

EXCERPT from SHADOW of the JAGUAR

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Chapter 1

Dr. Martin Stokes slammed his cup on the rough-hewn table, sloshing coca tea everywhere. The propane lamp danced, threatening to drop off the edge. Outside, a downpour pelted the palm-thatched roof of the mess area, obscuring the impenetrable jungle beyond.

“I said no.” He raised his voice above the din and glared at his daughter, Nancy.

Nancy glared back, arms crossed. “I have as much right to the data as you do. Remember who secured the funding for this expedition.”

“Just because you found the money doesn’t give you the right to exploit the find.” Martin closed his eyes and drew a deep breath, trying to tamp down his anger. He never should have allowed her to come along. Her driving need to bring something spectacular back to the university was overshadowing her usual common sense.

“I told you before and I’ll tell you again. I am in no way going to exploit your—our find. I will deliberately obscure the location when I publish.”

“What happens when the world demands proof of your discovery?” Martin waited half a beat but didn’t let her reply. “I’ll tell you what. This spectacular, unspoiled area will be overrun by academics, followed by selfie-obsessed ‘eco-tourists,’ who will in turn be followed by greedy corporations searching for the next hot destination for the moneyed elite, all while ruining pristine jungle.”

Nancy rolled her eyes. “Stop with your holier-than-thou conspiracy theories. Why keep fighting about the same thing? I won’t let that happen.”

“Did you not hear me? You can’t stop it.”

She spread her arms wide, encompassing the surrounding rainforest. “I love this place as much as you do. But the results from the LiDAR survey proves the ancient city identified in the conquistador’s manuscript may be *nearby*. You can’t keep that information to yourself.”

Martin waved her comments away and returned to his field laptop. “Famous last words of someone who means well. I promised Taruca that I wouldn’t do anything to endanger his tribe’s way of life. Your plan will set events in motion that we can’t control.”

“But Dad—”

“I don’t want to argue anymore. Pablo told me this morning the slashing and burning are getting closer. I will not allow your foolishness to destroy any more of this jungle.”

“Who’s doing the burning?” Nancy’s alarmed reaction was too little, too late, as far as Martin was concerned.

“No one’s certain. The government won’t say, so I can only assume a lot of money has changed hands.”

“But don’t you see? That makes it even more imperative that we find the lost city.” Nancy leaned toward him, both hands on the table. “Before the artifacts are destroyed completely.”

“Of course you would think that.” Martin shook his head in disgust. “If you disagree with my stance on the subject, I suggest you go back to Iquitos and take it up with Austen.”

“That would take days.” Nancy’s eyes widened. “You bastard. You’d search for the site without me, wouldn’t you?”

Martin didn’t respond. There was no point in continuing the conversation. Ever since the LiDAR-equipped drone revealed what appeared to be a large settlement perched at the top of a cliff with a secondary site below it, Nancy had campaigned heavily to go in search of the “lost city.”

Austen Newell, the billionaire who was funding their expedition, insisted his intentions were pure. But Martin was all too familiar with

the greed that could seize well-meaning philanthropists once they realized what kind of fame and fortune came with a find of this magnitude.

Along with his interest in discovering a lost city, Austen had also told Martin privately that he wanted him to search for what could be the cure for a specific kind of paralysis documented in the 500-year-old manuscript. The billionaire had offered a hefty finder's fee for any information that could lead to a confirmation.

Martin slipped his hand in his pocket and worried the smooth stone of the tiny jaguar statue Taruca had given him. The elder had implored Martin to keep his tribe safe from outside influence and Martin had agreed, even though it directly opposed his mission.

He'd have to persuade his daughter to back away from the discovery, or risk breaking his promise to Taruca.

Nancy let out a frustrated sigh and turned her back to him. It was difficult to make a grand exit during a downpour. There was really nowhere to go except the sleeping platform or the makeshift privy, and getting there was a wet undertaking at the moment. Martin reveled in the isolation of being deep in the Amazon basin.

