

PROLOGUE

The manhunter knelt at the front of the canoe, scanned the far bank as it appeared around the river's bend. Thick green rain forest morphed slowly into a rustic brown village, a settlement of hard-packed dirt and wood and corrugated rust built along the water's edge.

"This is it?" he called back to the Indian steering with the out-board motor. Only by necessity had his Portuguese improved in the past months.

"Sim, senhor. This is it."

The manhunter nodded, reached for the radio tucked between his knees.

But he stayed himself. He needed to be certain.

Seven months. Seven months since the call came for him in Amsterdam. A rushed consultation with his employer, a flight across the Atlantic to Caracas, a mad dash to Lima, and then south.

Ever south. Until he and his prey came to the end of the world, and then the chase wound back to the north.

Ever north.

He'd been on the target's heels, to one degree or another, for all this time. The longest hunt of his storied career.

And it would end here. One way or another, the hunt for Courtland Gentry would end right here.



ONE

Outside Quito, the manhunter had come close. He'd even called in a kill team, but they'd gone wanting for a target. Foolish of him, a false start could dull their fervor the next time; he would not cry wolf again. He'd caught fresh wind of the target in northern Chile and a hint of him farther down the Pacific coast, but then he'd lost the scent in Punta Arenas.

Until Rio and a lucky break. A visiting jujitsu student from Denmark had seen an Interpol Wanted poster while in his embassy filing for a lost passport. He'd run into another white student at a dojo in the favelas. Nothing to that, but the Dane knew his art, and the white man's fighting style showed hints of other disciplines: hard, brutal, warrior tendencies that he tried to hide from those around him. The Dane recalled the Wanted poster. It was no obvious match, but he felt compelled to contact the authorities. Something about the man in the dojo had uneased him. A look, an edge, the hint of suspicion on the part of the white student, as if he knew that the Dane was sizing him up for some reason.

The manhunter got word of the sighting, arrived on a private jet mere hours later. The suspect did not show for class that day, or the next. The manhunter brought in local reinforcements for the leg-work; dozens of men combed the favelas with photos and cash. Many of the crew were roughed up or threatened on the mean streets of the lawless slums, one man even relieved of his wallet and knifed in the arm. But the canvass paid off: someone talked; someone pointed a finger; someone whispered an address.

The manhunter went to have a look. He was not a shooter himself, he hadn't fired a weapon since his days in the Royal Netherlands Army, fighting the Angolans in the 1970s. But he did not want to spin up his gunmen-in-waiting on another wild-goose chase, so he left eight armed men up the street as he went on with only two. A horrid, run-down neighborhood, a shit-stained building, a piss-scented third-floor hall with a darkened doorway at the end of it. The manhunter's hands shook as he used another border's key and crept inside, his gunners just behind him.

A human form moved in a blur off a top bunk bed; the manhunter's life flashed before his eyes. Then a backpack heaved upon the blur's shoulder, and the blur was out a window, a full two stories down. The manhunter rushed behind him; the gunmen fired their weapons, tearing up the bed and the wall and the window frame in the blur's wake. The men reloaded as the manhunter reached the window, watched the target land and roll onto another rooftop, float across an alleyway to another building like a flying squirrel, and then leap and roll down to ground level, the explosions of small-caliber rounds chasing after him down the street as the two gunmen belatedly returned to the fight.

The target was gone. The bunk he vacated left no clues but the warmth on his tattered blanket.

That was ten weeks ago.

Last Sunday a call came from Fonte Boa, hundreds of miles north

on the Amazon River. The manhunter had made lists of possible professions in which the target might find work. There were hundreds, from sheet metal worker to legionnaire. Somewhere down the list marine salvage had been noted, due to his experience in diving and his raw courage. A small operation along a remote Amazonian tributary had employed a walk-up foreign white man, a queer occurrence in the Brazilian jungle to be sure. So the manhunter had flown to Fonte Boa and shown a photo to the boatman who delivered dry goods upriver to the settlements.

And now the manhunter was here.

He fingered the radio between his knees. One call and two fat helicopters full of gunmen would descend and fan out; they'd planned their attack with satellite photos and a grease board in the watcher's hotel room in Fonte Boa. One call would turn the pristine jungle to fire and end the target the Dutch manhunter had been after for these seven long months.

