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Opening Extract from...

Amazonia

Written by James Rollins

Published by Orion

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AMAZONIA

JAMES ROLLINS



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Prologue

JULY 25, 6:24 P.M.
AN AMERINDIAN MISSIONARY VILLAGE
AMAZONAS, BRAZIL

Padre Garcia Luiz Batista was struggling with his hoe, tilling weeds from the mission's garden, when the stranger stumbled from the jungle. The figure wore a tattered pair of black denim pants and nothing else. Barechested and shoeless, the man fell to his knees among rows of sprouting cassava plants. His skin, burnt a deep mocha, was tattooed with blue and crimson dyes.

Mistaking the fellow for one of the local Yanomamo Indians, Padre Batista pushed back his wide-brimmed straw hat and greeted the fellow in the Indians' native tongue. *"Eou, shori,"* he said. "Welcome, friend, to the mission of Wauwai."

The stranger lifted his face, and Garcia instantly knew his mistake. The fellow's eyes were the deepest blue, a color unnatural among the Amazonian tribes. He also bore a scraggled growth of dark beard.

Clearly not an Indian, but a white man.

"Bemvindo," he offered in Portuguese, believing now that the fellow must be one of the ubiquitous peasants

from the coastal cities who ventured into the Amazon rain forest to stake a claim and build a better life for themselves. “Be welcome here, my friend.”

The poor soul had clearly been in the jungle a long time. His skin was stretched over bone, each rib visible. His black hair was tangled, and his body bore cuts and oozing sores. Flies flocked about him, buzzing and feeding on his wounds.

When the stranger tried to speak, his parched lips cracked and fresh blood dribbled down his chin. He half crawled toward Garcia, an arm raised in supplication. His words, though, were garbled, unintelligible, a beastly sound.

Garcia’s first impulse was to retreat from the man, but his calling to God would not let him. The Good Samaritan did not refuse the wayward traveler. He bent and helped the man to his feet. The fellow was so wasted he weighed no more than a child in his arms. Even through his own shirt, the padre could feel the heat of the man’s skin as he burned with fever.

“Come, let us get you inside out of the sun.” Garcia guided the man toward the mission’s church, its whitewashed steeple poking toward the blue sky. Beyond the building, a ragtag mix of palm-thatched huts and wooden homes spread across the cleared jungle floor.

The mission of Wauwai had been established only five years earlier, but already the village had swelled to nearly eighty inhabitants, a mix of various indigenous tribes. Some of the homes were on stilts, as was typical of the Apalai Indians, while others built solely of palm thatch were home to the Waiwai and Tiriós tribes. But the greatest number of the mission’s dwellers were Yanomamo, marked by their large communal roundhouse.

Garcia waved his free arm to one of the Yanomamo tribesmen at the garden’s edge, a fellow named

Henaowe. The short Indian, the padre's assistant, was dressed in pants and a buttoned, long-sleeved shirt. He hurried forward.

"Help me get this man into my house."

Henaowe nodded vigorously and crossed to the man's other side. With the feverish man slung between them, they passed through the garden gate and around the church to the clapboard building jutting from its south face. The missionaries' residence was the only home with a gas generator. It powered the church's lights, a refrigerator, and the village's only air conditioner. Sometimes Garcia wondered if the success of his mission was not based solely on the wonders of the church's cool interior, rather than any heartfelt belief in salvation through Christ.

Once they reached the residence, Henaowe ducked forward and yanked the rear door open. They manhandled the stranger through the dining room to a back room. It was one of the domiciles of the mission's acolytes, but it was now unoccupied. Two days ago, the younger missionaries had all left on an evangelical journey to a neighboring village. The small room was little more than a dark cell, but it was at least cool and sheltered from the sun.

Garcia nodded for Henaowe to light the room's lantern. They had not bothered to run the electricity to the smaller rooms. Cockroaches and spiders skittered from the flame's glow.

Together they hauled the man to the single bed. "Help me get him out of his clothes. I must clean and treat his wounds."

Henaowe nodded and reached for the buttons to the man's pants, then froze. A gasp escaped the Indian. He jumped back as if from a scorpion.

"Weti kete?" Garcia asked. "What is it?"

