

Rain's Agenda
2019

Note:

Rain's Agenda was originally written in 2009, then sat on my computer for ten years before publication. The story follows black marketeer John Galveston, an Australian living in a post World War III-world, loyal to the British monarch headquartered in northern Australia. This scene, which occurs towards the end of Part 1, takes place in the southern reaches of Bolivia, which, in this world, is a ghettoized part of the United States of South and Central America. Past Bolivia, and the continent is in the hands of the mysterious nation of Andea, a closed-off and alleged anarchist territory which has been the target of recent American terrorist attacks.

Galveston, working with contacts in the CIA, is trying to track down one of these terrorists. A friend of his, Lucy Carlton, has gone missing investigating the group, and he wants to find her safely.

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The town of Puerto Suárez is a small town river port located under fifteen clicks from the Mato Grosso (that is, Andean) border. Approaching the harbour along Laguna Cáceres, Octavio slows the airboat. He explains to the tourists that we'll spend the night here, then head toward Delgado tomorrow.

Sitting next to me is Marie, trying to hold my hand. On my other side is Smith and the bloke meant to be her husband.

Octavio shuts the fan down completely and stands up in his chair behind us. The airboat starts to drift at an angle, the right side coasting right for the dock. He puts his foot out to try and slow us as we touch the dock, then grabs the rope to tie us off.

I lean in and kiss Marie on the cheek. I whisper, "Last night was fun, sweetcheeks."

Before she can respond I'm standing, striding quickly for the back of the boat. I slide in, assume the seat behind the wheel – or rather, the two levers that control fan speed and blade direction. Marie isn't the only one looking at me curiously.

Octavio looks back from the dock. "Excuse me, *amigo*, do not touch any of the contro–"

I crank the fans, ripping us away from the dock. At least one person tumbles – or perhaps jumps – overboard. That leaves five or six on the boat with me, including Marie, Smith and her partner.

On the dock, Octavio has gone from friendly to furious. He's got a radio in his hand and he's reaching for his belt.

These backwoods parts of Bolivia have a lot of drugs, a lot of gun-running, gangsters and murder for hire. It wouldn't be a tremendous shock if there were cartels or *sicarios* hidden away in this swamp.

I yank my own del Toro 9mm, fire twice into the air. Two more people go overboard. Marie's eyes are wide.

Smith makes her move, comes at me. I take my one hand off the control lever and jab her in the windpipe. Then I twirl her, my arm around her neck.

"Everyone off!"

A few more people go over, including Smith's partner. Marie remains frozen where she is, staring at me like a deer in the headlights. I take my gun and fire just to the right of her, the bullet blowing a hole in the dock not two meters from Octavio.

"Go, bitch!"

She comes to her senses and leaps.

Octavio now has his gun, but is resisting taking the shot because of Smith.

I reef the lever. The nose of the boat goes up and we fly away from the dock. As soon as the fan is between me and Octavio, I let Smith go and keep low at the controls. Within seconds, the dock is long behind us.

Smith adjusts her shirt, then takes a seat just in front of me. She's still choking on her air. "Asshole," she grunts.

"I could have pistol-whipped you," I yell over the noise behind me.

She's massaging her throat. "Westmorland should be on the way," she coughs.

"Keep your eyes open for the violet orchids," I say, before quickly adding, "sweetheart."

She scowls as she turns back to the water. We travel south a couple dozen clicks before she tells me to slow.

We're in the vicinity of the area Westmorland had identified on satellite. Our eyes scan the shorelines of each passing island. Nothing, nothing, nothing. This whole thing is simply one vast swamp. You could hide a goddamn terrorist army out here. What in the fuck was Lucie doing out here?

We coast near an island that might be a candidate. Three or four gators hang about lazily. Not the island we're looking for.

We see smoke from a peak ahead. Smith is on her pad checking things out – no, cartels are in that direction, probably have gunmen on shore watching for the *federales*. There must be hundreds of millions of yuan out here, buried in vacuum-sealed plastic bags. We steer clear.

Eventually, we spot a tree growing diagonally, almost half fallen into the water. There's orchids all over it. "I think we've hit pay dirt," Smith tells me, her face in her pad.

