IN AT THE KILL

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First published in Great Britain in 2023 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 529 34045 7
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 529 34046 4
eBook ISBN 978 1 529 34047 1

Typeset in Plantin Light by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

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PROLOGUE

He edged forward and with each step his breath came faster.

Every time Pablo moved closer he increased the risk that their dogs would see him, hear him, smell him.

But he had to go closer because Nikko had demanded detail. The questions he must answer were specific. He could not even see the building yet but was aware of the drone of machinery and of the arrival of more vehicles.

He was there because of his kid brother. Pablo was middle-aged, near to his 45th birthday. He was married – happily, he thought – and was the father of three children, two boys and a girl. Neither his wife nor children knew where he was at that moment in the dwindling afternoon light, nor would they benefit in any way from what he was doing. This was all about his kid brother who would be locked in the crowded cages of the prisoners awaiting trial or investigation in the La Modelo gaol in Bogotá. Each time Pablo thought of his kid brother, 22 years old, an afterthought or accident by his parents, and the reputation of violence and bestiality in the prison of 11,000 inmates, his resolve was strengthened. He edged forward, pushing away undergrowth. Thorns cut his face and hands, and sometimes he scuffed dead leaves and foliage. He was careful to avoid fallen branches where the sap had long gone – they would be brittle, would crack easily, noisily.

His home was four rooms, a bath behind a curtain off the kitchen, and a living area where the TV was. He and his wife shared one bedroom and his children slept in the other, which was an increasing area of difficulty as they grew older and more sensitive about their own sex. At the back was a brick shed for the toilet

with a drop under the seat, and beside the shed was a lock-up garage. Pablo parked his vehicle at the front of his one-storey home, built of concrete blocks with a roof of corrugated iron. In the garage, protected by a padlock, he stored the tins of paint that he tried to sell six days a week at his stall in the town's market. The ability to feed and clothe his family depended on the amount of paint that he sold. He could have made a better living if it had not been necessary to pay a sum each month to the enforcers of a "prominent person" in the town, and also to contribute to the wages of the local municipal office, and sometimes to the police.

Now, his pick-up – 16 years old and with 110,000 klicks on the clock after at least two modifications of the gauge – was parked on the verge of a main road, four kilometres out of the town of Leticia. Pablo had walked, and then crawled, and his trousers were filthy from the mud and his fingers bled, and insects swarmed around him, searching for the softness of his ears and his eyelids and his nose, but he did not swat them away or clap them between the palms of his hands.

The river was a meld of reds and browns, and was constantly changing in texture. It was raining. When the rain came down from low leaden clouds, the river rose quickly, and the mosquitoes multiplied: he had been brought up to exercise self-control and had been lectured at home, in school, in church, that it was wrong to blaspheme. The mosquitoes were feeding off him now, and when he hissed at them some took advantage and flew into his mouth and found his tonsils and went behind his yellowed teeth and he had to stop himself spluttering.

It was the dogs he feared most. The engineers had brought them and the older, fiercer ones were kept hungry and were tied to running wires, but there were also the family dogs and puppies that some of the men were fond of. Pablo knew about the dogs from the many times he had edged close to where the work was taking place on this bank of the upper reaches of the Amazon river. The only times in his life that he had been close to messing his trousers had been when he was close to the big shelter that had been built and where a generator throbbed and where the dogs

barked, sometimes in a frenzy and sometimes out of boredom. Men patrolled the perimeter of the site, where the cleared ground met the wall of the jungle. They carried automatic weapons and he presumed them to be veterans from the war with the guerrillas: they had faces as hard as those of their guard dogs. Pablo had not been in the military, had never owned a firearm. Here, away from the town, a shot would not be heard, and a body could be quickly lost: a shallow pit would suffice or a splash in the river and a brief feeding opportunity for catfish and piranha.

He had seen the strange craft grow over the period of seven weeks that he had been coming to this place and each time he came he was more terrified. After pillars had been sunk and the steel frame erected, a roof had been built to cover the first stages of the craft's construction. Day after day, and usually long into the night, the generator moaned and cried, and the welders had fastened the fierce lights, and hammers had belted at the joints, and twice a week Pablo had taken up his position and had observed.

