

COLD-BLOODED TRADE

By Kerry K. Cox

Thus we pursued our path round a wide arc of that ghastly pool,
Between the soggy marsh and the arid shore,
Still eyeing those who gulp the marsh foul.

—Dante, *The Divine Comedy*

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when
vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings.

—Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*.

The damn suit was hot.

More than hot. Sweltering. Forget sweating, he was gushing. And everything itched. Fortunately, scratching was not only acceptable, under the circumstances, it could be considered mandatory. Method acting.

So, he scratched. Continuously, energetically, and with abandon. Wherever it itched, he went at it like he was digging for gold. And it itched everywhere. Underscore, everywhere.

Plus, there was the stench. Harsh, suffocating, a living thing that bit into his nostrils, anchored itself like a blood-starved tick, and wormed into the pores of his skin. He couldn't imagine ever ridding himself of it.

It was necessary verisimilitude, of course. Strategic, too. But he couldn't help feeling like maybe he'd gone overboard. In such a cramped, enclosed space, with no air circulation, the smell was predatory, crawling inside him with every breath, boiling his stomach, poisoning his lungs.

Add to all that the oppressive Florida humidity. It trapped the heat and odor like a fetid sponge, steaming his confines into a foul sauna. His head throbbed in tempo with the echoing, metallic drumbeat of rain outside, and he gave serious consideration to fainting.

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As director of the Zacanga zoo in Toluca, Mexico, Julio Vasquez had a wealth of experience with animal excrement. But he'd never smelled anything like this.

"*Dios mio*," he said, in a voice coarsened by tequila, cigarettes, and fifty-seven years. "It stinks in there." He peered into the dimness of the plane's cargo hold.

"More bad with heat and rain," the stick-thin man standing next to him said. Csaba Juhasz—who, much to everyone's relief, Americanized his Hungarian name into the more manageable Tom—flicked a lighter unsuccessfully at a cigarette as the rain on the tarmac outside the ancient DC-3 escalated into a roaring downpour.

"Didn't you clean at all?" Vasquez asked.

Tom ducked his head low to ignite the cigarette. "You don't pay for clean."

Vasquez pictured opening the cargo doors in Mexico after a five-hour flight. "It's a long trip. It will be even more unbearable in there."

Tom shrugged. "Not my problem. Clean now if you want. He will shit again."

Vasquez blew out a breath of frustration. These side ventures were immensely profitable, no arguing with that. But the lowlifes you had to deal with, the time you spent, and of course, the risk, well, sometimes he wondered if it was worth it. He had a good job, nice

home, family, they could get by on his salary alone. Yes, if he stopped, he would have to cut some luxury expenses. The downtown apartment, for one. And the supple young vet tech he'd installed there.

Of course, he didn't really have a choice. This had been a specific request from a client who, like all those he served on these little missions, was accustomed to getting anything and everything he wanted. If he asked you to do something, and you were happy with the current intimate relationship between your head and your neck, you smiled, said, "*por supuesto, no hay problema,*" and delivered.

Vasquez used the flashlight app on his smartphone to illuminate the cargo hold. The stark light reflected off the metal walls, casting harsh shadows among the few stacked crates. The plane carried a light load, the primary purpose of the chartered flight being the delivery of one item to a cartel leader's *colección personal*.

Strapped against the far wall, a six-by-six-by-eight-foot-tall cage of vertical steel bars held the frightened, huddled black mass of a *Gorilla beringei beringei*. A highly endangered subspecies of the Eastern Mountain Gorilla, with a natural range limited to Africa's Virunga mountain range, and Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable National Park.

Fortunately for Vasquez and his client, the animal's *unnatural* range included several United States zoos, one of which was in Miami. Even more fortunately, the Miami zoo's director was an entrepreneurial fellow open to creative fundraising opportunities.

The gorilla reacted to the sudden, punitive beam of light by ducking its head low, one hairy arm shielding its eyes, and folding into a fetal lump.