His daughter, not so much.

He'd been so proud of her when she'd graduated *summa cum laude* with a doctorate in ethnopharmacology. He wished her mother would have been there to witness their little love-bug walking across that stage in all her glory, and again when she won the coveted professorship.

But now Nancy was a creature of academia—that strange, insulated animal that was the bane of Martin's way of thinking. "Publish or perish" wasn't just an old adage. It was an absolute, and tended to warp those caught up in the academic system. Sadly, it appeared that his beloved daughter had drunk the Kool-Aid.

The elder's secret changed everything. Martin would search the city, when and if they found it. If what the old man had told him was true, Martin would bring back whatever he could for Austen...

...and destroy the data pointing to the location.

That way he'd keep his promise to Taruca and complete his contract with Newell.

The downpour ended as quickly as it started, leaving in its wake shining wet leaves dripping with runoff. Mud puddles dotted the walkways, the ultimate breeding ground for mosquitos. Martin grabbed the ever-present can of insect repellent off the table and sprayed himself down for the third time that day.

Not that it would help.

He'd never sweated so much as when he was in the jungle. The stifling heat and humidity that gave rise to the number of biting, stinging, and sucking insects impervious to DEET was astounding. Even so, Martin loved everything about the Amazon. The immense diversity nearly stole his breath. Besides, there were always mosquito nets for when it got too bad.

Roughly the size of the contiguous United States and bordered by nine countries, the Amazon basin stretched across a full two-thirds of Peru. The rainforest manufactured twenty percent of the planet's oxygen using barely six percent of land mass, earning it the nickname "The Lungs of the Planet." The Amazon River was 6400 kilometers long and connected diverse populations despite having few bridges along its entire length.

The lifeblood of a continent.

Unfortunately, the unprecedented rate of destruction perpetuated by foreign and domestic interests endangered everything Martin was there to achieve. Smoke from the fires raging across the basin permeated the air. Some days were so bad, Martin and camp personnel would limit their activity to less physical pursuits. Allowed to remain unchecked, all manner of species, discovered and undiscovered, unknown cures for modern-day maladies, not to mention the very air humankind took for granted, would be destroyed.

Humanity's breathtaking short-sightedness.

Trained as an ethnobotanist, Martin felt it was his responsibility to protect the natural world and indigenous medicinal culture, but he was between a rock and a hard place. Part of him was excited to discover what could be a new civilization, and with it the possibility of fulfilling his ultimate promise to Austen. Another part dreaded the outcome. The lost city could hold the answers to so many questions. Answers his

daughter Nancy would be more than happy to provide, and for which Austen Newell would pay. Her name and Austen's would become synonymous with the discovery.

Heady stuff.

Nancy left the protection of the mess area and headed for the sleeping platform. At the same time, Mateo materialized from the jungle with a bunch of bananas on his back and headed their direction. He carried a woven bag filled with what Martin assumed were mangoes.

A good haul.

Martin checked his wristwatch. Three o'clock. Time for their daily dose of electricity and a cocktail. Darkness fell early in the jungle. They ran the generator long enough to recharge the laptop and the satellite phone, as well as several lanterns. They'd been using solar panels in a clearing for a portion of their needs and a gas-powered generator for the rest. The gas was running low, making the monthly supply delivery imperative.

Refrigeration was too much of a power drain and he'd switched from his favorite beer to rum. Nancy liked adding fresh mango to her drinks, insisting she didn't miss ice.

Mateo tossed her a freshly picked banana and continued toward the mess area.

"Thanks, Mateo." Nancy shoved the fruit in her pocket as she climbed the ladder to the platform.

Mateo set the bananas on the table and walked over to the generator to start the engine. The rumble of the motor fissured the peaceful setting, reminding Martin why he'd left Los Angeles. True, he missed his brother, Lou, and Lou's wife, Nita, but the thought of going back to the madness of the US left him cold.