But first he must make certain.

A howler monkey splashed from a tree into the water, scampered back onto the bank, and disappeared into the thick growth.

Seconds later, the launch slowed and bumped against the rubber tires tied to the dockside. The canoe's owner made to turn off the outboard.

"No," said the manhunter. "Leave it running. I will only be a moment."

"Wastes gas, sir," said the local. Some sort of Indian savage. "I can start it again in five seconds."

"I said leave it running." The white man climbed ashore, started up the dirt hill towards a man idling by a shack raised on narrow stilts. The Dutchman would get some verification that this was the place, and then he would not wait around for the fireworks. He carried an ancient Webley Top-Break Revolver in a shoulder holster, but that was really just for show out here amongst the savages of the

jungle. Killing was not his job. He'd use his radio, and then his job would be done. He'd head back upriver to Fonte Boa to wait at the hotel.

Mauro sat in the shade, waiting for his father to return with the morning's catch. At ten years old Mauro normally went out with his father to collect the nets, but today he'd stayed behind to help his uncle with some chores and had only just arrived at the dock when the canoe with the white man appeared. He watched the old man make his way up the hill, stop in front of the drunkard, and engage the man in conversation. The white man pulled a white paper from his breast pocket and showed it to the drunk, then handed him some cash.

Mauro stood slowly. Hesitated.

The white man nodded, headed back to the canoe, and pulled a radio up to his mouth.

Young Mauro walked towards a narrow trail that led away from the docks, away from his village. Once inside the dark protection of the jungle canopy, the boy began to run as fast as his calloused bare feet would take him.

TWO

Court Gentry pulled on his umbilical cable for a bit more slack then turned back to the wreckage in front of him. He reached out with a gloved hand and felt his way forward to the hulking iron wheelhouse of the sunken steamboat. Visibility in the murky river was no more than twelve inches at this time of late morning, thirty feet below the ochre surface of the warm water. Finding his place, he adjusted the angle of the flashlight on his helmet, lifted his welding torch back up, and narrowed the flame to little more than a glowing spike. Then he slowly applied the white-hot fire to the iron to begin a new cut.

A series of three strong tugs to his line pulled him off his mark.

“Dammit,” he said aloud, his voice reverberated in his brass helmet. The dive helmet’s radio wasn’t working so the team communicated through tugs. Three short, hard pulls meant “surface immediately,” which meant it would take him, at a minimum, ten minutes to get back down here through the algae and oily film to find his spot again.

But he did not wait. “Surface immediately” wasn’t a message to

ignore. It could be nothing, but it also could mean there was a problem with the equipment, which could be dangerous, or it could mean snakes or crocs or a school of piranha had been spotted close to his dive site, which could be downright deadly.

He broke the surface four minutes later; his gear and his weights made it impossible to tread water, so he pulled himself along his line towards the shore. When he was waist-deep, he wiped green goo off the acrylic faceplate of his helmet, but only when he unfastened the latches and lifted off the heavy headgear could he see his way forward through the thick reeds and tall grasses on the riverside. Above him stood his two coworkers, Thiago and Davi; both men were experienced salvage divers, but neither was fitted to go down today. Only one compressor was operational, so they split the time between the three of them. One man on the bottom, and two men on crocodile/anaconda/piranha watch.

“What is it?” Court called out to them. His Portuguese was not half as good as his Spanish, but it was functional. One jerked a thumb to the other side of a tiny lagoon that swelled off of the river like a tumor, and Court saw young Mauro standing there on the trail that led towards the dock. The boy wore a red and black Barcelona soccer jersey emblazoned with the name of a Bulgarian player who had not taken the pitch for that club since the mid-nineties, and he was bare-foot. Court had never once seen the dark-skinned kid in shoes.

Gentry was surprised that he’d been called to the surface to talk to the boy—still he waved and smiled. But his smile dropped in an instant. The kid’s eyes were wide, and his body was tight.

Something was wrong.

Court trudged along the marshy bank that rimmed the lagoon, his feet sucked down by mud. He climbed up to the young Brazilian, led him down the trail a few yards before asking, “What’s up?”

