

# Shaman

SAM POLAKOFF



*Across the world, there are people who have learned, through the generations, how to access the spirit world and, via sacred rituals and beliefs, they are seers who become either healers devoted to good or purveyors of evil. These people are known as shamans.*

# PART I

## CHAPTER 1

### *Mt. Ausangate, Peru – Present Day*

Alone atop the summit, Dan Alston gazed at the endless, embracing sky. The afternoon sun cast a pink hue along the edges of the scant, gray clouds. Dan smiled as he filled his lungs with the crisp mountain air. There was nothing like a climb to exorcise the stress from the chaotic world of the U.S. Senate. *Work hard, please no one*, he lamented. The life of a senator. *Fight, fight, fight and sometimes compromise*. The once collegial institution had turned into a festering cauldron of partisan bickering. This just might be his last term. The prospect of campaigning once offered an adrenaline rush that rivaled a difficult climb. Not anymore.

Dan admired the snow-covered peaks of the Andes gently enveloping the color-laden mountains surrounding the nearby Sacred Valley. The vibrant hues of the so-called Rainbow Mountain shifted along the rock in striped shades of red, beige and brown.

The sound of the wind caused his head to swivel and he took note of the dark clouds threatening the valley below. Dan knew that weather in the Andes could change without notice, especially at 20,000 feet. A light rain spattered across his face. He was cold and knew he erred in ignoring Moises, their guide.

Moises and Dan's best friend, Eli Shepherd, began their descent ahead of the storm. They had to be close to safety by now. Inherently stubborn, Dan began to regret lingering too long on the summit. He couldn't help himself. Dan was certain a few more minutes wouldn't matter. He wanted to capture the breathtaking horizon in all its splendor for his digital library.

The growing intensity of the falling rain began to pelt his body. Each cold, assaulting raindrop stung like a flying dart from a native blowgun. The rock became slippery. He understood the

descent would be tedious but manageable. High upon the face of Ausangate, even with the best equipment, the most experienced climbers occasionally succumbed to the treachery of the elements. He heard the faint sound of Eli calling from below. He wanted to respond to let his best friend know he was alright. The unyielding wind and rain made a reply fruitless. While his keen sense of focus remained intact, his body began to rebel, reminding him that this trip was commemorating his fiftieth birthday. The Ausangate climb was his present to himself. His only child, Bri, was in the midst of law school at Georgetown, his wife of more than two decades, Maddie, gave up on their marriage after the last election, saying she no longer wanted to be part of the disingenuous Washington social scene. That left Eli, who had always been there; through school, grueling campaigns, divorce and everything in between. He was as loyal as an old Golden Retriever.

Dan carefully lowered himself, axe in hand, pitons and crampons firmly engaged with the rock's nearly impenetrable surface. The rain was now falling in sheets. The water savagely raced down the face of the mountain. Dan's attempts to steady himself were difficult at best. He inched his right leg slowly downward, seeking a small outcrop of rocks upon which he could gain an advantage. His foot gently swayed along the surface, searching, until he discovered what he was looking for; a group of collected rocks, plastered to the side of the mountain and held together by nothing more than hundreds of years of erosion from rains, the likes of which he currently battled. He enabled both feet to hit the top of the rock and allowed himself a moment to rest and catch his breath. Two minutes, yes, just two minutes and he would continue.

Standing steady and hugging the mountain, his sense of regret had taken hold for not following Moises and Eli down the mountain sooner. Moises was particularly insistent but Dan had been steadfast in his desire to enjoy the extra few minutes of tranquility. He looked up, taking solace

in that he already made significant progress toward basecamp. A bolt of lightning appeared, literally before him, followed by the crushing sound of thunder. When he was a boy, he used to think that thunder was God bowling. At 20,000 feet, it sounded more like the world was about to end. Leaning against the cavernous rock, worry set in. The raging storm quickly reduced visibility on the mountain to nothing. He closed his eyes, just for a second and attempted to gather his resolve to continue. With the rain and wind pounding down upon him, he heard it. *That voice*. It haunted him. Was hypothermia causing him to hallucinate? A whispery, sexy, female intonation teased his senses. An alluring sound, it appeared at odd times; in bed, at the gym, heck, even once on the Senate floor.

*Yāvenhawk, O Yāvenhawk  
I am one with you.*

The words, their meaning and the voice meant nothing to him. The incidents were so entirely random, he trained himself to block them out of his mind. Today, he was unsuccessful.

Dan looked skyward to gauge the storm clouds and saw an angry predator upon the summit. A terrifying gray wolf bared its teeth and snarled as foam formed at the corners of its mouth. Dan's head began to spin. It felt as if someone or something was consuming his state of consciousness. His vision blurred. *That voice*. It drove him insane.

Vertigo overtook him as the fragile grouping of rocks supporting his weight gave way to the harrowing storm and its accompanying rush of rain and wind. Dan clawed at the mountain, trying to hold on as his body slid down the wet rock. His belay, the anti-braking device designed to slow a climber's descent, failed. Dan's goggles were torn askew by the downward force and his right cheekbone scraped raw against the cold, mass of ubiquitous rock. His right hip and knee banged precipitously against the mountain's perilous ridge, ripping his pants with a sharp,

zipping noise. Dan felt his right shoulder dislocate and blood begin to emerge from the numerous cuts and scrapes. He couldn't gain control. He lost consciousness as the fast-paced slide continued, depositing his body onto a snow-covered ledge one hundred feet below.

A bloody, broken and beaten soul, he conceded that the mountain won. He sat up slowly and assessed the damage. He knew his shoulder was dislocated, his lower back, right knee and hip were sore but he willed himself to rise, to figure out where he was and somehow make his way back to the safety of basecamp. He had a first-aid kit and considered taking the time to tend to his open flesh wounds but determined that they weren't bad enough. As he got to his feet, he heard a growling sound. He brushed himself off and attributed the noise to the howling wind whipping through and around the rocks. He picked up his goggles which came loose during the fall and spotted his axe resting in the snow a little further away. He knelt down to pick up the axe and as he rose, he found himself facing the wolf. Dan wondered how that wolf made it down from the summit. *Was it the same wolf?* As far he knew, wolves didn't populate Ausangate, especially at this altitude. The wolf snarled and continued to inch closer. Dan felt his grip tighten around the handle of the axe. It was all he had with which to defend himself. He steadied himself and braced for the beast to attack. Dan raised the small axe above his head with his left hand and tried to cast his weight forward. His right foot slipped on a small patch of ice and he went down face first in the snow and slush, back into a state of sleep-laden helplessness. He knew this was the end and tried, as if one would know how, to prepare himself to be mauled by the angry predator. He tried to lift his torso from the cold muck to face his attacker but his head wouldn't move. His eyes wouldn't open. Everything went black. Just before the lights went out, Dan remembered hearing it again, the seductive voice...singing that haunting intonation, *Yāvenhawk, O Yāvenhawk. I am one with you.*

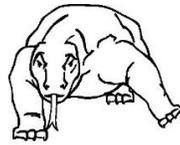
Amidst the blackness, from the distant recesses of his mind, Dan Alston thought he heard the sound of an approaching helicopter.

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