

## Chapter 1

### *Southern Argentinian Jungle*

*July 18, 1:07 p.m.*

Professor Jim Grady skidded his bright yellow Jeep to a stop near his team's camp. He stared out his window through a small opening in a nearly impenetrable wall of Argentinian jungle. To the untrained eye, it appeared to be nothing more than a small break in the foliage but the opening led into his team's remote archeological site.

The camp was a twenty-five-meter circle hacked from the jungle brush, which radiated outward for miles in all directions. A small group of tents were arranged in a neat row near the left side of the clearing, dwarfed by the huge Camboata trees towering above and behind them. To the right of the tents was the pit his team had excavated, and beyond that were the team's trucks. The only thing missing were the people.

Grady slid his six-foot, 185-pound frame from the vehicle, a wall of humidity blistering him as he scanned for signs of life. He found none. No one working in the main pit, no one getting lunch in the mess tent, no one walking around the camp. There wasn't a single colleague or worker from the university on the site. The flaps of their empty tents fluttered in the afternoon breeze and their equipment lay haphazardly scattered on the ground, like they had been there one moment and gone the next.

Grady's pulse quickened.

He had called and texted many times over the past two days, trying desperately to reach his team. No one had answered or returned his messages and his concern had grown with each failed attempt.

The locals had warned him about the dangers of searching for the underground chamber and mysterious stone. They told stories about explorers disappearing into the jungle, and of armed men knocking on doors in the middle of the night, dragging away screaming villagers. Grady had dismissed them as folklore meant to scare children. He had set his mind on finding the fabled stone with mysterious properties and making a name for himself in the archeology field, but now, seeing his site turned into a ghost town, fear ripped through him. Had he condemned his team to some gruesome fate?

A humming sound rose from the center of the camp. Grady tensed, then spun in the direction of the unfamiliar noise. It pitched up, increasing in intensity, like a crystal glass humming before exploding, then it stopped.

“Jennifer is that you?” he called timidly to his team leader.

No reply.

“Is anyone there?”

Only silence.

Grady closed the Jeep’s door and took a few tentative steps toward the main tent, which served as the dining hall and meeting area for the camp. He paused, scanned the area again, took a deep breath and marched to the tent, covering the span in several tense minutes while his heart strummed loudly in his chest.

The canvas structure loomed larger up close than it appeared from the distance, its tall sides casting a shadow on the forest floor. Grady stopped at the entrance, wiped his sweaty palms on his shirt, and gingerly lifted the flap to look inside. The dining hall was empty, but the stench of rotting food spilled out, causing Grady to recoil in disgust.

He looked back at his Jeep, overwhelmed by the urge to sprint to it and get away. But he couldn't leave. Not without looking for his team. Their safety was his responsibility.

*Get it together and find your damn people.*

The sun shone brightly against a cobalt blue sky, its warming rays heralding another hot summer day, yet Grady shivered involuntarily as he searched for someone...and the source of the sound. He walked briskly, his pulse increasing with each step. He finally arrived at the main excavation area, but found it abandoned as well. Tools lay on the ground, waiting for workers to return, like everyone was on a break. But Grady knew better. Something had caused them to drop their equipment and abruptly leave the area, but what? Why would his team leave their camp in this condition and where could they have gone and how?

Grady ran his trembling hands through his hair as his mind raced through possible scenarios, none of them good.

*What have I done?*

He heard the sound again.

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*Posadas, Argentina*

*July 18, 5:43 p.m.*

Grady sped along the highway, the passing countryside a blurred streak in his peripheral vision. He punched the dashboard repeatedly, thinking of how he had abandoned the search for his team. When the odd humming noise had returned, a tsunami of fear had flooded him, and he sprinted back to his Jeep and got the hell out of there. Now a new feeling overwhelmed him.

Guilt. His stomach churned thinking about everyone. Especially Jennifer. What would she think about him running away like a scared kid?

Grady's thoughts wrestled in his mind, creating confusion, but one thing was clear: he needed to find help. Fast. Unfortunately, normal channels wouldn't work—the nature of his research guaranteed that. There was only one person he could turn to, but he had no idea what kind of reception he'd get. He'd have to worry about that later. First, he had to get back to his apartment in the town of Posadas to get his research notes. He had rented the space to be near the dig, but now he'd have to abandon it. Just like his team.

He parked his jeep outside the two-story tan and white building, badly misjudging the stall and taking up two spaces. His sweaty hands slipped off the handle as he struggled to open the door. He needed to calm himself.

Grady slowed his breathing, steadied his hand, then carefully gripped the metal lever, and popped open the driver's side door. He sprinted the short distance to his apartment complex, weaving past parked cars and hedges that lined the walkway. Climbing three concrete stairs at a time, he reached his second-floor unit and looked down to the parking lot. He had left his truck door open but couldn't worry about that now.

He opened his front door, darted inside, and locked the door behind him.

His small apartment was in shambles. Toppled bookcases and paper from his drawers lay strewn across the floor. Someone had ransacked his place undoubtedly searching for his research notes. If they had found them, his chance of finding his team had disappeared along with them. He could only pray that they hadn't discovered his hiding spot.

Grady ran to his bedroom and found his window shattered. A breeze ruffled the white curtains like a menacing ghost warning him to leave. He crouched by his bed and rolled the frame away from the corner of the wall, exposing the slatted wood floor. Jamming a key into a narrow gap, he pried up a single plank, revealing a secret compartment. He shined his cell phone light inside and sighed with relief.

