

Chapter 1

The road from Puerto Saludos to Limon was paved, which in Costa Rica suggests that at one time long ago a binding agent was added to the indigenous soils and deposited on a game trail. Actually, this is an unfair description; the binding agent was applied annually layer upon layer like the rings of a tree and rudimentary efforts were sometimes made to smooth and even widen the path. Still, the jungle relentlessly encroached upon the road's simple pavement, nature's guerilla assault, and the rains (this was a tropical rainforest after all) washed out the road at regular intervals. Bridges were eventually constructed over the deepest rivers and in their struggle with the rains, the persistent jungle rot and the traffic, those spans that remained were both the most likely to continue to stand as well as the most likely to suffer dramatic failure.

A steady flow, as many as twenty, maybe thirty, vehicles each day traversed this road on the way to and from Puerto Saludos, rental cars and busses carrying the gringo eco-tourists and surfers as well as the trucks hauling all the stuff required to feed, hydrate and satisfy these visitors. And given all the recent rain, it was decided that El Colonel de Corona and Tim would take Tim's Jeep on their trip up this jungle road to ol' Limon. After the recent river incident (a friend borrowed the Jeep to visit a local brothel and left it stranded in a swollen wash) Tim had equipped the Jeep with a snorkel and a six-inch lift. El Colonel, or simply El Colon to his Nicas, owned an ancient International $\frac{3}{4}$ ton crew cab that ran on diesel and filtered vegetable oil. The International was air conditioned and a 4X4, so it presented a tempting choice. Nearly amphibian, it could likely wade any runoff they might encounter, but it was thirsty, mighty thirsty. With diesel at near \$5.00 a gallon and little hope scoring any filtered vegetable oil along the route, the Jeep it was. This left more money for other essentials, mainly alcoholic in nature.

According to Tim, there were sixteen bars along this route and he had once managed to stop and drink a beer at each in one trip. Of course, this route, some 30 KM as the crow flies or 60 KM on the main road, was probably 120 KM if Tim's detours for beer were taken into account. This record was something of a feat, a Costa Rican gringo half-marathon. The much longer trek to San Jose connected some 32 drinking establishments and Tim, despite numerous attempts, had not yet accomplished consecutive stops on that gringo ironman event. After 20 or so stops he found he could not limit himself, so he remained and partied with his newfound friends until further thoughts of driving were impossible. Still, he vowed that he would one day conquer the trip to San Jose.

On this trip they brought their own beer. The box of bottles clinked in the back of the Jeep as the ice they had borrowed from the Hotel Blue Conga was melting rapidly in the near 90 degree-heat with near 90% humidity; welcome to midwinter in the tropics! The local theory was that it was impossible to get drunk on beer during the day in the jungle. The heat would burn up all the alcohol. El Colonel had a corollary theory; Costa Rican beer was watered down. Neither Tim nor El Colonel, both large, alien, pink skinned, florid men (though Tim was a couple of inches taller at over six-foot-three) who shared driving duties on this two-hour trip more out of boredom than anything else, had any fear of being stopped for drunken driving. Drinking while driving was not a crime in Costa Rica; it was an expectation, especially among gringos.

Both El Colonel and Tim were expats, Americans, living in Costa Rica. Each had heard though the bamboo grapevine that the annual Costa Rican Jazz Festival had spread to ol' Limon. The first festival was a government sponsored event meant to showcase and encourage local artists and help develop entertainment venues for the tourists, but now, in its third year, the event had taken on a life of its own. Every jazz ensemble from every college in the US wanted to come to Costa Rica

for tour (an excuse to visit the tropics in winter) so the festival had become something of a competition. It spread and gained international esteem and now the venue had spread outside the confines of San Jose to Limon.