Life was so much better here. More alive. More real.

More *vital*.

Martin didn't see, as much as felt, a shift in the surrounding energy. Puzzled, he glanced over his reading glasses at Mateo. The man's body had gone rigid, and a wary look creased his features.

"What's wrong?" Martin asked.

Mateo nodded toward the center of the camp. "We've got company."

Martin pivoted on his stool to see what he was talking about. Several men dressed in camouflage emerged from the jungle and strode to the middle of the encampment. Their faces had been painted black and green to match their clothes. All of them carried automatic rifles.

Commandos? In this part of Peru? Martin hadn't heard of any paramilitary forces nearby. Herberto, Austen's contact in Iquitos, had assured them they wouldn't have any problems.

Apparently Herberto had been wrong.

Martin closed his laptop and walked out to greet them. One man, taller than the rest, strode to the front.

"*Hola, amigos.* What can I do for you gentlemen?" Martin smiled, unsure if they meant them harm. His tiny jungle camp was woefully unprepared for an armed insurrection. They had three machetes, a 9mm pistol, a hunting rifle, and a couple of cleavers.

Not much of a defense.

The tall one smiled, his dark eyes cold in the waning light. "I am here for the treasure," the man said in Spanish.

A wave of alarm swept through Martin. "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

No one knew about the elder's wild claims except Martin. Taruca had waved off Mateo and two other camp personnel so he could speak with Martin alone. It was then that the elder had told him the miraculous story of the lost city.

"Oh, I think you do." The taller man wagged his finger at Martin.

Martin shook his head. "No, I'm afraid I don't. If you could explain, maybe I could help you. My name is Martin. And you are?"

"I am Dario. And these"—Dario swept his arm in a wide circle, encompassing his men—"are my compadres. I call them *Los Asesinos*—The Killers." Dario grinned again, aiming his rifle at Martin's chest.

Sweat rolled down the sides of Martin's face and his stomach roiled. This was too early in the expedition to have drawn the attention of organized criminals. *How did they find out about our camp?*

"Why don't we sit down, have a cup of tea, and talk about it?" Martin made to move toward the propane stove, intending to put some

water on to boil. Five of the six gunmen raised their rifles in unison, aiming their barrels directly at Martin. He froze.

“I am not here for tea.”

“I don’t want to cause any trouble.” Martin raised his hands, his mind scrambling for a way to defuse the situation. He glanced at the sleeping platform, but realized too late his mistake.

Dario followed his glance and grinned even wider. “Hello. Who are you?” He walked toward the platform. Eyes wide with fear, Nancy shrank back from the edge, moving out of sight.

Martin stepped forward. “Leave her out of this. She doesn’t know anything.”

Dario paused, turned back to Martin. “Doesn’t know anything about what?”

“You said you were looking for treasure. She doesn’t know anything about any treasure.”

“But you do?”

Martin tried to swallow but his throat wouldn’t comply. “There is no treasure.”

“That’s not what I heard.” Dario moved closer, his hand resting casually on his gun. “I heard that you found something. Something big.”

Martin spread his hands wide. “As you see, we have very little. Take what you want and leave.”

Dario’s eyes flashed in anger. “Enough. Tell me where to find the city. Now.”

Had someone in the camp accessed the report? The data on his laptop was password protected, but he would often leave the program running while he attended to something else.

Martin nervously eyed the rifles pointed at him. “I told you. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Dario nodded at his men. “Take the woman.”

“No—” Martin stepped toward Dario. Mateo was right behind him.

Dario fired a round into the dirt near Martin’s feet. Martin jumped.

“One more step and I won’t miss.”

“Let. Me. Go.” Her panic obvious, Nancy reached for Martin. “Daddy?”

The pleading in her voice speared Martin's heart. He took another step toward her but Mateo grabbed his arm.

"We are outgunned," he said, his voice low.

Martin stood down at the urgency in his voice. He watched helplessly as Dario's men dragged his daughter from the sleeping platform.