Henaowe's eyes had grown huge with horror. He

pointed to the man's bare chest and spoke rapidly in his native tongue.

Garcia's brow wrinkled. "What about the tattoo?" The blue and red dyes were mostly geometric shapes: crimson circles, vibrant squiggles, and jagged triangles. But in the center and radiating out was a serpentine spiral of red, like blood swirling down a drain. A single blue handprint lay at its center, just above the man's navel.

"Shawara!" Henaowe exclaimed, backing toward the door.

Evil spirits.

Garcia glanced back to his assistant. He had thought the tribesman had grown past these superstitious beliefs. "Enough," he said harshly. "It's only paint. It's not the devil's work. Now come help me."

Henaowe merely shook in terror and would approach no closer.

Frowning, Garcia returned his attention to his patient as the man groaned. His eyes were glassy with fever and delirium. He thrashed weakly on the sheets. Garcia checked the man's forehead. It burned. He swung back to Henaowe. "At least fetch the first-aid kit for me and the penicillin in the fridge."

With clear relief, the Indian dashed away.

Garcia sighed. Having lived in the Amazonian rain forest for a decade, he had out of necessity learned basic medical skills: setting splints, cleaning and applying salves to wounds, treating fevers. He could even perform simple operations, like suturing wounds and helping with difficult births. As the padre of the mission, he was not only the primary guardian of their souls, but also counselor, chief, and doctor.

Garcia removed the man's soiled clothes and set them aside. As his eyes roved over the man's exposed skin, he could clearly see how sorely the unforgiving jungle had ravaged his body. Maggots crawled in his deep wounds.

Scaly fungal infections had eaten away the man's toenails, and a scar on his heel marked an old snakebite.

As he worked, the padre wondered who this man was. What was his story? Did he have family out there somewhere? But all attempts to speak to the man were met only with a garbled, delirious response.

Many of the peasants who tried to eke out a living met hard ends at the hands of hostile Indians, thieves, drug traffickers, or even jungle predators. But the most common demise of these settlers was disease. In the remote wilds of the rain forest, medical attention could be weeks away. A simple flu could bring death.

The scuff of feet on wood drew Garcia's attention back to the door. Henaowe had returned, burdened with the medical kit and a pail of clean water. But he was not alone. At Henaowe's side stood Kamala, a short, white-haired *shapori*, the tribal shaman. Henaowe must have run off to fetch the ancient medicine man.

"Haya," Garcia greeted the fellow. "Grandfather." It was the typical way to acknowledge a Yanomamo elder.

Kamala did not say a word. He simply strode into the room and crossed to the bed. As he stared down at the man, his eyes narrowed. He turned to Henaowe and waved for the Indian to place the bucket and medical kit down. The shaman then lifted his arms over the bedridden stranger and began to chant. Garcia was fluent in many indigenous dialects, but he could not make out a single word.

Once done, Kamala turned to the padre and spoke in fluent Portuguese. "This *nabe* has been touched by the *shawara*, dangerous spirits of the deep forest. He will die this night. His body must be burned before sunrise." With these words, Kamala turned to leave.

"Wait! Tell me what this symbol means."

Turning back with a scowl, Kamala said, "It is the mark of the Ban-ali tribe. Blood Jaguars. He belongs to them.

None must give help to a *ban-yi*, the slave of the jaguar. It is death." The shaman made a gesture to ward against evil spirits, blowing across his fingertips, then left with Henaowe in tow.

Alone in the dim room, Garcia felt a chill in the air that didn't come from the air-conditioning. He had heard whispers of the Ban-ali, one of the mythic ghost tribes of the deep forest. A frightening people who mated with jaguars and possessed unspeakable powers.

Garcia kissed his crucifix and cast aside these fanciful superstitions. Turning to the bucket and medicines, he soaked a sponge in the tepid water and brought it to the wasted man's lips.

"Drink," he whispered. In the jungle, dehydration, more than anything, was often the factor between life and death. He squeezed the sponge and dribbled water across the man's cracked lips.