El Colonel was not old enough to be a colonel, at only thirty two, but he was a US Marine (still active in fact, but on a kind sabbatical) had advanced to captain, and his first name, Colin, was mistaken by the locals for a title, hence he was known in and around Puerto Saludos as El Colonel. His name was something of a riddle and in fact, he never used his real surname, Campbell. He'd known Tim for nearly two years, yet he doubted Tim could recall that his surname was not Corona. His Nicas, the Nicaraguan workers who had been helping him build his black pepper farm, called him Señor Colon, a local translation of his name which also just happened to mean Mr. Money as the colon was the local currency. But the locals, the Ticos, knew him as el Colonel de Corona, for his military background and originally for his hair - thick, blond, bleached further by the tropical sun and kept high and tight so that in the bright dawn or dusk sun, it seemed to glow about his head like a crown, a corona. He was el Colonel de Corona, the colonel of the sun-crown. The title fit. Tim kept his thick, dark and wavy hair in a ponytail as he was a few years younger; Tim had moved to Costa Rica to oversee a small resort, restaurant and bar that his father owned (and also, it was rumored, to avoid certain legal matters in his native New Hampshire.)

El Colonel had his own unspoken reasons for moving to Costa Rica. His attempt to develop a black peppercorn (*piper nigrum*) plantation in the remote Costa Rican jungle was more a result of his residency than a reason for it. He was, in fact, hiding in plain sight; there was a price on his head courtesy of both the competing Colombian drug cartels. This was something of a feat, earned in five years fighting the drug trade in Medellin. First, he was transferred to desk duty in Arlington, an assignment he could hardly bear, and after a serious and suspect hit and run accident on the beltway, the Corps all but ordered him time to cool down for a while and they deferred the remainder of his commitment. He chose Costa Rica as a good place to disappear; it was beautiful, remote, tropical and he could live there, albeit frugally, on his meager half pay allowance. This was no vacation though and came at a price; every two months he spent in Costa Rica had added yet another month to his remaining Marine Corps obligation. Thus far, he figured he'd added a year, maybe more.

They reached Limon, a city lacking the tourist appeal of nearly every other collection of more than four buildings in Costa Rica. Limon was poor, old, established, dingy and seemed at odds with rest of the country; it was more Caribbean and teeming with African influence. Puerto Saludos was Disney. Limon was real. Tim had a friend who owned one of the seedier yet prominent hotel/bars on the old waterfront (who could have guessed?) and this was where they booked a room for the night and would spend the remaining afternoon. The concert was to begin in the evening at the Parque Vargas, only a few blocks from the bar. Colin, sensing that Tim would never make it to the concert, left his friend in the company of a handful of Canadian college girls on winter break. He walked northwest toward the oldest part of the city. He wanted to see the new cathedral, its towering concrete steeple visible from everywhere. As he approached the massive structure it seemed almost crude, all sharp angles and reinforced concrete, a great beast reclining on its back and at its base, a giant tower - a huge concrete erection! He tried to wipe that image from his mind but found he could not. The entire site was surrounded by fence as the cathedral was still under construction. Colin loved cathedrals and there were so many in Costa Rica; each rivalled the most magnificent in the world. Yet this was the first that he had seen that he could not love. Just one of the four-century-old original cathedral's towers remained, alone, a partial

renovation, small, diminished, preserved in front of the new structure, a metaphor perhaps. This was where the Latin Mass was relegated for all eternity, a sad reminder of the old, more intimate church. The new church was huge, generic, cold, steel and concrete, obscene and vastly out of place in dingy Limon, Costa Rica, where Columbus once mistakenly declared he'd found the reverse passage to India.

Colin was hungry, but his knowledge of the local restaurants was limited and his stomach sensitive to the local bugs, so he stopped at a convenience store for a bag of Plantanos and a Coke. Back at the Hotel Caribe Bar, Tim was nowhere to be found. The bartender said that he and the Canadian girls had left some time before for places unknown. This was neither unexpected nor uncalled for. Colin inquired of the water and food in the hotel and the bartender assured him that the hotel purified all its water, even that used to shower and wash the towels and bedclothes, and that the food, while hardly the best in Limon, was unlikely to cause distress - es muy poco probable. This was not the bold assurance Colin wanted to hear. Colin spoke impeccable Spanish. In fact, his Spanish was so good, he had been able to pick up some of the local lilt and lingo, though his continental Madrid accent, considered highbrow, even aristocratic, remained. Locals were often confused at first when they heard this massive blond and sunburned gringo speak like an educated native, even guilty having perhaps spoken of him rudely in his presence believing him to be affluent. Yet when he did speak, he gained something of their respect even if he looked nothing like them – nothing at all.