Scrambling for something to delay the inevitable, he blurted, "I—I don't have the information right now, but I can get it for you."

Dario smiled. "Then this will help you to get it more quickly." He gestured to his men, who dragged Nancy across camp and melted into the dense foliage.

"What are you doing?" Alarmed, Martin started after the disappearing group.

Dario barred his way forward with the barrel of his gun.

Martin froze. "I just said that I would get you the information."

"So?" Dario cocked his head.

"So let my daughter go."

Dario broke into another grin. "I don't think so. I think that keeping your daughter with us will make you work harder."

"I'll need time."

"You have ten days." Gun raised, Dario walked backward until he reached the edge of the jungle, then disappeared.

Martin's shoulders slumped forward. Mateo was at his side in an instant.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Martin shook his head. "I let them take her."

"You had no choice."

"But I could have made up something."

Mateo shrugged. "Then they would have found out the truth and become even angrier. I think maybe it's good that you didn't have anything to give them. They would not have left anyone alive."

"What will they do to her?" Martin squeezed his eyes shut as horrific visions of torture filled his mind.

"I don't know," Mateo said. "He gave us ten days. We must come up with a plan."

Martin moved back into the mess area and picked up the satellite phone.

“What are you doing?” Mateo asked.

“Calling for help.”

Chapter 2

The first stanza of *The Godfather* theme played from somewhere underneath the pile of Leine Basso's clothes. She rolled onto her side, taking the bed sheet with her, and scanned the floor.

There. She grabbed the phone peeking out from under her discarded shirt and checked the screen.

Lou.

"Leine here." Her bedmate's hand moved enticingly up her thigh, headed for trouble. She captured his errant fingers and squeezed, hard.

"Leine. It's Lou. I've got a problem. Can you come into the office?"

"Sure." She glanced at the time. "I can be there in half an hour."

"Good. See you then."

Leine ended the call and began to gather her clothes.

"Leaving so soon?"

She turned to look at Santa and her breath caught. The sheet barely covered his hips, exposing muscular shoulders, washboard abs, and a line of curly black hair headed south.

Damn. He still affected her like he did when they first met. Shaking it off, she nodded. "Lou needs me."

Santa leaned back against the pillow and pulled off the sheet. His dark eyes pierced her with a look that melted her to her toes. "I need you, too."

She shrugged on her shirt and the rest of her clothes, then readjusted the knife in her ankle sheath. The shoulder holster went on last, the 9mm Sig nestled snugly against her left armpit.

A girl needed to accessorize.

Leine sighed. “You know this was a mistake, right?”

“What? Last night? Or this morning?”

She paused for a moment as she zipped her slacks. Her mouth was as dry as a pile of fallen leaves. “Definitely the tequila. But yeah, this.” She gestured at both of them. “We made a pact. No more hooking up.”

Santiago “Santa” Jensen was lead detective for the Robbery Homicide Division of the Los Angeles Police Department and the love of Leine’s life. Unfortunately, the LAPD tended to frown on its homicide detectives fraternizing with former off-book assassins. It didn’t help that Santa disagreed with Leine’s tendency to go vigilante on the scumbags that trafficked young men and women.

Go figure.

Santa rolled onto his side, grabbed a pack of cigarettes, and shook one out.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that.” Leine hated that he’d started smoking. He took it up after they broke it off the first time. Apparently he’d been a smoker several years ago but quit before they met.

“You just told me what we did was wrong. Now you want to tell me what to do?” He lit up and exhaled a cloud of blue smoke.

Leine waved at the air as she grabbed her handbag. “Fine. Do what you want. Just don’t kiss me with that mouth.”

“I can do all kinds of things with my mouth.”

“And I expect that to continue.”

Santa grinned. “I thought we had a pact.”

Leine returned the smile. “Pacts are made to be broken.”