Like a babe suckling at his mother's teat, the stranger responded to the water. He slurped the trickle, gasping and half choking. Garcia helped raise the man's head so he could drink more easily. After a few minutes, the delirium faded somewhat from the man's eyes. He scrabbled for the sponge, responding to the life-giving water, but Garcia pulled it away. It was unhealthy to drink too quickly after such severe dehydration.

"Rest, senhor," he urged the stranger. "Let me clean your wounds and get some antibiotics into you."

The man did not seem to understand. He struggled to sit up, reaching for the sponge, crying out eerily. As Garcia pushed him by the shoulders to the pillow, the man gasped out, and the padre finally understood why the man could not speak.

He had no tongue. It had been cut away.

Grimacing, Garcia prepared a syringe of ampicillin and prayed to God for the souls of the monsters that could do this to another man. The medicine was past its

expiration date, but it was the best he could get out here. He injected the antibiotic into the man's left buttock, then began to work on his wounds with sponge and salve.

The stranger lapsed between lucidity and delirium. Whenever he was conscious, the man struggled mindlessly for his piled clothes, as if he intended to dress and continue his jungle trek. But Garcia would always push his arms back down and cover him again with blankets.

As the sun set and night swept over the forests, Garcia sat with the Bible in hand and prayed for the man. But in his heart, the padre knew his prayers would not be answered. Kamala, the shaman, was correct in his assessment. The man would not last the night.

As a precaution, in case the man was a child of Christ, he had performed the sacrament of Last Rites an hour earlier. The fellow had stirred as he marked his forehead with oil, but he did not wake. His brow burned feverishly. The antibiotics had failed to break through the blood infections.

Resolved that the man would die, Garcia maintained his vigil. It was the least he could do for the poor soul. But as midnight neared and the jungle awoke with the whining sounds of locusts and the *cronk*ing of myriad frogs, Garcia slipped to sleep in his chair, the Bible in his lap.

He woke hours later at a strangled cry from the man. Believing his patient was gasping his last breath, Garcia struggled up, knocking his Bible to the floor. As he bent to pick it up, he found the man staring back at him. His eyes were glassy, but the delirium had faded. The stranger lifted a trembling hand. He pointed again to his discarded clothes.

"You can't leave," Garcia said.

The man closed his eyes a moment, shook his head, then with a pleading look, he again pointed to his pants.

Garcia finally relented. How could he refuse this last feverish request? Standing, he crossed to the foot of the

bed and retrieved the rumpled pair of pants. He handed them to the dying man.

The stranger grabbed them up and immediately began pawing along the length of one leg of his garment, following the inner seam. Finally, he stopped and fingered a section of the cotton denim.

With shaking arms, he held the pants out to Garcia.

The padre thought the stranger was slipping back into delirium. In fact, the poor man's breathing had become more ragged and coarse. But Garcia humored his nonsensical actions. He took the pants and felt where the man indicated.

To his surprise, he found something stiffer than denim under his fingers, something hidden under the seam. A secret pocket.

Curious, the padre fished out a pair of scissors from the first-aid kit. Off to the side, the man sank down to his pillow with a sigh, clearly content that his message had finally been understood.

Using the scissors, Garcia trimmed through the seam's threads and opened the secret pocket. Reaching inside, he tugged out a small bronze coin and held it up to the lamp. A name was engraved on the coin.

"Gerald Wallace Clark," he read aloud. Was this the stranger? "Is this you, senhor?"

He glanced back to the bed.

"Sweet Jesus in heaven," the padre mumbled.

Atop the cot, the man stared blindly toward the ceiling, mouth lolled open, chest unmoving. He had let go the ghost, a stranger no longer.

"Rest in peace, Senhor Clark."

Padre Batista again raised the bronze coin to the lantern and flipped it over. As he saw the words inscribed on the opposite side, his mouth grew dry with dread.

United States Army Special Forces.

AUGUST 1, 10:45 A.M.
CIA HEADQUARTERS
LANGLEY, VIRGINIA

George Fielding had been surprised by the call. As deputy director of Central Intelligence, he had often been summoned to urgent meetings by various division heads, but to get a priority one call from Marshall O'Brien, the head of the Directorate Environmental Center, was unusual. The DEC had been established back in 1997, a division of the intelligence community dedicated to environmental issues. So far in his tenure, the DEC had never raised a priority call. Such a response was reserved for matters of immediate national security. What could have rattled the Old Bird—as Marshall O'Brien had been nicknamed—to place such an alert?