I shut down the fans and coast towards the island, aiming for the mangled tree. We coast to a stop, hiding the airboat beneath one of the branches. Emerging from behind the tree, we find the island is larger than it looks, and is heavily forested.

Smith holds a digital map on her pad. Glancing at it, I realize that when the CIA says we're fifty miles from the Andean border, they mean Bolivia's southern border. The eastern border, cutting up at a ninety degree angle, is only a klick or two away, deep within rainforest – possibly cutting right through this island.

We climb a hill and begin sleuthing our way through the heavy trees. Smith's retrieved her gun now, hidden within her luggage, and carries it with full readiness. A thousand birds chirp and squawk above us, the dense canopy of the trees nearly blocks out the sun, and more capybaras go running by in front of us. I almost shoot one.

I try to force myself to go easy. Let's be realistic here. It's been two days since Lucie called me. Odds are, she's either dead by now, or managed to get away from Laird and flee into this swamp. Maybe she was lucky and made it north to Puerto Suárez, maybe she's drinking algae-covered swamp water somewhere to the south, maybe she's gator feed, maybe she jumped the fence into Andea....

Or maybe she's dead. That's a distinct possibility I'm going to have to accept.

After a few minutes of scurrying through the jungle, we come across a clearing, similar to the campground from last night, with about two dozen cabins on stilts and several fire pits. The cabins are so badly dilapidated it makes Octavio's camp look like a five-star hotel. Weeds and flowers climb the sides of buildings, windows are shattered, boards missing, doors hanging from single hinges. The place is a wasteland; the kind of place meth addicts might form a commune in to escape their parole officers.

About the only thing that appears halfway decent are the small wind turbines, two to a cabin, though even a few of those have been overgrown by the vegetation and jammed. Inside the cabins are dim light bulbs hanging from their wiring straight out of the ceiling, mouldy refrigerators etched with stains, ceiling fans about to come crashing down and busted or burned out space heaters.

Behind each cabin is an empty pen set up with chicken wire. A few of them contain the odd lost feather or chicken footprint in the sand, a few with jumbuck wool in the chicken wire, yet we soon discover that not only chickens and jumbuck had been housed here; the stinking corpse of a decapitated wild capybara is still strewn over the poorly constructed wooden table behind one hut.

These lot are ferals.

As Smith and I quickly and covertly scan through the commune, we come to see that it's abandoned. The lights are left on in some places, rice and fruit left on the tables, yet no one's around. They'd left in a hurry.

And the entire place stinks of cheap liquor; the kind of bathtub whisky rednecks sometimes brew, only worse, more potent. I find a bathtub – or rather, an aluminium crate I assume is used as a bathtub – full of this foul-smelling alcohol. One whiff nearly makes me choke.

This is what they must use to fuel those border fires. And by the smell of it, the entire camp has been doused in it. Someone was planning on burning all the evidence. That is, if we're not in the middle of a giant trap, about to be burned alive. God, I hope Westmorland's combing the surrounding woods right about now.

My thought is interrupted by a soft yet noticeable thud a few cabins down. I run outside and slink my way to the south, not sure exactly where it came from. I hear another bang as I approach the third cabin down, and the poorly built wooden door rattles. With my gun in hand, I ascend to the porch, and reach for the doorknob. It rattles before I can touch it. Startled, I reach forward and grasp tight, yanking the door towards me.

On the other side I see Lucie, dishevelled, her hair a mess, her shirt half ripped off, hands tied behind her back and a scarf tied around her mouth, trying to fidget with the doorknob.

We stare at each other for half a second; neither one of us was ever planning on seeing the other again. Regaining my focus, I quickly pull the scarf from her lips and begin untying her wrists. "I didn't think you'd come," she whispers.

"When we get out of this," I reply without looking up to her, "I think you owe me a blowjob."

When her arms are free, I take her by the wrist and lead her away from the cabin.

She says, "We've got to get out of here. Laird has this whole place doused in accelerant."

She barely gets a chance to finish before I hear a gunshot. Her arm goes limp in my hand and blood splatters on my sleeve.

I dart to the side, instinct taking over. I try and yank her arm as I move, yet she's gone limp. I see she's taken it right between the eyes.

Bloody fuck.

I throw my back into the cover of the nearest cabin, fresh bathtub whiskey quickly absorbing into my shirt. I quickly realize that my legs are unprotected with these raised cabins.

