

Blood Jaguar

by Allan Serafino

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Blood Jaguar
ISBN 1-55316-092-4
Published by LTDBooks
www.ltdbooks.com

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Published in Canada by LTDBooks, 200 North Service Road West, Unit 1, Suite 301, Oakville,
ON L6M 2Y1

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National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication Data

Serafino, Allan
Blood jaguar [electronic resource]

ISBN 1-55316-092-4 (electronic) ISBN 1-55316-907-7 (REB 1100&1200)

I. Title.

PS8587.E7B56 2002 C813'.54 C2002-900086-6
PZ7.S4789B1 2002

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Chapter 1

The spotted jaguar paced back and forth inside the cage, powerful muscles rippling under its glossy coat. It slammed its body against the bars at each turn and then, raising its sleek head, let out a piercing scream through fanged teeth.

In the noisy *zocalo*, only Hugh Falkins seemed to hear the cry. It sent an icy shiver along the hairs on his neck but the hundreds of buyers and sellers crammed in the busy Mexican plaza went on with their daily business.

Hugh locked eyes with the jaguar. As he gazed into its golden eyes, he sensed the cat's fear and frustration and for a moment he was one with the animal, inside its body and mind. He moved across the distance between them as if in a dream and reached out to touch it.

"No tengo!"

A stick slashed across his hand. Hugh yelled in pain and snatched back his hand.

"Stupid American. You want to get killed?" the cat's owner shouted.

"I just wanted to touch—"

"No! No touch!" The man raised the stick again.

It never fell. A uniformed man forced his way between them. "Leave the boy alone," he commanded, "he's with me."

The seller's eyes smoldered but he lowered the stick, backing away with an angry gesture.

"Come away from there, *Senor* Falkins." Hugh's rescuer tugged at his sleeve.

Hugh recognized his white uniform with the stylized "S" insignia of Sheldon Enterprises. The man was barely five feet tall, had dark olive-colored skin, a hooked nose and black curly hair. He shook hands with Hugh.

"Thanks," Hugh said. "You must be *Senor* Dario."

"Si. I have come to get you. I have your letter saying you arrive from Florida."

The jaguar coughed, a sound like the low rumble of thunder.

"Why is he caged? He shouldn't be trapped like that."

The pilot shrugged. "He will bring a good price."

The cat's eyes connected again with Hugh's. It thrust its paws between the bars as if reaching out to him but the grumbling seller snapped the stick across them with a resounding crack. The jaguar recoiled with a sharp yowl and threw itself against the bars until the seller finally threw a dark blanket over the cage to silence the animal. He turned on the pilot in a spate of anger.

“He says don’t be sorry,” Dario said. “The animal is *muy demente. Loco*. And very dangerous. Already it has hurt one man. Don’t waste your time on it. The jeep is that way.” Dario led him toward the far end of the plaza.

“I pick up supplies for the camp first. That is why I ask to meet you here and not the airport. It will take us one hour to fly you to Yaxchilán.”

Yaxchilán. The ancient Mayan archaeological site where his father was now working was like a dream to Hugh. All his careful planning would take him there soon if something didn’t go wrong. He was anxious and nervous even though, at sixteen, he had traveled to foreign countries before. But this was his first visit to southern Mexico. And the first time he was alone.

He carried only one light packsack, yet it was hard to keep up with the small man as they pushed their way through the crowd. At four o’clock in the afternoon, the market square was noisy, and full of strange smells and exotic sights. Hugh wanted to see everything but Dario strode past the women dressed in white embroidered *huipiles* who called out their wares for sale: “peppers, beans, squash, corn!” They displayed stalls of fresh bananas, pineapples and melons. He wrinkled his nose as they passed chickens clucking in basket cages, butchered pigs hanging from the braces of awnings, and caged ducks and rabbit and monkeys lining the walkways. The smells of overripe fruit, spices and the hot-griddle aroma of *tortillas* jangled his taste buds. His last meal had been on the plane that morning.