It was a huge project, building the craft – would have cost more money than he could imagine – here in the dense jungle beside the river, and with skills that he could barely comprehend. He did not know where it would sail to, how far, and through what dangers if it were not assembled with every rivet, nut, bolt and sealant secured, and an engine inside that must not fail, and the risk – so great – of the men in it drowning . . . But he did know what its cargo would be, the white powder that ruled with such violence, and brought such rewards. Pablo had felt quite safe at the start but it was different now as the long length of the hull had become recognisable and more men had come to the site by the slipway that a bulldozer had fashioned. More armed men and more dogs and all of them hungrier. Last week a portable crane had lifted the diesel engine into place. The fuel tanks were already there and the previous evening they had been filled and Pablo had estimated that the tanks had each been capable of carrying 20,000 litres. A small, squat tower sat on top of the craft and he had seen two men who disappeared into the hatch more often than the others – and he assumed they would sail with it when it was launched and went

down the river towards the open ocean. It frightened Pablo, now that it had taken the shape of a boat that could travel underwater, just to look at it, and he tried to imagine how far away was its destination. When they had tested the engine at the back it had raced, chucking out fumes, acrid and black.

Pick-ups arrived in convoy, came along the track to the building inside which the craft had been built. Pablo thought the cargo was stored here because those who held the guns had become more menacing and the dogs took a cue from them. There was a bedlam of noise. Pablo needed to be closer, needed to see better. And fear became almost terror. He knew, as would anyone who lived in that town on the Colombian frontier where the state's boundary was marked by the winding path of the Amazon river, what fate would be handed out to him if he went too close. But he moved forward, . . . and the mosquitoes attacked his face in waves, and the thorn bushes were dense and caught at his clothing and he had to unpick himself each time and not let the material rip. He had to get closer if he were to assess the quantity of the cargo, its weight and its packaging. And he was there because of his kid brother.

The boy was an idiot. He had none of the disciplines taught to Pablo by his parents. He had been spoiled, protected from the reality of humble life, and had repaid his parents with shame and anguish. The last few years of the family's life had been made a misery by the choices of the little bastard. It was not good enough for him to make a living through hard graft. He wanted affluence, and fast. He started work as a junior in the lower ranks of a cartel that functioned in the capital. The kid had been a courier and had ridden his scooter into a chicane set up by the paramilitary police. Had been arrested, and been relieved of ten kilos of pure uncut cocaine powder. Had gone into the communal cell at La Modelo, and Pablo winced at the thought of what might happen there to his kid brother. He had been spotted by an agent of what they called the Administration who would have been trawling through new prisoners to identify some who might be useful. He had gabbled out to the agent where his parents eked out their last

years: irrelevant . . . Had spoken of an elder brother who lived in that useless backwater of a town, Leticia: a chord struck, interest piqued. A military helicopter had flown the agent from Bogotá and had landed him in the compound of the community hospital. He had sat astride the pillion of a Honda bike and been driven away into the night to a lock-up garage at the back of Pablo's bungalow. Not a negotiation, not a matter of haggling as it would have been over the price of paint.

"Quite simple, my friend. Easy for you to understand what I have to offer," Pablo had been told. A cigarette had hung from the side of the man's mouth. He spoke with a calm American drawl and seemed unconcerned at the matters he spoke of. "Your little brother is in a bad place, my friend, and I would not like to contemplate his future until he has aged, lost his looks, and the passage between his cheeks is no longer tight. Luckily, for him and for you, I happened across him. It is possible that – for very specific information – I might find the time to intervene on his behalf and see to it that he gets a gentle ride, and is soon at liberty. That's one side of the coin. The reverse of the coin is that I do not have the information that is important to me and I do not have the time to get the kid a better outcome. You are with me? Not too difficult to understand?"

"What do I have to do? What information?"