Leine walked through the double glass doors into the SHEN reception area and waved at the woman sitting behind the front desk. SHEN stood for Stop Human Enslavement Now, the organization Leine worked with to help bring justice to the victims of human trafficking.

“Hey, Brigitte.”

Brigitte smiled and waved back. “He’s waiting for you in room three.”

“Thanks.” Leine proceeded down the long hallway past interview rooms one and two, stopping at room three. Lou stood in front of the large monitor, which projected the live image of a man who looked vaguely familiar.

“Here she is,” Lou said. “Leine Basso, this is Austen Newell—I’m sure you’ve heard of him.”

Leine nodded at Austen and set her bag on the table. “I have, yes. Good to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

A wealthy financier from New York, Austen Newell had gotten his start at his father’s private equity company. At the age of twenty-seven he’d been christened Wall Street’s wunderkind for his uncanny ability to read the market and soon became the head of one of the largest hedge funds in the world. At the age of thirty-five he’d cashed in and traveled, searching for places and industries to invest in and leaving death-defying stories of derring-do in his wake. While trekking through South America five years ago, he’d contracted a rare form of paralysis and was unable to continue his adventures. Frustrated, he began funding expeditions to remote areas, living vicariously through the men and women he supported.

Austen’s intense expression reminded Leine of her old boss, Eric. His smooth complexion and lack of wrinkles belied his middle age, as did his reddish-blond hair. Lou, on the other hand, didn’t look well. The bags under his eyes and the gray cast to his face screamed of a sleepless night.

“What can I do for you gentlemen?” she asked.

Lou leaned forward and put his hands on the conference table. “My niece has been abducted.”

“Nancy?” Leine had met Nancy and her father, Martin, several times before at various get-togethers—the Stokes family was close. “Where did it happen?”

“My brother’s camp in the Amazon.”

Leine turned toward the screen. Austen’s face loomed large. “How do you know Martin and Nancy?”

“I’m funding Martin’s expedition in the Amazon basin. Nancy was adamant about joining him there. I should never have agreed.”

“Had there been threats against them prior to the start of the expedition?”

Austen shook his head. “That’s why this is so bizarre. The area where the camp is based is considered among some of the least dangerous in terms of criminal activity. Obviously, the jungle itself isn’t a walk in the park. Nancy said she was comfortable with the risks.”

“Do we know who took her? Have they made their demands?” Leine looked from Austen to Lou.

“Martin said the head kidnapper’s name is Dario,” Lou said. “He gave Martin ten days to find the location of some mythical lost city.”

“So I’m going to ask the obvious question here. Does Martin know what the guy’s talking about?”

Lou glanced at Austen. “He says he doesn’t have a clue. Austen thinks differently.”

Austen shifted in his chair. “The expedition came across a tribe of natives that had rarely been in contact with the modern world. The elder, or chieftain I guess you’d call him, mentioned a mythical place not far from their encampment. A lost city. Martin dismissed the man’s story as myth. I don’t.”

“How did this Dario find out about their conversation?” Leine asked.

“It’s possible someone in the group managed to contact Dario and tell him what they’d heard,” Austen offered. “Otherwise we don’t know.”

“Is there a way to find out if the city exists?”

Austen nodded. “The expedition is equipped with a LiDAR-capable drone. But even if the tech came back with no evidence of this lost city, I doubt it would deter these thugs.”

“I’ve heard of LiDAR,” Leine said, “but I have to confess I don’t know much about the technology.”

“It uses a combination of laser light pulses to penetrate and map densely forested areas. It’s a game-changer when it comes to charting inhospitable areas.”

“So either way, if Martin were to use this drone to find or not find what the chieftain mentioned, Nancy’s life is in danger.”

“Exactly,” Lou replied.

“What would you like me to do?”

“I need you to go to South America.” Lou typed something into his laptop and turned the computer toward her. The screen displayed a satellite image of dense jungle surrounding what appeared to be a rustic camp. “And find Nancy.”