“You told me to come if I ever saw a white man.”

“Yes, I did.” Court’s own body stiffened.

“An old man. Alone. At the dock.”

“Did he talk to anyone?”

“Yes, he asked Amado a question. Showed him a sheet of paper. Gave him some money. Then the white man talked into his radio.”

“His radio?” Gentry’s eyes were off the kid, on the trail back to the dock, a kilometer distant through dense rain forest. His hands had already begun removing his old tattered wetsuit, stripping himself down to his underwear.

Thiago called out to Gentry from behind, probably telling him it wasn’t time for lunch, but he ignored Thiago.

“Where is he now?”

“He left. Got back in a launch and headed upriver.”

Court nodded. Spoke in English to himself. “The manhunter.”

“¿*Cuál?*” *What?*

“Good. You did real good, Mauro. Thank you.”

“Sure, Jim.”

Seconds later Court was on his knees by his gear on the other side of the lagoon. The boy had followed him to the bank and stood above him and watched him open his large duffel bag. From it he retrieved a black sawed-off 12-gauge shotgun with a wooden pistol grip. He grabbed his wallet from the bag; it was fat with Brazilian reals, and he held it out to the boy. “This is for you. Take some of it; give the rest to your mom.”

Mauro took it, his eyes wide with surprise and confusion. “You are leaving?”

“Yeah, kid. Time for me to go.” Gentry’s hands moved quickly as he yanked on dirty brown pants and a filthy long-sleeved cream-colored shirt.

“What about your dog?”

“He wasn’t my dog; he just hung around my camp. He’s a good boy. Take care of him, and he’ll take care of you, okay?”

Court began lacing old tennis shoes onto his wet feet.

Mauro nodded, but in truth he did not understand any of this.

He'd never seen anyone move so fast in his life. People in his village did not leave, did not make decisions in an instant. Did not hand their wallets over to kids. Did not change their life because some dumb old man showed up in a canoe.

His uncle was right. Gringos *are* crazy.

"Where will you go?" he asked the strange American.

"I don't know. I'll figure something—"

Court stopped in midsentence. Cocked his head to the side as he lifted a small loaded backpack out of the big duffel and secured it onto his back.

Mauro heard it, too, and said, "Helicopter."

Court shook his head. Took the pistol-grip pump shotgun and stood up. Velcroed it tight to the right side of his backpack, grip down and within reach. A machete was already fastened similarly on the left. "No. *Two* helicopters. Run home, kid. Get your brothers and sisters inside, and stay there. It's gonna get good and loud around here."

And then the gringo surprised young Mauro one last time. He smiled. He smiled wide and rubbed the boy's tufted black hair, waved to his two coworkers without a word, and then sprinted off into the jungle.

Two helicopters shot low out of the sun and over the treetops, their chugging rotor wash beating the flora below as they raced in formation. They were Bell 212s, a civilian version of the Twin Huey, the venerable but capable aircraft ubiquitous amongst American forces in the Vietnam War.

In the history of manned flight, no machine was more at home streaking over a jungle canopy than the Huey.

The choppers were owned by the Colombian police but had been loaned, along with their crews, to the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, a semi-right-wing, semi-disbanded defense force that

fought from time to time against the FARC, or Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, and the ELN, or Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional, Colombia's left-wing rebel groups. The Colombian police had thought the loan was to send this team of twenty commandos to a mountain region to combat the FARC, but in fact the AUC was working for hire over the border in the Amazon jungle.

The pilots would not report the misappropriation of resources; they were being well paid.

Each man in the unit wore green jungle fatigues and a bush hat. Each man had a big HK G3 battle rifle cradled in his arms, and each man had extra magazines for the rifles, grenades, a radio, and a machete strapped to his chest and belted to his waist.

The commander of the unit sat in the lead helicopter, screamed over the Pratt and Whitney turbo shaft engine to the nine soldiers seated with him. "One minute! If you see him, shoot him! If you shoot him, *kill* him! They don't need him alive!" and then he amended himself. "They don't *want* him alive!"

A chorus of "*Sí, comandante!*" roared louder than the engine. He delivered the same order into his radio to the men in the second helicopter.