In an adjoining area under tents, men hawked clothes and archaeological artifacts—terracotta figurines, potsherds, and jade carvings—and he recalled his father’s bristling anger at the illicit trade in ancient carvings stolen from archaeological digs. “They’ll ruin everything for those of us who really care,” he had often complained.

A vendor wearing a stack of straw hats stepped in front of Hugh, blocking his way. “*Sombrero, Señor? Mas barato.*”

Dario turned to look at Hugh thoughtfully. “You have no hat?” he asked.

“I didn’t bring one.” In his hurry to get away, he hadn’t packed any clothes for the hot Mexican climate.

“You must,” Dario insisted. “It is very hot in the jungle where you are going. He says these are cheap. Let me bargain for you.” He paid for a wide-brimmed sisal hat that Hugh slanted over his long blond hair. Checking his reflection in a mirror the seller held out to him, he laughed nervously. “Hey! This is great. Indiana Falkins! If only my friends could see me now.”

The jeep, already loaded down with boxes of supplies for the camp, looked like an over-packed donkey where it crouched in the shade of a tree. It groaned and belched black smoke when Dario put the key in the ignition. Soon they were out of the busy commercial area and on their way. Hugh was glad to feel the cool breeze on his skin after the close humidity of the marketplace. They veered off the main road toward a local airfield where a Cessna single-engine plane awaited them. There, they transferred the boxes containing everything from medicines to groceries, strapped in and were ready to go.

Dario revved the engine. “Soon you will see your father,” he yelled above the noise.

Hugh took a deep breath as the runway slid away beneath them. Relax, he told himself. This is it. End of the road. He is my father. He has to take me. He hoped he had made the right decision in running away from home.

“I’m going to marry Sam Sheldon!”

That’s the way it had started. A bolt out of the blue. But, no, he had seen the signs of his parent’s break-up earlier than that.

“The field trip is only for two months, Eve. Why won’t you come? You always have before.”

Hugh could hear his father’s voice through the thin bedroom wall. He shouldn’t have been listening, but...

“You and Sheldon. That’s it, isn’t it?”

“Roger, I’m tired of living in dirt camps. Sure, it was fun in the beginning but now I’m tired and I have my own career...”

“And what about Hugh? We’re a team. We have been for years.”

“He’s got to think about his school. He’s got his own life to think about.”

“And Sheldon can...”

Hugh had heard no more. He crumbled inside. His fault. His fault. If it weren’t for him, they would still be a team, traveling around the world. As for Sheldon, he didn’t dislike the man exactly, but the entrepreneur was too reserved for him. Hugh was extra baggage.

The sound of the plane’s engine made him sleepy.

His mother saw in Sheldon those things she never had with his father: security, comfort and normalcy. Hugh loved his father for not being “normal”—he was exciting. He would think nothing of suddenly dragging his family to the far corners of the world. And Hugh missed him with a mixture of bitterness and despair that he found overwhelming. But his father had also deserted him and the knowledge hurt every time he remembered. Now, all he had of his father was the ring. He turned it on his finger so the carving of the silver falcon, the family crest that was hundreds of years old, glimmered with intensity in the light coming through the window.

The plane leveled out as Dario maneuvered the joystick and rudder pedals, trimming the balance with practised ease. He called out to Hugh as the engine’s noise settled to a regular hum. “He is happy to see you? Your father?”

“Yeah, I guess he’ll be happy to see me. I mean, it’s going to be a surprise.”

“It is good for a son to be with his father. My children, I have three.” He held up his fingers to show Hugh. “The *Senor* Falkins, he don’t talk about you. I don’t know he has a son.”

Hugh pretended not to hear him and looked away.

The plane slid easily through the air, and the cityscape, lit with the dull orange glow of refinery fires, disappeared behind them. They were leaving the rich oil country of the Mexican gulf for the mysterious green interior of the jungle.

Within minutes they were flying over the river.

Dario pointed below. “Usumascinta. The site is right beside the river. About thirty minutes.”