Austen added, “Lou tells me you’re the best at locating people. Spare no expense. Take whatever you need. I’ve arranged for your transportation to the camp. You can leave tomorrow.”

“Any backup?” Although used to doing things on her own, a jungle op with trained professionals would be preferable.

“I called in a marker or two,” Lou answered. “There’s a team of six on their way to the camp as we speak.”

“Anybody I know?”

Lou shook his head. “Not on short notice. I ended up putting together a team from scratch. They all come highly recommended.”

“That works. Can you have the doc call in a prescription for antimalarial meds?” Leine picked up her handbag and prepared to leave.

Lou handed her a thumb drive. “Here’s all the information.”

“Thanks.”

“There’s one last thing.”

“What’s that?”

The door opened and April walked in. She smiled at the men and nodded at Leine. “Hey, Mom.”

“Hey, kiddo.”

In her mid-twenties, April had gone from world vagabond to aspiring novelist to one of the best mentors at the new SHEN academy—she currently taught self-defense to new recruits. Leine always marveled at how her daughter seemed to have inherited the best of both her mother and father: she was tall and athletic and had dark, flowing auburn hair and green eyes like her mother. She also tempered the optimism of youth with her mother’s pragmatic outlook. Coupled with her father’s razor-

sharp ability to analyze people and situations, she was a force to be reckoned with.

“I’d like you to take April along,” Lou said. “She needs to get out of LA, experience something other than bad traffic and smog.”

“I’ve worked jobs in Greece, Scotland, England, and France. What the hell is wrong with sending her to any one of those places?”

“C’mon, Mom. It’s the *Amazon*.”

“You know what it’s like there, right?” Leine asked her. “Hot and humid, with bugs the size of Volkswagens?” Not to mention dangerous gunmen who’d kidnapped a university professor.

April rolled her eyes. “Yes, of course I know. Martin’s a friend of mine too, and so is Nancy. I want to help find her.”

Leine studied her. “There’s something else at work here.”

“Well, there is the whole Amazon thing,” April replied, her excitement obvious. “Being able to see one of the most magnificent places on earth before it’s destroyed by human activity is the chance of a lifetime. Besides,” she smiled at Leine, “I get to spend more time with you.”

Leine smiled back. Quite a change from all those years before when she and April had been estranged. “It’s going to be dangerous. I’m not just talking about poisonous snakes and spiders. Those men were armed. And you’ll need to get shots—yellow fever, Hep A and B, typhoid...”

April crossed her arms. “Really? You’re going to play the ‘dangerous’ card? I’m as trained as you were when Eric sent you on your first assignment. I’m also years older.” Eric had been Leine’s boss at the Agency—an off-book government-sanctioned group of elite assassins. He’d discovered Leine as a teenager at a firing range in Southern California shortly after her father died, learning to shoot every weapon she could get her hands on.

Suffice it to say, she’d had some anger issues. Eric identified and used that anger and trained her to become an elite assassin. He was also April’s father.

Which April didn’t know.

“And I’ve already had my shots.” April grinned at Lou.

Leine was about to protest when she caught Lou's eye. She knew by his look that he was going to send someone with her, whether it was her daughter or another operative. Leine didn't have the heart to argue with him—Martin was his family. She would have liked to break April in on a less dangerous op, but she realized this was a gift. She'd be able to watch April, make sure she followed instructions, help season her. If not, she could always send her back. Harsh, maybe, but if her daughter didn't toe the line, she could put them both in danger. Leine treated all operatives the same—family or not. Her first job was to keep both herself and the team alive to do what was required.

“Are you all right with that, Austen?” Leine asked.

“Absolutely,” Austen replied. “I've already taken care of her travel arrangements. You'll both be on the same flight.”

Leine nodded. “Be sure to pack light. Add some netting and plenty of DEET. I'll take care of the rest.”

The excitement on April's face was a reward Leine hadn't anticipated. She hoped the trip would be a good experience.

Jungle operations rarely were.

End Excerpt

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