He quietly and carefully opened the door to his shared room to find two empty twin beds. He showered, still concerned with the water but not concerned enough to remain in a jungle funk, and having already tested the waters, quickly downed a plate of the daily el casado at the hotel restaurant before heading out to the concert. Several artists were scheduled to play, including a jazz trio from the University of Miami and a vocal group from NYU. As he was something of a tickler of the ivories, he looked forward to it immensely. The sun had still not set when he took an empty seat, a small plastic folding chair that seemed barely up to the task, in the front row facing the pavilion. It was a beautiful setting; the Parque Vargas was a botanical garden that bordered the bay. The pavilion sat in front of a grassy pitch surrounded by towering coconut and other palms planted in regimental order and among them were various smaller gardens filled with tropical flowering plants, bromeliads, succulents and other impressive specimens. There were thirty, maybe forty people attending, and perhaps fifty seats. This meant nothing, he knew, as Costa Ricans were notoriously late for everything. The students from Miami were also late, however, and when the quartet was situated, the park was filled to overflowing. Soon keyboard, string bass and jazz guitar were conversing, tossing themes back and forth and causing all those in attendance to sway and nod to their syncopated rhythms until the sax came in and forced the music to soar to new heights. Colin recognized the music, an old Stan Getz/Kenny Barron song, but he could not remember the title. He was unaware that his fingers were tapping out Barron's keys on his knees and this action along with his general sway was causing his chair to push against the chair next to him, causing it too to sway with the music. On the adjacent seat sat a man, tall, very thin, slightly balding, with a long thin nose, unhealthy red tinged hair, dark olive skin and a somewhat blank expression, a difficult face to read. It was as the quartet reached its crescendo (and Colin's motions their most obnoxious) that Colin felt what he thought might have been an elbow, subtle but not quite enough to be a blow, in his left ribs. Had this blank, thin faced man just ribbed him? Colin ignored it. When the song ended, he looked at his neighbor and asked, "Was I bothering you?" in Spanish.

The man apologized and said, “Sorry. I don’t speak Española. It’s just you were jostling the entire row of chairs.”

The voice was incongruous with the man, rich, round and substantial. Colin, taken aback, had not expected a reply in his native tongue. He reached out with a large, thick, farm-hardened hand and introduced himself: “Colin Campbell. Originally from Omaha, USA.”

His neighbor returned his gaze with what might have been a smile, or if the circumstances had been different, what might have been taken as a look of condemnation, took Colin’s hand into his long, thin fingers with a firm grip and said in a strong baritone, “Dr. Alan Greene, Montreal, Canada, and jazz aficionado.”

Colin returned the man’s gaze with a broad, warm smile and shook the man’s hand up and down nearly in time with the music as the quartet began anew. He was too filled with the music to be angry and his joy was contagious. Through the remainder of the concert both men laughed, bounced, swayed and stamped to the music, constantly jostling their entire row though no one else complained. The locals were accustomed of the odd ways of the gringo turistas. Colin and Greene were each transported with the music, its soaring lines and, when the group from NYU performed, its impeccable harmonies. Both men stood, hooted and applauded when the concert ended, hoping to initiate an encore, but their fellow Costa Rican brethren, now significantly depleted, did not share their enthusiasm and their entreaties went unfilled.