A moment later the helicopters split, the comandante's craft banked hard to the left, dipped its nose toward a small winding river that snaked to the south.

Court shot through the dappled morning light flickering through the canopy above him, certain in his stride. He continued on the jungle trail, his ears tuned to the sound of the rotors behind him. Soon the single beat of the choppers changed to two as the aircraft separated. One landed behind him, probably in the swampy clearing a hundred yards from the dive site. Gentry knew the men would sink knee-deep in the muck, and this would buy him a little time to get

away. The other helicopter flew on past his position, off to his left, lower than the treetops; certainly, it was skimming the river. It would be dropping off dismounts in a blocking maneuver along his path.

So much for the extra time.

Court picked up his pace even more. The smile was gone from his face, but the thirty-seven-year-old American felt confident and strong as his legs and arms pumped him onward. Adrenaline, an old friend whom he hadn't run into in a while, coursed through his body and fed power to his muscles and his mind.

He'd been here for nine weeks, nine *good* weeks, but in his adult life he'd rarely stayed in one place for so long. As he'd told the village boy, it *was* time to go.

The comandante's team fast-roped onto the riverbank; the first four down dropped onto their elbows in the muck and raised their HKs to the forest to provide cover for the second four as they slid down. The second four moved up to the dirt road, dropped down, and covered both directions. The comandante and his number-two descended last, ran up to the road, and moved out at the head of the column.

The comandante got the call that the men from the other chopper were splashing their way through a marsh; he cursed aloud in Spanish and yelled at his men to pick up the pace.

Gentry sprinted through his tiny camp. It did not take long. The camp was just a tent with a sleeping pallet, a stone-lined fire pit, a well-worn trail to a hand-dug latrine, a hammock enshrouded in mosquito netting, and a few belongings hanging from a net in a tree. He was glad to see the dog wasn't here; it was close enough to lunch time to know the little four-legged survivor had scampered down to the town's one little thatched-roof restaurant to await leftovers before

making his way to the shady palms near where the fishermen returned with their daily catch. There he could rest for a while before fighting with the other dogs of the village for a chance at leftover fish bait tossed from the boats.

Court was well aware that the dog's daily agenda was more organized than his own.

He kept a Browning pistol in a locked case inside his tent, but he did not take time to retrieve it. Instead he grabbed a lighter from just inside the canvas door of his two-man tent and a small can of cooking fuel lying next to it. In seconds he'd poured the oil over the tent, his belongings in the tree, even the hammock. He lit his home on fire with neither a moment's pause nor a shred of regret, tossed the lighter on the ground, and headed off towards a small stream fifty feet away.

A man shouted off to Gentry's left. From the high-pitched exulting tenor of the voice, he could tell he'd been spotted.

They were close.

Gentry leapt into the ankle-deep stream and sprinted to the south, his footsteps exploding in the flowing water.

The comandante slid on his back down the bank and into the cold stream. He found his footing in the water and raised his weapon just as the target turned to the left, out of his sights and out of view. The men ran on past their comandante, each man wild with the chase, thrilled with the chance of a kill.

He lowered the G3 and sprinted right along with them. He knew there was a road ahead that led to the river, but he also knew that this stream did not wind directly to that road. He assumed there was a little trail that the target was making for, a trail too small to be picked up through the triple canopy of the jungle on the satellite photos. The comandante and his men only needed to get close enough to the target to see where he ducked out of the stream bed and back into the

jungle, and then it would be just a matter of time before they caught him on the trail. The jungle would be too thick to hide in, the dirt road too straight for a fleeing man to duck bullets fired from the heavy 7.62 mm battle rifles that he and his men carried.

The comandante made the turn with his men, white water splashing chest high as the ten soldiers ran together. Up ahead he saw the dark-complected man with the long hair and the backpack, both hands empty. One of his men at the front of the scrum fired a shot, blasting vines from a tree well above the target's head. Just then the man ducked left, ran out of the water and up the steep bank, and disappeared into the black hole of a small foot trail. One more rifle shot from his men chased him into the jungle.

"There he goes!" shouted the Colombian. "Up the bank!"