The river was a delta of muddy streams that became a single, twisting snake through the jungle as they flew onward. Its cliffs were high and steep and, at points, Hugh saw the telltale flash of rapids. It was not a place where he would likely make use of his newly learned scuba diving skills.

The jungle below tugged at his memory. It looked oddly familiar yet that couldn’t be. He’d never been in a Mexican jungle before. He became aware of voices, muffled, rising in an eerie chant. He couldn’t make out what they were saying over the pounding drums. He pressed his hands to his temples for the sounds were coming from *inside* his head. His vision blurred as if he was stepping through a heavy mist, and ghostly figures swam before his eyes, causing him to become nauseous. He fell forward, his head spinning.

“*Senor! Senor!* Are you all right?” Dario shook him with his free hand, his face etched with concern. “Are you sick?”

“No. No, I’m fine.” Hugh shook his head and the voices stopped. The ghosts disappeared as if they’d never been. “Just the heat I guess.”

“You must try to take it easy. It is very hot in the afternoon.” Dario motioned to a cooler behind him. “Have a *Coca*.”

Hugh pulled a bottle of Coke for each of them. The sharp taste soothed his jangled nerves and he began to wonder if it wasn’t just the heat after all. Even in the cockpit, he could feel humidity rising from the jungle below. He’d probably fallen asleep and dreamed the whole thing. Yet the incident had been disturbing—even a little frightening.

“Will my father be at the camp?”

“The *profesores* are out at the digging. But they all come back soon. The jungle is no place to be alone at night.”

“I hope they can use an extra hand.”

“Hand?” Dario looked confused.

“Me. An extra worker.”

Dario seemed to find this amusing. “Ah, yes, I think so. But you may not want to stay, my young friend.” He didn’t wait for Hugh to inquire but went on. “That place is bad luck. All the time, things are going wrong.”

“What things?”

“Many accidents with the work. Some men are getting sick. One, he has the snakebite. Very dangerous the snakes. Another is hurt with the *machete*.”

“Oh!” Hugh gulped.

“Si. Very bad.”

“Is it safe?”

“I would be careful.”

The green jungle floated beneath them, placid and quiet and even when they passed over the river village Dario called Frontera Echeverria, he saw only an empty river outpost.

Dario pulled a packet of cigarettes from his breast pocket and offered one to Hugh. He shook his head, waiting to hear more.

The pilot tapped out a cigarette and proceeded to light it. He slowly blew a plume of smoke from his lungs and continued.

“But still they don’t find the thing they look for. Many days have passed with much worry. And now the *Senor* Sheldon is unhappy too. He comes to see in a few days.”

Hugh jolted upright. “What? You mean Sheldon is coming to the camp?”

“*Si*, the big man, my boss. Samuel Sheldon. He comes. He does not like, I think, to spend his money for to find nothing, no?”

“No, he wouldn’t,” Hugh agreed. He turned his face back to the window again, pretending interest in the scenery below, trying not to give away the worry on his face. Damn! Sheldon coming to the site? He’d be caught for sure. What if Sheldon had already figured out Hugh’s trick and radioed ahead to the camp? What if Dario already knew? What if his father was waiting?

A bead of perspiration trickled down his neck like a hot ember.

Sheldon. Coming to Yaxchilán. Hugh saw his carefully laid out plan falling apart like a house of cards. In the beginning, he had needed to find out exactly where his father was. As his birthday was approaching, he asked his mother, as a present, to visit his father. She rounded on him sharply. “I don’t know where he is and I don’t want to know. Ask Sam if you’re that interested.”

He asked one of his father's colleagues instead.

"Yaxchilán," David Cameron sighed. He pronounced it Yash-she-lan. "Middle of the Chiapas jungle in central Mexico. Site of one of the most important Mayan cities. And now your father's got Sheldon's money, so he'll be sitting pretty down there, too. No financial worries. Sheldon goes down in his own private plane, I understand." He raised a hopeful eyebrow but Hugh was already lost in thought. He'd figured out how to use Sheldon's influence to get him to Mexico.