They both remained in their seats for some time, still taking in the afterglow of the concert, when Colin felt the first sensation in his bowels, a growl. He stood, then quickly sat back down as a rumble preceded a sharp cramp in his lower abdomen. Greene noticed this distress and asked him if he was OK. The cramps rolled through Colin’s guts in an excruciating wave. This advanced to a more immediate need to vomit and soon, Colin was fertilizing the bromeliads with the remains of black beans, rice, peppers, plantains and some sort of fish. Greene did not abandon him and asked where he was staying. The two men slowly made their way through the two blocks that separated Parque Vargas and the Hotel Caribe. Once in Colin’s room (no sign of Tim and none was expected) Greene helped Colin to the bathroom and handed him a wastebasket, both entry and exits, covered, then called room service for tea. When the tea arrived, he rummaged through his backpack, selected two packets of dried herbs, and placed a pinch of each in the boiled water, making an herbal tea. Once it had steeped, he poured a cup and brought it to Colin. “Drink this,” he told him and Colin, depleted, incapacitated and compliant as the Mayan Revenge attempted to turn him inside out from both ends, did as he was told. The liquid worked almost immediately. Soon Colin was in the shower, cleaning himself up once again.

Once out of the shower, as he dressed, he thanked Greene and asked, “What kind of doctor are you, one of those naturopaths?”

“Actually,” said Greene, “My PhD is in Botany. I specialize in primitive cultural remedies.”

“So you’re not a physician?”

“Nope. The tea I gave you was actually a combination of two herbs used by local indigenous Indians. One is for dysentery and the other for an upset stomach. I’ve used both for much the same problems you had and found them to be quite efficacious.”

“A miracle cure, I’d say,” said Colin. “You could make a fortune with this.”

“Perhaps,” said Greene.

“Seriously,” said Colin. “This is the sure-fire hangover cure. Now if you could only fix impotence...”

“I think I have something for that,” Greene interrupted.

“And male pattern baldness,” Colin continued and repeated, “You have something for that?”

“I do. Impotence is a problem that transcends all cultures.”

“Really,” Colin replied. “Lucky for me, I’m not there yet. Sounds like you have a fortune there in that backpack.”

“Not likely,” said Dr. Greene. “You’d think, but that’s not how it works.” Greene then explained how he’d been one of the lead field botanists who worked for ComGen, one of the largest and most successful biotech companies in the world. They sent him to Costa Rica over a year before to lead a research expedition into the virgin rainforest to study local herbal medical practices and to take back samples, seeds and cuttings for further study back at the corporate headquarters in Boston. Communications were awkward in the field as the company provided no SAT-phone, landlines were limited and cell service covered only major cities. Native language limitations were also a concern as messages were often conveyed to remote local offices via fax and then relayed to the field operations using local messengers. The home office had sent word to curtail all Costa Rican operations; the company was up to its eyeballs in unapproved new drug studies and promising biosynthesis projects. The field collection team was to pack up their current findings and head for home. The entire team except for Greene vacated their makeshift campsite/laboratory deep in the central highland rainforest. Greene remained behind though and sent word that he needed only one, maybe two months to fully mine the promising relationship that he had developed with a particularly wise and ancient shaman and his apprentice. The apprentice was a young woman who’d been educated at University in San Jose as a biologist and later returned to her tribe to help bridge the gulf of distrust that existed between the native peoples and “modern” Costa Ricans. She was also invaluable to Dr. Greene; she spoke impeccable English. He knew that he would never again have an opportunity like this to learn the herbal medical traditions of this ancient culture.

When Greene emerged some six months later from the rainforest with reams and reams of notes, dried samples, seeds, roots – quite literally a documented collection and history of the tribal medicine of an entire ancient people - he found he’d been abandoned, tossed away in Costa Rica like the old sneakers dangling everywhere from the utility lines in old Limon. The young researcher who was to relay Greene’s message had been informed of his own layoff even before the team’s return to the US, so Greene’s request for additional time had not been conveyed. Quite frankly, it was rumored that Greene had become enamored of a local peasant girl and like Fletcher Christian of the Bounty, decided to remain behind in paradise rather than return home. His corporate credit card was cut off, his local access to funds, stopped. So now he found himself stuck in Limon. The local US Embassy was not much help to him; he was the only Canadian on the research team and the only Canadian Embassy in Costa Rica was in San Jose. It may as well have been in the North Pole as Greene had no way to get there. He had an expired visa, little money on his person and no access to his own funds in his Bank of Montreal accounts.