I decide to meet the monster face to face. I step out from the cabin, my gun pointed down the clearing. Standing there I find a man in his early thirties, surprisingly well-groomed, clean-shaven and dressed halfway decently, with a gun resting calmly in his arm, not aimed at anything other than the ground, and a lit torch in the other.

I can only assume it's Patrick Laird.

My throat catches at the scent of Lucie's blood, and I know I couldn't say anything even if I could think of something. Instead there is a long moment of silence where we merely stare each other down.

"Freeze!" I eventually hear. It's Smith. Laird slowly looks towards her. She's standing to his side, between two cottages scattered randomly.

Laird remains where he stands.

"Drop the weapon," she shouts. She repeats it again in Spanish.

He slowly looks down to the pistol in his hand, then back to her. His face is stoical, unemotional. He's pissed, brimming with rage. This is a man whose cause has just died – he's been abandoned by his colleagues, and is about to

be arrested or killed by the CIA. He is cold, merciless, and vengeful. Yet as he looks up to Smith, I can see something in his eye, something sadistic.

It's not until he tosses the pistol to his side that I see the wooden plank next to the dirt pathway.

I barely have time to think before his gun lands on the pedal. A cabin explodes next to Smith, engulfing her in the explosion. For a brief few seconds, I hear an excruciating shriek as what's left of her skin burns off.

The shockwave hits me and I stumble backwards. Laird is fast. He drops his torch on the front steps on the nearest cabin and rolls across the grass to retrieve his gun. He has it in hand and is charging at me before the torch lands. When it does, the entire cottage is burning within seconds.

Before I know what's happening, Laird is in my face, launching a punch at me. It connects with my jaw and sends me plummeting to the ground. Laird is still on top of me. He grabs me by my shirt and starts punching and pistol-whipping me repeatedly in the face.

This is all so fast, and painful. I think my nose is broken. I bite my tongue. Am I missing a tooth? Laird is rambling something beneath his breath. "...trying to protect society... an abomination... anarchist lunatics..."

He's furious, maniacal.

At some point, I come back into reality, and manage to jerk my arm up. I slam him in the face with the broadside of my del Toro. He jerks to the side, half falling back, and, my arm flailing, I pull the trigger.

I think I clip him in the leg. He jumps back, scurrying away. I'm not sure if I hit him or not.

Where the fuck is Westmorland?

I groan as I pull myself out of the mud. Laird vanishes behind the smoke before I can fire again. The entire commune is going up in flames now. Black smoke rises high into the sky and floods through the camp.

I start coughing, and try to stay low, yet the flames are quicker than I am. Fire is racing across the grass now, spreading deep into the surrounding forest. I think I can hear police sirens, but they're a ways off, and I can't stay here and wait for Westmorland.

I scurry across the ground towards the tree line. I don't remember what direction we came in from, I don't even know what direction I'm facing. I can't see the sun behind the smoke. I just keep crawling.

The flames catch up to me, and latch onto the bathtub whiskey soaked into my shirt. I toss myself into a puddle and roll around, yet the flames are increasing in size behind me. I quit crawling and take off sprinting.

Entire goliath trees are engulfed in flames behind me. Branches come crashing down and a few trees topple over. I hear a somewhat rat-like squeal as I see a small capybara running for its life. Birds squawk and squeak as they try to escape the smoke. Vibrant tree frogs leap to their deaths from high branches trying to escape the flames. A pain-filled growl echoes through the trees as an enormous cat charges through the flames.

The destruction is malevolent, ungodly.

I almost run full out into the fence. It appears out of nowhere. The Andean border. Seven meters tall and made of interlinking titanium, gleaming a dancing orange and black reflection back at me.

Instinct and adrenaline has taken over now. I am one with the animals, fleeing for my life. My breathing is heavy, my eyes darting, my logic gone. Any sirens that might be near are deafened out by the cackling of dying rainforest around me.

I climb the fence.

The flames seem to be taunting me. Fire jumps across the air at me. My shirt ignites again as I reach the barbed wire at the top. Metallic claws dig into my palms, lash my forearms. The skin on my shoulder is starting to burn.

I jump the fence, and tumble into the swampland below, into the abyss. Into Andea.

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