The smoke from Nikko's cigarette kept the insects at bay. Pablo had had to strain to hear him, he spoke so quietly. "The information I need is exact and particular. I don't want shit. Fuck with me, Pablo, and the kid has a hard time of it. Cooperate with me, it is possible that he might one day see the light of day. I don't do charity, Pablo. I do deals, and I rely on honesty in return. Your kid brother would wish you to comprehend the terms of what I offer. You are following me?"

"What must I bring you?"

He had been told. He had been given contact codes. He had been handed a mobile phone that was programmed to transmit only text messages and with only one number loaded. A last drag on his cigarette. He had been shown a photograph of what he was

told was a similar craft to the one about to be built on the river bank downstream from the town. The cigarette was thrown away, then stamped on. "You do not deliver, I do not deliver. Understand, I could intervene in mid-build, any day I want, and could catch a crowd of little guys, but I'm hankering after bigger cats. They're not here, they're way down river, far from here. So . . . This is good, my friend, because I want to know when the big splash happens in the river and you want your kid brother to get clear of that gaol. My word is my bond . . . Keep thinking of the boy and where he is. Been a pleasure to meet you."

A quarter of an hour later Pablo had heard a helicopter go low over the town, almost above his home, and veer away into the night. He had been told the next morning that a woman in the San Rafael hospital was enduring a difficult birth and had been airlifted to a larger medical unit, and people seemed satisfied with that reason for an army Huey flight coming in during darkness. He had looked outside his garage before setting up his stall in the market and had found the crushed cigarette, half smoked, a Marlboro Light. A week later he had started his regular vigils on the river bank and reported on the phone given him . . . and each time he was there, and the fear began to merge with terror, he would try to imagine what his kid brother, the idiot, might be going through.

The rain was torrential and the cloud ceiling seemed barely above the caps of the trees. In front of him, mostly masked, the work had intensified. More noise, more clamour, more shouting. He thought it must have been a tractor that had dragged the shape out from under the protection of the roof. Next came a torrent of men carrying packages the size of the sacks used for cement, but he could not see clearly, not enough to satisfy him that he had fulfilled his obligation to the American who called himself Nikko. Had to perform the duty or the kid would remain in the cage at La Modelo, where old men would want to penetrate him. He went even closer. It was about family blood and family responsibility, and he moved closer still. He crawled on his stomach, prising creepers and low branches aside, and tried not to curse the insects hovering around his face, or the thorns snatching at his clothes.

He saw the tankers' pipes had been detached, the fuelling finished, and the trucks reversing away. All done as a military operation. Ladders against the hull and men on different rungs, taking the packages and dropping them down through the hatch: he saw the way that the men buckled under their weight and realised that several tonnes of cargo were being loaded. He recognised faces. One from the bank where he lodged money every week, precious little of it. One from the police, traffic section – a joke in Leticia because there were so few vehicles – who had gained a good discount from him for paint, avocado colour, to decorate his home. And another stallholder who had ordered three tins of magnolia for freshening the interior of a parochial hall. He needed to go closer because the mosquitoes had bitten around his eyes and they were swollen and his vision was poorer. It had rained each day of the last nine, and each night, and was worse than he could remember.

A small branch snapped under the weight of his right hand as he pressed down to lever himself closer. He had almost reached the line where the foliage finished and the cleared space started.

He had not noticed the branch until his weight rested on it. It made a sharp crack. Would have been a half-centimetre in diameter . . . he might have eased from his path, just that evening, a hundred branches of that size. This one had broken. He froze, and thought he was rewarded with luck. The knots in his shoulders loosened. The loading continued, the armed men strutted in front of him, laughing and smoking, and the tractor had been driven off to the far side and he saw two men in dark boilersuits being hugged and kissed: he assumed them to be the crew and knew it was very near the time that the beast, all gleaming metal, went down into the water. He would see it engulfed by a wave of mud-brown water, would watch it go out into the river, would send his message to the man, from the Administration, would turn around and head back the way he had come.