"This is the same one we discussed?" Vasquez asked. He strained his eyes to confirm there was no bait and switch going on. Experience had taught him that wildlife traffickers were a perfidious bunch. They'd think nothing of saddling him with some inferior, elderly or diseased specimen, instead of the robust, healthy male he'd picked out. "This is the exact individual?"

"Sure, same one. Go in, look," Tom said. "Watch out for shit."

Vasquez flashed his light around the perimeter of the cage. The floor was awash in wet feces. No doubt the cage was worse. "Just tell me. The one I selected yesterday, the big silverback. This is him?"

"It is same, of course."

Vasquez pinned the ape with the flashlight beam, trying to make out details. He'd been very specific the day before in making the deal with the zoo's director. "It better be," he said. "I'm paying top dollar."

"So far, you pay me nothing," Tom said, his meaning clear.

Vasquez knew there was no room for error. "I need to confirm," he said, and stepped up into the cargo hold.

He hadn't gone three steps towards the cage when he was blasted across the chest by a handful of black, slimy shit.

"Acchhh!" he yelled, and backed away. "*¡Pinche hijo de puta!* Get me something to wipe this off with!"

"I told you watch for shit," Tom said. "Stand in rain, it will wash away."

Vasquez exited the hold and stood in the downpour, arching his back to give the water full access to the disgusting slime running down his belly.

"You need now to pay me," Tom said. "No more fucking around." He looked towards the Lincoln Town Car, where his driver sat behind tinted glass. He waved a hand, and the door of the Lincoln swung open. An inordinately large white man emerged, wearing cargo shorts and a t-shirt, seemingly oblivious to the driving rain. A pistol rode under his left arm in a shoulder holster, the grip in what Vasquez recognized as cross-draw position. Vasquez didn't know much about guns, but in his dealings for this particular client base, he'd seen plenty of them.

"All right, all right," he said. "I only wanted to be sure. Can we get out of the rain to do this? I don't want my phone to get wet."

Tom gestured towards the cargo hold. "Go in there."

Vasquez looked at Tom, then at the hulking man flanking him, and sighed.

He stepped cautiously back up into the hold, deliberately breathing through his mouth to avoid *vomitando* from the smell. He dug a pair of reading glasses from his jacket, pulled his phone from his pocket, and tapped the screen a few times. "Routing number?" he asked. Tom handed up a slip of paper. Vasquez referred to it, tapped some more, and gave the paper back. While Tom tore the note to bits and dropped the shreds to the wet ground, Vasquez watched his phone. "*Listo*," he said after a few anxious seconds. "It's done."

"Wait," Tom said. His eyes remained fixed on Vasquez as he said, "Dimitri. Check."

The big man hunched over his phone to protect it from the rain, tapped the screen, and waited. A few moments passed, then he said, "It's there."

"Okay," Tom said, then raised his voice. "Done!"

Tom's incongruent shout caused Vasquez' eyebrows to crunch in momentary confusion, then vault up his forehead as the gorilla's cage door suddenly swung open. "He's getting out!" Vasquez screamed. He instantly initiated the universally approved response when a presumably agitated mountain gorilla breaks free of constraint. The glasses flew off his head as he plunged out of the cargo hold and commenced fleeing.

He made it less than ten yards before he was brought to a halt by Dimitri's ham-sized hand on his shoulder.

"Let go!" Vasquez twisted against the iron grip. "That ape is loose! We need a tranquilizer gun, and...."

“Shut up,” Dimitri said, and easily manhandled the pudgy zoo director back to the plane.

The gorilla stood at the edge of the cargo hold door, vigorously scratching its ass. “Julio Vasquez,” the gorilla said, “U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. You’re under arrest.”

"I can't shake the smell," USFWS Special Agent Nick Tanner said. He hoisted what was left of a second pint of Wizard Wit, a Boca Raton brewery's smoky Belgian, hoping enough of it would dull at least one of his senses.