Fielding strode rapidly down the hall that connected the original headquarters building to the new headquarters. The newer facility had been built in the late eighties. It housed many of the burgeoning divisions of the service, including the DEC.

As he walked, he glanced at the framed paintings lining the long passageway, a gallery of the former directors of the CIA, going back all the way to Major General Donovan, who served as director of the Office of Strategic Services, the World War II–era counterpart of the CIA. Fielding's own boss would be added to this wall one day, and if George played his cards smartly, he himself might assume the directorship.

With this thought in mind, he entered the New Headquarters Building and followed the halls to the DEC's suite of offices. Once through the main door, he was instantly greeted by a secretary.

She stood as he entered. "Deputy Director, Mr. O'Brien is waiting for you in his office." The secretary crossed to a set of mahogany doors, knocked perfuncto-

rily, then pushed open the door, holding it wide for him.

"Thank you."

Inside, a deep, rumbling voice greeted him. "Deputy Director Fielding, I appreciate you coming in person." Marshall O'Brien stood up from his chair. He was a towering man with silver-gray hair. He dwarfed the large executive desk. He waved to a chair. "Please take a seat. I know your time is valuable, and I won't waste it."

Always to the point, Fielding thought. Four years ago, there had been talk that Marshall O'Brien might assume the directorship of the CIA. In fact, the man had been deputy director before Fielding, but he had bristled too many senators with his no-nonsense attitude and burned even more bridges with his rigid sense of right and wrong. That wasn't how politics were played in Washington. So instead, O'Brien had been demoted to a token figurehead here at the Environmental Center. The old man's urgent call was probably his way of scraping some bit of importance from his position, trying to stay in the game.

"What's this all about?" Fielding asked as he sat down.

O'Brien settled to his own seat and opened a gray folder atop his desk.

Someone's dossier, Fielding noted.

The old man cleared his throat. "Two days ago, an American's body was reported to the Consular Agency in Manaus, Brazil. The deceased was identified by his Special Forces challenge coin from his old unit."

Fielding frowned. Challenge coins were carried by many divisions of the military. They were more a tradition than a true means of identification. A unit member, active or not, caught without his coin was duty-bound to buy a round of drinks for his mates. "What does this have to do with us?"

"The man was not only ex–Special Forces. He was one of my operatives. Agent Gerald Clark."

Fielding blinked in surprise.

O'Brien continued, "Agent Clark had been sent undercover with a research team to investigate complaints of environmental damage from gold-mining operations and to gather data on the transshipment of Bolivian and Colombian cocaine through the Amazon basin."

Fielding straightened in his seat. "And was he murdered? Is that what this is all about?"

"No. Six days ago, Agent Clark appeared at a missionary village deep in the remote jungle, half dead from fever and exposure. The head of the mission attempted to care for him, but he died within a few hours."

"A tragedy indeed, but how is this a matter of national security?"

"Because Agent Clark has been missing for four years." O'Brien passed him a faxed newspaper article.

Confused, Fielding accepted the article. "Four years?"

EXPEDITION VANISHES IN AMAZONIAN JUNGLE

Associated Press

MANAUS, BRAZIL, MARCH 20— The continuing search for millionaire industrialist Dr. Carl Rand and his international team of 30 researchers and guides has been called off after three months of intense searching. The team, a joint venture between the U.S. National Cancer Institute and the Brazilian Indian Foundation, vanished into the rain forests without leaving a single clue as to their fate.

The expedition's yearlong goal had been to conduct a census on the true number of Indians and tribes living in the Amazon forests. However, three months after leaving the jungle city of Manaus, their daily progress reports, radioed in from the field, ended abruptly. All attempts to contact the team have failed. Rescue helicopters and ground search teams were sent to their last known location, but no one was found. Two weeks later, one last,

frantic message was received: "Send help . . . can't last much longer. Oh, God, they're all around us." Then the team was swallowed into the vast jungle.

Now, after a three-month search involving an international team and much publicity, Commander Ferdinand Gonzales, the rescue team's leader, has declared the expedition and its members "lost and likely dead." All searches have been called off.