He heard a little high-pitched squeal and a snort of breath. He decided he would say that he had drunk too much beer – the Costeña label – and had fallen asleep on his porch and the

mosquitoes had found him. That's what he would say to the other stallholders in the morning to explain the state of his face. The squealing was in his ears, and warm breath was panting on his face. He thought it was a rat. Only the black caimans of the crocodile family could keep the number of rats along the river bank under some sort of control. He lashed out at the creature. It screamed, and he felt teeth fasten on his hand, needle sharp, and he could not free them. A moment of agony coursed through him, and the craft was moving down towards the waterline and torches were following its progress . . . He had struck a puppy. Its mother came fast. The bitch was snarling, and heading for Pablo, and the dogs on the wires took up the frenzy, and the men with guns turned away from watching the hull, moving on tree trunk rollers, towards the dark expanse of the water.

The bitch found him and only then did the puppy loosen its teeth from his hand, and more dogs came, and torches. The craft went into the water and a rippling wave surged across the width of the river. He had the phone out, and tried to read the screen and to hit the right keys. Just needed the one word. *Launched*. Should try to add something about his brother, and the validity of the deal struck, but the bitch had a hold of his shoulder and was dragging him towards the cleared ground. He thought he had pressed Send, did not know if he had, and lost his grip on the phone. A torch shone in his face and alongside the beam he would see the short barrel of a rifle, and more men came running. The bitch was pulled off him and kicks began to land on his head and shoulders.

A voice called out, "That you, Pablo? What the fuck are you here for?"

Another voice. "A spy. What else? A fucking spy."

He was lifted, sagged, then stood. He was punched and then clubbed across his head with a rifle. More men came. Perhaps they were distracted, perhaps the major moment was behind them, the launch into the river; perhaps it was surprise at finding him there – Pablo, the poor cretin who sold cheap paint off a stall in the market each day. Perhaps it was confusion based on his

sodden appearance and his puffed and damaged face. Perhaps . . . There would not be another moment, that he knew. He turned in a quick swivel movement, stamped his feet and lifted his knees, and tried to charge away back into the undergrowth. The dogs came with him. He thought they did not shoot because of the dogs. He was stumbling, slipping; they were jumping clear of the branches and the vines, and birds scattered above them. The torches from behind showed him the way towards the river and the ground dropped. It was a game for the dogs. The shouting of the men dinned in his ears. If they had hold of him they would interrogate him, torture him. After they had tortured him, and gained the name of Nikko from the Administration, they would kill him. After they had killed him they would go to his home, the bungalow where his wife and children were, and they would burn it and then set light to the garage where he stored his paint. He heard a blundering pursuit, had only a few more metres to fight through before he came to the sodden bank and could slither into the water.

There was much that Pablo did not know.

That a minimum sum of one million American dollars had been budgeted for the building of the craft.

That the total weight of the cargo was four tonnes.

That the street value of the cargo, pure cocaine powder, would be in excess of 300 million euros, a currency he had never seen nor heard of.

That the craft was starting its journey to the mouth of the Amazon river that was 2980 kilometres away, and then would attempt to cross an ocean and sail another 6000 kilometres.

Knew only of the deal done with Nikko and the presence of a stamped-out cigarette to prove they had met. He loathed the drugs, detested the agony they made in his life, hated them for where they had put his kid brother.

He slid into the water. The dogs gathered on the bank and their barking was raucous behind him. Away to his right he could see the outline of the craft, a shadow on the deep brown murkiness of the water, and could hear the engine engage and smell the foul

belch of the diesel fumes. And he went under. He kicked and struggled and panicked and floundered, and imagined the circling piranha and catfish, and thought a black caiman would soon find him and they could grow to five metres in length and had wicked jaws. The rain spattered on the water around him. He could barely see, and for the last time – and with a prayer in his mind – he went under.

The craft passed, and the river swirled hard against him and he saw the name of Maria Bernarda painted on the hull. Then Pablo's consciousness failed and the last sensation he was aware of was the churn of a propeller driven by a modern 350 horsepower diesel engine. He sank, gulping river water into his lungs, and no longer had the prayer in his mind or the image of his brother.