"What'd the guy charge you to haul all that ape shit in?" Dimitri, aka Special Agent Alex Popov, asked, his southern drawl far removed from his former Russian growl.

"Two hundred bucks," Tanner said. "Goddamn costume was another hundred."

"I'd like to be there when you file for reimbursement."

Following the bust of Julio Vasquez at the Miami airport, the two Special Agents had motored north to Orlando, where Popov was currently based. Before Tanner continued on to his next assignment, they'd stopped to celebrate the successful sting with drinks and dinner at Popov's favorite spot, The Ravenous Pig. Lobster tacos, red shrimp and grits, and sweet potato tortellini had long since been consumed with gusto, Tanner holding his own despite the lingering *eau de primate* that seemed lodged in his nose. The drinks kept coming, which helped.

"I thought we were toast when the Miami Zoo guy backed out," Popov said.

Tanner nodded as he drank. "Hard to blame him, though. He's the fucking zoo director. Anything happens to his gorilla while we have it...."

"What? We'd pay him."

"Not so easy to get another."

"True," Popov said. "But to screw us at the last minute like that...."

"It happens."

Popov thought about it a moment, and laughed. "The truth, Nick. Did you really think that was gonna work?"

Tanner smiled. "The guy's on a mission for a cartel boss' private zoo. He's scared to death to go back empty-handed, he smells authentic shit, it's hot, it's dark, it's raining, I'm all hunkered down in the cage...." He drained his beer. "I gave it fifty-fifty at best," he admitted.

Popov shook his head. "You got balls of steel, podnah."

"I think the closer was when I nailed him with my apeshit fastball."

They both laughed, a laughter prolonged by the release of tension and a nice beer buzz.

"I'm gonna have to crash in the parking lot," Tanner said, eyeing his empty glass. Outside, his Coachman Clipper Ultra-Light trailer was hitched to his Ford Expedition.

“You’ll get roused here,” Popov said. “Stay at our place tonight. I’ll have my wife come get us. Pick up your rig tomorrow.”

“Ray’s with me.”

“He’s housebroke, ain’t he?”

“More than me.”

“Great. We got a spare room. I’ll bring you guys back in the morning. When you gotta be in...where is it?”

Tanner struggled to remember. “Mississippi. Um...Pearl Town, Pearlingville, something like that.”

“Pearlington.”

“Bingo.”

“Nice area. What’s goin’ on there?” Popov caught the eye of their waiter and signaled for another round.

“Two things, actually,” Tanner said. “I’ve been working remote with the state guys on a reptile smuggling ring for a couple months. Did some online chatting with a pretty serious dealer, a few long-distance buys. The state guys think he’s primed for a big in-person buy and bust, but it’s right in their backyard, and there’s only a few of them.”

“Worried they’ll get made.”

“Yeah, so I’m going in. As it happens, my daughter Kiera’s got a meet in New Orleans at roughly the same time, so hopefully, I get a chance to hop over for a day.”

Popov shook his head. “That reptile shit, it’s outta control, especially down here. So much money. Overseas market’s gone crazy.” He pulled out his phone. “I’m gonna call Bev.”

Popov dialed his wife as the waiter arrived with another round of beers. Tanner raised a hand and said, “Thanks, Chad. One more thing, I’d like to order something to go.”

“Certainly, sir.” Chad pulled out his order pad.

“I’d like the porterhouse steak.”

“Great choice. And with that? Potatoes or—”

“Nothing with it. Just the steak.”

“Just the steak? Um, all right. And how would you like it cooked?”

“Raw.”

Chad gave the joke a courtesy smile. “Rare, then?”

“No, raw. Uncooked. Fresh from the fridge.”

Chad frowned. "I don't think I can do that, sir."

"I'll pay full price."

"I don't think...."

Tanner waved him off. "It's all right, Chad. Do this for me, then. Tell the chef to barely cook it. Just wave it at the stove. Whatever he's willing to let out of there, okay?"