The current consensus of the investigators is that the team either was overwhelmed by a hostile tribe or had stumbled upon a hidden base of drug traffickers. Either way, any hope for rescue dies today as the search teams are called home. It should be noted that each year scores of researchers, explorers, and missionaries disappear into the Amazon forest, never to be seen again.

"My God."

O'Brien retrieved the article from the stunned man's fingers and continued, "After disappearing, no further contact was ever made by the research team or our operative. Agent Clark was classified as deceased."

"But are we sure this is the same man?"

O'Brien nodded. "Dental records and fingerprints match those on file."

Fielding shook his head, the initial shock ebbing. "As tragic as all this is and as messy as the paperwork will be, I still don't see why it's a matter of national security."

"I would normally agree, except for one additional oddity." O'Brien shuffled through the dossier's ream of papers and pulled out two photographs. He handed over the first one. "This was taken just a few days before he departed on his mission."

Fielding glanced at the grainy photo of a man dressed in Levi's, a Hawaiian shirt, and a safari hat. The man wore a large grin and was hoisting a tropical drink in hand. "Agent Clark?"

"Yes, the photo was taken by one of the researchers during a going-away party." O'Brien passed him the second photograph. "And this was taken at the morgue in Manaus, where the body now resides."

Fielding took the glossy with a twinge of queasiness. He had no desire to look at photographs of dead people, but he had no choice. The corpse in this photograph was naked, laid out on a stainless steel table, an emaciated skeleton wrapped in skin. Strange tattoos marked his flesh. Still, Fielding recognized the man's facial features. It *was* Agent Clark—but with one notable difference. He retrieved the first photograph and compared the two.

O'Brien must have noted the blood draining from his face and spoke up. "Two years prior to his disappearance, Agent Clark took a sniper's bullet to his left arm during a forced recon mission in Iraq. Gangrene set in before he could reach a U.S. camp. The limb had to be amputated at the shoulder, ending his career with the army's Special Forces."

"But the body in the morgue has both arms."

"Exactly. The fingerprints from the corpse's arm match those on file prior to the shooting. It would seem Agent Clark went into the Amazon with one arm and came back with two."

"But that's impossible. What the hell happened out there?"

Marshall O'Brien studied Fielding with his hawkish eyes, demonstrating why he had earned his nickname, the Old Bird. Fielding felt like a mouse before an eagle. The old man's voice deepened. "That's what I intend to find out."

ACT ONE

The Mission



CURARE

family: *Menispermaceae*

genus: *Chondrodendron*

species: *Tomentosum*

common name: *Curare*

parts used: *Leaf, Root*

properties/actions: *Diuretic, Febrifuge, Muscle Relaxant, Tonic, Poison*

ONE

Snake Oil

AUGUST 6, 10:11 A.M.
AMAZON JUNGLE, BRAZIL

The anaconda held the small Indian girl wrapped in its heavy coils, dragging her toward the river.

Nathan Rand was on his way back to the Yanomamo village after an early morning of gathering medicinal plants when he heard her screams. He dropped his specimen bag and ran to her aid. As he sprinted, he shrugged his short-barreled shotgun from his shoulder. When alone in the jungle, one always carried a weapon.

He pushed through a fringe of dense foliage and spotted the snake and girl. The anaconda, one of the largest he had ever seen, at least forty feet in length, lay half in the water and half stretched out on the muddy beach. Its black scales shone wetly. It must have been lurking under the surface when the girl had come to collect water from the river. It was not unusual for the giant snakes to prey upon animals who came to the river to drink: wild peccary, capybara rodents, forest deer. But the great snakes seldom attacked humans.

Still, during the past decade of working as an ethnobotanist in the jungles of the Amazon basin, Nathan had

learned one important rule: if a beast were hungry enough, all rules were broken. It was an eat-or-be-eaten world under the endless green bower.

Nathan squinted through his gun's sight. He recognized the girl. "Oh, God, Tama!" She was the chieftain's nine-year-old niece, a smiling, happy child who had given him a bouquet of jungle flowers as a gift upon his arrival in the village a month ago. Afterward she kept pulling at the hairs on his arm, a rarity among the smooth-skinned Yanomamo, and nicknamed him *Jako Basho,* "Brother Monkey."