And for quite a different set of reasons, Dr. Alan Greene was little more than a ghost. He had no living relatives to contact for help, few friends and no reasonable way to contact those he could

call friend. His rudimentary Spanish was barely adequate for day to day existence, much less up to the task of directing messages to people he'd lost contact with long before. He'd quite literally spent the better part of the last decade or more in the more remote parts of the world – in Fiji, Malaysia, Madagascar and here, in Costa Rica. His recent contact with the modern world had been extremely limited and his recent friends, his colleagues at ComGen, had either moved on or refused his calls. He was stuck and had been getting by in great part by selling some of his accumulated herbal remedies to the local apothecary trade, where he found that many of his finds were quite rare and valuable. But he was concerned that this cash trade might be illegal, especially given the very narrow purpose of his visit as established on his expired visa. And he was getting low on salable samples.

Colin abruptly announced that he was famished, no doubt because the Mayan Revenge had left him completely empty. Greene informed him that the tea he had drunk was not only immediately effective, but it had a prolonged effect that would last a few days, perhaps even a week. Colin could even eat undercooked fish from Limon's street vendors without fear. The two men left the room to find a restaurant open at this late hour. The late-night hotel clerk directed them to a popular hot spot where Colin spotted Tim with one of the prettier of the Canadian college girls. After introductions, they left Tim and his Canadian beauty in the bar and moved to the dining room. Colin ordered beer, a local fish soup, bread, gallo pinto, plantains, beefsteak, fruit. When Greene ordered no food, Colin realized his mistake. The man had no money. Colin called back the waiter. "It's my treat," he explained to Greene and wasting no time, Greene asked the waiter to simply double the order. He would have what Colin was having. The food arrived and Greene ate ravenously. Colin surmised that his guest was thin, bordering emaciated, for reasons other than his natural body type; the man was starving. Colin called for more bread and beer and plenty of butter. Plates and bowls arrived full and left empty. Fully sated, Colin ended the meal with thick, sweet espresso in the Costa Rican custom and Greene did the same. Greene asked if he might order one of those local, thin cigars and Colin said, "No problem."

"I've not had a meal like that in weeks," said Greene as he smoked his little cigar. "Thank you so much for your kindness and generosity."

"No problem," said Colin. "You did cure me of the Revenge. It was the least I could do." Colin's thoughts were elsewhere, however. He was thinking about his farm and all the unforeseen problems he'd encountered while trying to produce the stubborn piper nigrum in Costa Rica. He was contemplating making a deal with Greene, helping him out in return for his botanical expertise. "I actually may be able to help you further, you know, get you a ride to San Jose, to the Canadian Embassy."

"Oh," said Greene, evidencing that somewhat ill look that Colin had earlier recognized as a smile. "That would be outstanding."

"But first," Colin explained, "I could use your help. You are a botanist, you say, an expert in tropical plants? What do you know about the piper nigrum?"

They talked until the wee hours. Colin told Greene all about his struggles with the black peppercorn plantation; reclaiming the farmland from the jungle, the snakes, the persistent root rot that took so many of his plants, the failure of some plants to thrive and grow while an adjacent plant might grow a foot or more in a day. Greene was familiar with the ancient spice from the tropics of India, but not so much its cultivation. Still, he thought that he could help Colin solve

some of his cultivation issues using his extensive knowledge of plant propagation generally and the diseases that affect tropical plants as well as his familiarity with the commercial production of grapes, another vine. He would gladly come to Colin's plantation and help with the farming of piper nigrum.

"Of course, I'll pay you," said Colin. They came to a modest agreement. For \$150 a week, a princely salary in Costa Rica, and a place to sleep, Greene would help Colin solve his plantation problems. Colin would in turn help Greene get to San Jose so he could resolve his current Visa issues and contact the Canadian Embassy. Once the Piper Nigrum was thriving (Greene estimated that this might take two, perhaps three months) Greene would return to his native Canada. The men shook hands and agreed to meet at the hotel the next day at noon for the return trip to Puerto Saludos.