His brown courier bag was still there.

He grabbed it and looked inside. Everything was there.

A slamming car door drew his attention to the lot below. He rose slightly, peering over the sill and through the smashed window.

Two men in suits moved around his car. One rifled through his glovebox while the other scanned the lot for something. Grady's heart lodged in his throat when he realized they were looking for him. One of them turned toward his bedroom window. Grady ducked.

*Did he see me?*

Grady slowly peered over the sill again. The men were running ... toward his apartment. They'd be on him in minutes.

Grady sprinted, bag in hand, to the bathroom. He jammed the window open, then smashed the screen with his palm, partially tearing the mesh.

Pounding rose from the front door.

He had to get out of there.

Grady punched the screen again, but this time the entire framed popped out. He climbed onto the toilet and out through the window. Gunshots echoed through his apartment, followed by the sound of someone kicking in the front door.

Grady scurried onto the narrow ledge that ran along the outside of the building. The wind tussled his red hair as he balanced twelve feet above the black asphalt of a neighbor's carport. If he were to drop here, he'd leave one hell of a mess for his neighbor to clean up. His brown bag strap lay across his forearm as he inched along the ledge, heading toward the back of the complex.

He shuffled a few more feet, reached for the next piece of molding and gripped it. Something sharp sliced into his finger. He instinctively recoiled, titling backward, nearly dropping to the ground, his right arm flailing in the air. He lunged for the piece of trim, grabbing it lower than before. Nothing sharp this time. He clamped his fingers around it and balanced himself, his heart thudding like a drum in his chest.

"Verdammt! Where the hell is he?" an angry German voice yelled from the bathroom window.

Grady turned to look.

A bald-headed man popped out. He looked to the street, then turned to Grady. An evil smile spread across his face. "Got you." He climbed onto the windowsill.

A second pursuer stuck his mustached face out of the window and glared at Grady.

The bald man slid a gun from his coat. "Auf Wiedersehen, professor." He took careful aim.

“Nein! Herrmann wants him alive! Get him and his notes!” the mustached man growled.

The bald man grunted, then put his gun back in his pocket. “It’d be easier to shoot him.” He slid onto the ledge, moving fluidly, like a gymnast. He quickly closed the gap with Grady.

“I’ll get down to the parking lot, and make sure he can’t get away,” mustache man barked.

Grady’s fingers ached from holding on, but he couldn’t stop. He shimmed to the corner of the building and hopped down onto a neighbor’s balcony. He landed awkwardly, tumbling onto the sandpapery floor, knocking over a potted plant in the process. The ceramic container smashed into a section of stucco wall, shattering into pieces.

Grady tried the slider.

Locked.

He grabbed a chunk of the smashed pot and launched it at the glass, which shattered on impact. He ducked inside the apartment and found it empty. He ran to the front door, threw it open and sprinted into the second story hallway, nearly running over a neighbor.

“Verlo! Watch where you’re going!” The man screamed.

“Sorry.”

Grady hit the landing, running at full speed. He reached the ground and broke into a dead sprint, then flipped a quick look at his apartment before turning the corner. The bald man popped out the front door, spotted Grady, and sprinted for the stairs.

Grady ran along a tall row of flowering hedges, which exploded outward as the mustached man barreled into him. The two sprawled into the road, kicking and hitting then rolled

to a stop, the man straddling Grady. He pressed his huge hand into Grady's throat, cutting off his air and grinning as he squeezed.

A roaring engine, followed by a car horn, blared from down the street. The man spun his head and looked over his shoulder, loosening his grip on Grady's throat. Grady used the distraction to shove him off and the man tumbled into the street, in front of the approaching silver sedan. The speeding car ran over his head, popping it on the asphalt. The driver skidded to a halt and hopped out of his car, mouth hanging open as he stared at the dead body.

Grady paused a moment, then vomited into the street, his body shaking with a mixture of adrenaline and shock. He wiped his mouth with his bloodied shirt sleeve.

Gunshots rang out from his building.

"You're dead, motherfucker!" The bald man had caught up to him.

Grady staggered to his feet and raced down the walkway toward the parking lot. He stopped in front of a gate and pulled the handle. Locked.

He hopped onto an adjacent wall, then jumped over the gate and tumbled onto the brick walkway on the other side. Popping to his feet, he resumed his mad dash. Moments later, a soft grunt arose from behind him. Grady turned to see the bald man jump over the gate, hitting the ground in stride.

*You've gotta be kidding me!*

Grady needed to slow his pursuer to have a chance to escape. He ran by a row of trash cans, pulling them to the ground in front of the bald assassin. The sound of cursing and banging tin behind him told him his plan worked, but had he bought enough time? Grady emerged from



the walkway and sprinted for his truck. The door was still open. He dove into the vehicle, started the engine, and threw it into reverse. The truck lurched backward, speeding out of the parking space. Grady hit the brakes then threw it into drive just as the windshield shattered under a barrage of gunfire.

Grady ducked, then mashed his foot onto the accelerator. He peered over his dashboard, spotting the bald man standing in the road in front of him, taking aim. The assassin squeezed off several rounds, which buzzed over Grady's head, shattering the Jeep's rear window.

Grady aimed the truck straight ahead, nearly crushing the bald man, who dove to the side moments before impact. Grady looked at his rearview mirror. The bald man was running to his car.