Biting his lip, he searched through his weapon's sight. He had no clean shot, not with the child wrapped in the muscular coils of the predator.

"Damn it!" He tossed his shotgun aside and reached to the machete at his belt. Unhitching the weapon, Nathan lunged forward—but as he neared, the snake rolled and pulled the girl under the black waters of the river. Her screams ended and bubbles followed her course.

Without thinking, Nathan dove in after her.

Of all the environments of the Amazon, none were more dangerous than its waterways. Under its placid surfaces lay countless hazards. Schools of bone-scouring piranhas hunted its depths, while stingrays lay buried in the mud and electric eels roosted amid roots and sunken logs. But worst of all were the river's true man-killers, the black caimans—giant crocodilian reptiles. With all its dangers, the Indians of the Amazon knew better than to venture into unknown waters.

But Nathan Rand was no Indian.

Holding his breath, he searched through the muddy waters and spotted the surge of coils ahead. A pale limb waved. With a kick of his legs, he reached out to the small hand, snatching it up in his large grip. Small fingers clutched his in desperation.

Tama was still conscious!

He used her arm to pull himself closer to the snake. In his other hand, he drew the machete back, kicking to hold his place, squeezing Tama's hand.

Then the dark waters swirled, and he found himself staring into the red eyes of the giant snake. It had sensed the challenge to its meal. Its black maw opened and struck at him.

Nate ducked aside, fighting to maintain his grip on the girl.

The anaconda's jaws snapped like a vice onto his arm. Though its bite was nonpoisonous, the pressure threatened to crush Nate's wrist. Ignoring the pain and his own mounting panic, he brought his other arm around, aiming for the snake's eyes with his machete.

At the last moment, the giant anaconda rolled in the water, throwing Nate to the silty bottom and pinning him. Nate felt the air squeezed from his lungs as four hundred pounds of scaled muscle trapped him. He struggled and fought, but he found no purchase in the slick river mud.

The girl's fingers were torn from his grip as the coils churned her away from him.

No . . . Tama!

He abandoned his machete and pushed with his hands against the weight of the snake's bulk. His shoulders sank into the soft muck of the riverbed, but still he pushed. For every coil he shoved aside, another would take its place. His arms weakened, and his lungs screamed for air.

Nathan Rand knew in this moment that he was doomed—and he was not particularly surprised. He knew it would happen one day. It was his destiny, the curse of his family. During the past twenty years, both his parents had been consumed by the Amazon forest. When he was eleven, his mother had succumbed to an unknown jungle fever, dying in a small missionary hospital. Then, four years ago, his father had simply vanished into the rain forest, disappearing without witnesses.

As Nate remembered the heartbreak of losing his father, rage flamed through his chest. Cursed or not, he refused to follow in his father's footsteps. He would *not* allow himself simply to be swallowed by the jungle. But more important, he would *not* lose Tama!

Screaming out the last of the trapped air in his chest, Nathan shoved the anaconda's bulk off his legs. Freed for a moment, he swung his feet under him, sinking into the mud up to his ankles, and shoved straight up.

His head burst from the river, and he gulped a breath of fresh air, then was dragged by his arm back under the dark water.

This time, Nathan did not fight the strength of the snake. Holding the clamped wrist to his chest, he twisted into the coils, managing to get a choke hold around the neck of the snake with his other arm. With the beast trapped, Nate dug his left thumb into the snake's nearest eye.

The snake writhed, tossing Nate momentarily out of the water, then slamming him back down. He held tight.

C'mon, you bastard, let up!

He bent his trapped wrist enough to drive his other thumb into the snake's remaining eye. He pushed hard on both sides, praying his basic training in reptile physiology proved true. Pressure on the eyes of a snake should trigger a gag reflex via the optic nerve.

He pressed harder, his heartbeat thudding in his ears.

Suddenly the pressure on his wrist released, and Nathan found himself flung away with such force that he half sailed out of the river and hit the riverbank with his shoulder. He twisted around and saw a pale form float to the surface of the river, facedown in midstream.