He stole a piece of Sheldon Enterprises letterhead and wrote to the company office, asking for a pilot pick him up in Villahermosa, the nearest big city to the site. He forged Sheldon's signature. After that, he bought an airline ticket from Tampa to Villahermosa with his college savings. Hugh shook all the way to the airport that day but it was too late to reconsider now.

In what he hoped was a relaxed voice he asked Dario, "What are they looking for down there?"

The pilot shrugged. "Temples, ruins. They all want the treasure of Los Mayas."

"Have they found any?" Hugh's pulse began to quicken.

Dario laughed. "You too, I see. The blood, it goes fast, heh? The eyes glaze. Everyone wants gold. But I tell you, the Old Ones do not give up their secrets. You must be careful down there."

"I just want to see my father."

"Then I hope it will go well. I tell you, my young friend, that is not a happy place to be. I don't stay there—I go back as fast as I can. See your father but leave quick too."

Hugh stared down at the canopy of green. He'd come too far to leave now. And Sheldon or no Sheldon, he'd make his stand.

Their flight path took them directly upriver to the site of the ancient Mayan ruins. "We arrive," Dario shouted and gave the engine more revs.

As they dropped into the river canyon, the jungle canopy came up at them like a green fist. Hugh barely had time to make out a short, narrow airstrip etched on the deep canyon terrace on the west side and the flashing white of ancient stone buildings thrusting up out of the forest as they roared by on the test run.

Dario banked the plane in a wide curve and prepared for his final approach. "Over there," he indicated the left side, "Guatemala border. We don't go too close. They shoot at us."

The engine roared. Dario throttled back and lowered the flaps. Using the landmark cliffs on the Guatemalan side, he took them down from a thousand feet in a stomach-curdling drop and leveled out just above the water. Waves flashed by as Hugh was thrust forward against his seat belt.

They nosed down, this time in a gradual and controlled descent. Hugh got a better glimpse of the Mayan ruins, almost hidden in the foliage—the top of a crumbled white pyramid. He saw a huge white temple with broad steps leading down to the waterside. He saw—he thought he saw—hundreds of people lining the steps. There was a sudden, blinding flash...red blood... A stab of pain shot through his side as if he'd been stabbed and he cried out.

Dario lost control. Just for a second, but the plane rocked sharply as the winds from the river punched against the undercarriage. The airstrip loomed before them and the plane slammed onto the beaten path.

They plunged toward a wall of trees.

Hugh was thrown forward against the restraining belt and back again into the seat. His chest exploded with pain and his head whirled in a shower of lights.

Dario yanked back on the throttle with all his might. The plane hammered on the ground and spun to the right, careening wildly, but he jerked the wheel left and they shuddered down the narrow runway, stopping short of a massive tree trunk.

Hugh gasped for air, his chest jerking in spasms.

The tide of pain finally gave way and he turned to Dario who was slumped over the controls. Hugh thought the man had been hurt but the pilot sat up groggily then, his breath rasping, and Hugh realized he had been holding his own too. He let it out, thankful that the pilot's natural instincts and training had taken over quickly.

Dario sat up and switched off the engine. He reached for a crucifix on a chain around his neck and kissed it fervently. Then he looked at Hugh. "What happened? You yell out just as we land."

"Sorry. Something just came over me. I got scared all of a sudden. I don't know why." His pulse was still racing.

Dario mopped his brow with a handkerchief. "Here is very tricky to land. But we are safe. *Gracias a Dios.*"

"Thanks be to God and thanks to you too," Hugh said to himself. What a way to make his arrival!

The door on Hugh's side was tugged opened. "Holy cow, you guys all right?" A redheaded boy about his own age peered in.

Dario undid his seat belt and motioned to Hugh to do the same. "We're fine, Mitch. Just a little trouble on the landing."

"A little trouble? I thought you were gonna be mashed potatoes. What happened?"

Dario caught Hugh's glance and winked. "A sudden cross-current. Nothing serious."

Hugh slid down to the ground. His legs were shaky and he was still dizzy. He had no rational explanation for the flash of light and the sudden jab of pain.

