set the men on alert. With one hand on his rifle, they listened. Time slowed in the darkness. Logs crackled in the fire, spitting sparks. A single frog started the night chorus. Moments later more croaks sounded off from low in the trees.

Vincent drew the short twig for the first watch. He climbed up roots and branches to a strong perch on a thick tree limb ten feet above the ground.

Blake lifted the mosquito netting tented over his hammock and climbed into the hammock facing the jungle. He set his rifle diagonally across his torso so that the barrel angled away from his thigh and the rifle butt rested on his chest. He pulled the netting over himself from boots to scalp.

"What does *Cruzeiro do Sul* mean in English?" Blake said.

"The city is named after a constellation." Ruis climbed into the other hammock. "We call it the Southern Cross."

"I take that as a good sign." Blake nodded in the dark. "I'm gonna sleep like a baby 'cause I know there's no way a New Yorker will nod off to the sounds of the great outdoors."

## North of the Killing Hand

"Thanks, buddy." Vincent noticed Blake and Ruis kept their boots on. Was this a cowboy thing, like dying with your boots on? He thought fungus would be a problem in this sweaty, damp environment. "Why are you guys keeping your boots on?"

Ruis and Blake answered in unison, "Tarantulas."

"Oh, great. Yeah, we're having fun now."

A buzzing summoned Ruis from his hammock. He wadded mosquito netting on his way to his backpack. Digging into his pack, he lifted out the bag containing his satellite phone. After a few exchanges, he ended the call with *gracias*, but he didn't sound at all thankful. He secured the device back into its waterproof bag and jammed the bag in his backpack.

"IBAMA officers at the girl's village found two more bodies. Shot." Ruis grabbed a corner of the mosquito netting. Dragging it to his hammock, he half-heartedly tossed it over the line strung over his hammock.

"The girl?" Vincent said.

"Two men. But they also found a severed hand."

Vincent quietly mourned. Why bring a child into such a dangerous, remote place? For all the many natural dangers in the jungle, humans remained the most ruthless predators. He hoped against the odds that the hand did not belong to Nefi Jenkins.