Chad nodded without understanding, and left. Popov set down his phone. "He's probably gonna tell the bartender to cut us off," he said.

"I don't know why I bother to ask. It never works," Tanner said. "Butcher shop, sure. Restaurant, never works."

They each grabbed their beer mugs. Popov raised his towards Tanner. "Here's to Nick Tanner, the baddest shit-pitchin' mountain gorilla ever to take the mound."

* * *

That night, Ray Charles slept much more soundly than Tanner.

Popov's guest bedroom boasted a single twin-sized bed. Ray claimed the foot of the mattress and sprawled across its width, forcing Tanner to curl his six-foot frame into a fetal position. Subtle pushes, even less subtle shoves, did nothing to rouse the big cat.

"For chrissakes, Ray," Tanner muttered. Finally, when a glance at his phone told him it was nearly four in the morning, Tanner got out of bed, grabbed the pillow, and stretched out on the carpeted floor. It wasn't too bad.

The next morning, breakfast included three cups of coffee and four Excedrin tablets before the effects of their celebration felt somewhat allayed.

"Gonna be hot again," Popov said. His voice sounded like he'd gargled sandpaper.

"Better walk Ray before I go," Tanner muttered.

He strapped Ray into his halter leash and headed outside. It felt like the sky was sweating. Having recently bounced straight from a case in the fog-shrouded California redwoods, to a crazy stint in the stark, bone-dry mountains of Utah, Tanner was having a tough time adjusting to the southern stew of heat and humidity.

As expected, strolling a suburban sidewalk with a twenty-three-pound bobcat on a leash didn't go unnoticed. A pig-tailed girl about nine years old brought her bike to a screeching halt upon seeing Ray and Tanner. "That's a big cat," she said.

"It is," Tanner said. "Actually, it's a bobcat."

"Bobcat? Like at the zoo?"

"Yep."

“Why you got him on a leash?”

“So he doesn’t run away.”

“He your pet?”

“He is, yes.”

She studied Ray with interest. “He walkin’ in his sleep?” she asked.

“No, he’s awake.”

She pointed at Ray’s face. “His eyes are closed.”

“Actually, they’re sewn shut. He had a bad infection as a kitten, and...um, the doctor decided to just close his eyes, because he couldn’t see anymore.”

“You mean he’s blind?”

“Yes, he is.” Tanner didn’t feel it necessary to mention that the eyeballs had actually been removed. According to the vet at the time, the only other option was to put the kit down before the infection caused a painful death. Having just retrieved the little feline from its den, the only survivor after its mother was poisoned, Tanner had adopted the bobcat. It went against his firm stance that no wild animal, no exotic of any sort, should ever be a pet. But it felt like this was a reasonable exception.

“Can I pet him?” the little girl asked.

“It’s probably not a good idea,” Tanner said. “Bobcats are wild animals, and you can never be totally sure how they’re going to react. I’m sure you’re very nice, but he doesn’t know you.”

“He might bite me?”

“Let’s not find out.”

She looked at Ray, then pointed again as she got ready to pedal away. “He’s goin’ poo.”

He was indeed. Tanner performed the mandatory clean-up, and poop-bag in hand, headed back to Popov’s house.

A half-hour later, he and Ray were packed up and in Popov’s Honda Element, heading back to The Ravenous Pig parking lot.

“This Mississippi thing, you gonna need any help?” Popov asked.

“Maybe. But not for a while, anyway. Day after tomorrow I’ve got my buy. Should wrap up pretty easily after that, assuming all goes well.”

“Well, I’m close if you need me.”

“Appreciate that.”

Popov wheeled the Honda into the restaurant's lot, and alongside Tanner's Expedition. "It was a pleasure working with you," he said.

"Likewise," Tanner said.

"Before you go, one thing."

"Yeah?"

"Sometime soon, make a stop for a case of deodorant."