"Hey Dario, I thought you weren't due for another few days," Mitch said.

The pilot shrugged and closed the door. "Ask him. Special delivery from *Senor Sheldon* himself."

Mitch looked Hugh square in the face, removing the wide hat to wipe away a line of sweat.

Surprised, Hugh saw that Mitch was really a girl, about sixteen, her face well tanned and her reddish hair, cut short, emphasized her boyish features.

She rammed her hat back on her head, glaring at Hugh. "Who are you?"

"I'm Hugh Falkins. My father—"

"The head honcho's son, huh. Didn't know he had one. Well, nobody asked me to get ready for another mouth to feed. What am I supposed to do with you? Hey, Dario," she turned to the pilot who was shouldering a heavy box, "you got my tapes?"

"Si, *Senorita*, Rolling Stones, Crashing Porcupines. The best."

"Smashing Pumpkins, you mean. Aw-rrright!" She leaned into the plane's cargo hold and pulled down a heavy bundle with ease.

Hugh joined in the unloading. In minutes, the boxes were piled on the ground.

Mitch, whose face was hidden under the brim of a wide hat, worked quickly and efficiently. When she finished, she hefted two bags onto her shoulders and headed inland, following Dario.

Hugh didn't want to be left behind. Grabbing a couple of bags, he started after them.

They worked their way up a steep, well-worn path. Sweat trickled into his eyes and soaked his shirt. His breath came in short gasps as he stumbled along behind them. The other two seemed not to be bothered by the steepness of the climb at all. Soon, they broke into a clearing in the jungle. He'd been aware of the jungle as a dark background around him but now he could see that the white-barked trees rose like thick legs thirty to forty feet above him and their green foliage nearly closed off the sky.

There were no temples. Instead, the clearing was dominated by tents, thatched wooden buildings, and a few more enclosures made of stone and roofed with coppery, galvanized tin.

They dumped their loads on long picnic tables under a wide awning and headed back to the plane. Hugh followed, though after two more trips, he was sweating profusely. The humidity was oppressive, sucking all the strength from his body. He slumped onto one of the tables and fanned himself with his hat.

There was no one else about—no reception committee, other than the girl. Hadn't anyone else heard the plane? Then he remembered Dario saying they were all at work deep in the jungle.

He gazed disconsolately at his surroundings.

"Kitchen tent there," Mitch inclined her head, "that's the lab and the collections building, the thatched huts are for storage and the permanent ones are showers. Toilet's just up the trail. This here's the mess hall. We call it the "lunchroom." Kind of reminds you of school, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but with ants." Hugh pointed to a long line of the insects crawling along the table.

"You get used to them. Look, we'll finish unloading the rest of the plane, okay? You look pretty whacked, so you stay here. It's cooler."

"Sure," he agreed. Sure, the steep climb had tired him but why was the girl able to do more work than him? And without effort?

It was just after five o'clock and the sun was going down behind the steep western slope. The place was quiet except for the occasional squawk of birds high up in the trees and the faint rustling of leaves caused by a breeze.

He yawned. He'd been traveling for sixteen hours, from Tampa, Florida, across the Gulf of Mexico to Merida on the Yucatán peninsula, southwest to Villahermosa and then to Yaxchilán. He was hungry and so tired he could have fallen asleep at the table. But he wandered around the campsite to satisfy his curiosity.

Archaeological digs weren't new to him so he wasn't surprised at the rough living arrangements. The showers were in simple concrete buildings; water provided by a large rain cistern on the roof and shuttled through a pipe to a nozzle. A wooden shack housed the toilets—the hole-in-a-wooden-seat variety with a removable can underneath. Hugh laughed at the sign on the door crudely marked, "Relax-Inn."

The lab was more interesting. Collapsible tables like those in the lunchroom were littered with archaeological paraphernalia: reference books, maps with grids marking out the ruins, boxes of potsherds and plastic artifact bags.

He stopped abruptly.

A skeleton lay on the table.