

Chapter 16

PIRANHAS AND CAIMANS

THURSDAY, 22 OCTOBER 2009

The Amazon rainforest spans eight countries, with more than half located in Brazil, and stretches from the Atlantic in the east to the Andes in the west.

At Ceasa Port, Momoko and I board a speedboat with a canopy and skip across the widest river. In no time, we reach the *Meeting of the Waters*, where the dark River Negro and sandy beige Rio Solimoes, both tributaries to the Amazon, collide but do not merge.

‘Put your hand in water,’ our guide says.

He cuts the engine and the boat drifts in neutral across the side-by-side rivers, stretching for six kilometres. The River Negro is warm from sun absorption, whereas the Rio Solimoes is cold because the sun’s rays cannot penetrate the dense water. Because of temperature variation, the speed at which they flow and their diverse properties, the rivers can never merge.

On the other side, the boat stops alongside a muddy embankment, and we stride to the top, where a white VW van with half a dozen passengers onboard is waiting to collect us.

We spend the next hour driving into the rainforest and transfer onto a

narrow engine-powered boat. We swing upriver, just Momoko and I and the guide, who kills the engine to avoid scaring away enormous iguanas roaming the riverbank, or when we cross paths with alligators, known as caimans. The black caiman is the most prominent member of the alligator family and can grow up to twenty feet long. It's one of the deadliest animals on the Amazon River. Its dark hide provides the perfect camouflage for its night-time hunts, allowing it to ambush unsuspecting prey in the river. It also strikes terror into local tribes due to its aggressive nature and regularly attacks those who live or work on the riverbank.

Having succumbed to such unrelenting pressure, Momoko's excited but still anxious. Not by the things she can see but by the things she can't.

We arrive at a circular, wooden lodge where we will spend the night. Amazonian river folk live and work at the lodge. We're the only guests here except for a German woman and her Italian husband.

After lunch, Momoko and I settle into hammocks suspended beneath a thatched canopy and drift off for half an hour, waiting for an afternoon thunderstorm battering the forest canopy to clear so we can explore this magical kingdom.

It's time to go. The rain has stopped. The skies have no more rainclouds. The humidity increases, and so do the flies, ants and mosquitoes feeding on sweat. We jump back on the boat and head upriver with the guide and a second man who drives.

The rainforest really comes to life beyond the guesthouse. Vines and flamboyant trees fling limbs over the water's edge. Prehistoric-looking birds shake leaves from the branches, caimans randomly raise their heads out of the water, and the bugs are like flying motorbikes. When we reach a Y-shaped split in the river, pink dolphins splash on the surface, jumping and making playful trumpeting sounds. We're handed a cane, line and hook to catch piranhas. They have arguably the worst reputation of any fish on the planet. These frenzied killers are capable of tearing the flesh off any animal in minutes. Normally, they're pretty shy creatures that lurk in the Amazon basins, feeding on other fish and insects with their needle-sharp fangs.

Drive hops off the boat onto the embankment and wanders across the mud in search of wildlife while we fish. When he returns, he's holding an

enormous turtle upside down and passes it to me for some reason. I'm tempted to spin the creature on my index finger like a basketball but decide against it. I'm terrible at basketball.

'I caught one!' Momoko shrieks. A piranha thrashes on the end of her line, and she just stares at its orange and silver body, freaked out by its eyes. She hates fish eyes. And bird eyes. She hates all eyes, in fact. I think she is ommetaphobic. Yes, it's a real word, and a real phobia. She would rather look at the thrashing piranha from afar than get near enough to cut it loose.

We change locations on the river, and Momoko reels in more snapping piranhas. The guide takes one in his hand and shows us its shark-like teeth. He feeds a fishing line into its mouth to demonstrate the power of its bite. The piranha effortlessly cuts the line in half, making it more practical than some kitchen utensils.

'Can they eat humans?' I ask. 'Or is it just a myth?'

'There is many type of piranha,' he explains. 'Some eat human, but it never happen. This piranha is not interested for human unless bleed. They like blood.'

The guide catches piranha after piranha, one every minute. Momoko has caught several, too. Some are babies, others are the size of an adult shoe. There must be millions in the river.

We transfer to the other side of the river as the sun sets over the trees, bathing us in a pink-orange light. I finally catch a piranha, only to be robbed of my glory when it slips off the hook.

It's getting dark when we head back to the guesthouse with our basket full of piranhas – dinner. The rainforest rapidly turns black, so the guide shines his torch, and turns in on the riverbank, while Drive slows the boat to a steady cruise.

Then he guns it, racing up the muddy verge. We brace as the boat ploughs up the bank onto the mud, rising and stopping.

What's he doing?

We're not getting out here, are we?

The guide steps off the boat and disappears. I can see his torchlight shaking between the trees.

He jumps back on the boat. I can't see him; I can only hear him at the opposite end as Drive pushes off from the embankment.

'He's got something,' I whisper to Momoko.

Momoko pauses. 'I can't see anything. The camera!'

It's in my hand. I take a picture. The flash lights up the boat. We look at the screen.

'He's holding a caiman,' I say.

He brings the broad-snouted alligator to the stern, where Momoko and I are sitting quietly. It's about a metre long.

Drive switches off the engine, and we drift in absolute darkness and silence.

The guide speaks. 'Caimans have bones on the stomach. Touch.'

We touch.

He shines the torch in the caiman's face. 'If you look eye, you will see it have two eyelid.'

We both look. Me at the caiman, Momoko into the darkness.

Without warning, he passes the caiman to me, and I'm suddenly holding this beast two-handed. I stand up, shifting the balance of weight, causing the boat to rock, and Momoko's making these whimpering sounds as she places her hands on either side of the boat to keep it stable. The jungle is pitch black and silent, except for the odd fluttering in the trees or water sloshing from the marine life lurking just below the surface, and the air is teeming with mosquitoes, which might act as vectors of pathogens that cause malaria and yellow fever. As much as we are trying to avoid being bitten, it's difficult when they're colliding with our faces and constantly brushing against our skin. I look at Momoko, who is swatting them away and blowing air to clear her lips and face, and now the guide directs his torch back on the caiman, its arms stretched wide, its eyes tilted towards its snout, and I fear the light will make it go skits, and look, it's sizing me up, working out how many bites it will take to immobilise me, how many of its family I might feed, so I hold its tail and throat even tighter, trying to use the right amount of pressure so I don't choke it to death or allow it to break free, and now I have visions of it wriggling out of my hands and landing on Momoko's lap, and me turning to find her finishing a backwards somersault into the river while I wait for her to resurface because there's no way I'm going in after her. Phwa, phwa, bloody mosquitoes, getting in my mouth and swarming us. Every time I change my position, or the guide moves, the

boat rocks, but at least the caiman is static in my hands. I'm not sure what to do next because, at this moment, I'm just concentrating on not letting go or falling into the river. My legs are cramping up from trying to maintain my balance and my weight evenly distributed.

Momoko doesn't speak a word, doesn't move a muscle. I'm not sure she's still breathing. I've dragged her into her worst nightmare.

The guide finally takes the caiman off me and releases it into the river.

Drive fires up the engine, and we head slowly back, displacing all the mosquitoes.

The guide is aiming his torch at the riverbank again.

'What are you looking for?' I ask.

'Caiman. You can see the eye from torch, like cat's eye.'

He passes me the torch. I aim the beam at the banks.

Hundreds of red eyes are illuminated by the torchlight. We're being watched. The pair that frighten me the most and are currently boring a hole through the back of my skull, however, belongs to my good lady wife.