Tama!

As he had hoped, the visceral reflex of the snake had released both prisoners. Nathan shoved into the river and grabbed the child by the arm, pulling her slack form to

him. He slung her over a shoulder and climbed quickly to the shore.

He spread her soaked body on the bank. She was not breathing. Her lips were purple. He checked her pulse. It was there but weak.

Nathan glanced around futilely for help. With no one around, it would be up to him to revive the girl. He had been trained in first aid and CPR before venturing into the jungle, but Nathan was no doctor. He knelt, rolled the girl on her stomach, and pumped her back. A small amount of water sloshed from her nose and mouth.

Satisfied, he rolled Tama back around and began mouth-to-mouth.

At this moment, one of the Yanomamo tribesfolk, a middle-aged woman, stepped from the jungle's edge. She was small, as were all the Indians, no more than five feet in height. Her black hair was sheared in the usual bowl cut and her ears were pierced with feathers and bits of bamboo. Her dark eyes grew huge at the sight of the white man bent over the small child.

Nathan knew how it must look. He straightened up from his crouch just as Tama suddenly regained consciousness, coughing out gouts of river water and thrashing and crying in horror and fright. The panicked child beat at him with tiny fists, still in the nightmare of the snake attack.

"Hush, you're safe," he said in the Yanomamo dialect, trying to snare her hands in his grip. He turned to the woman, meaning to explain, but the small Indian dropped her basket and vanished into the thick fringe at the river's edge, whooping with alarm. Nathan knew the call. It was raised whenever a villager was under attack.

"Great, just great." Nathan closed his eyes and sighed.

When he had first come to this particular village four weeks ago, intending to record the medicinal wisdom of the tribe's old shaman, he had been instructed by the

chief to stay away from the Indian women. In the past, there had been occasions when strangers had taken advantage of the tribe's womenfolk. Nathan had honored this request, even though some of the women had been more than willing to share his hammock. His six-foot-plus frame, blue eyes, and sandy-colored hair were a novelty to the women of this isolated tribe.

In the distance, the fleeing woman's distress call was answered by others, many others. The name *Yanomamo* translated roughly as "the fierce people." The tribes were considered some of the most savage warriors. The *huyas,* or young men of the village, were always contesting some point of honor or claiming some curse had been set upon them, anything to warrant a brawl with a neighboring tribe or another tribesman. They were known to wipe out entire villages for so slight an insult as calling someone a derogatory name.

Nathan stared down into the face of the young girl. And what would these *huyas* make of this? A white man attacking one of their children, the chieftain's niece.

At his side, Tama had slowed her panic, swooning back into a fitful slumber. Her breathing remained regular, but when he checked her forehead, it was warm from a growing fever. He also spotted a darkening bruise on her right side. He fingered the injury—two broken ribs from the crushing embrace of the anaconda. He sat back on his heels, biting his lower lip. If she was to survive, she would need immediate treatment.

Bending, he gently scooped her into his arms. The closest hospital was ten miles downstream in the small town of São Gabriel. He would have to get her there.

But there was only one problem—the Yanomamo. There was no way he could flee with the girl and expect to get away. This was Indian territory, and though he knew the terrain well, he was no native. There was a proverb spoken throughout the Amazon: *Na boesi, ingi sabe ala*

sani. In their jungle, the Indian know everything. The Yanomamo were superb hunters, skilled with bow, blowgun, spear, and club.

There was no way he could escape.

Stepping away from the river, he retrieved his discarded shotgun from the brush and slung it over his shoulder. Lifting the girl higher in his arms, Nathan set off toward the village. He would have to make them listen to him, both for his sake and Tama's.

Ahead, the Indian village that he had called home for the past month had gone deathly quiet. Nathan winced as he walked. Even the constant twitter of birds and hooting call of monkeys had grown silent.

Holding his breath, he turned a corner in the trail and found a wall of Indians blocking his way, arrows nocked and drawn, spears raised. He sensed more than heard movement behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw more Indians already in position, faces daubed with crimson.

Nate had only one hope to rescue the girl and himself, an act he was loath to do, but he had no choice.

"Nabrushi yi yi!" he called out forcefully. "I demand trial by combat!"