



Romantic Suspense

COURSE OF ACTION: THE RESCUE

**Lindsay McKenna
Merline Lovelace**

Merline Lovelace

**Course of Action: The Rescue:
Jaguar Night / Amazon Gold**

«HarperCollins»

Lovelace M.

Course of Action: The Rescue: Jaguar Night / Amazon Gold /
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Two edge-of-your-seat, passionate military stories from bestselling authors Lindsay McKenna and Merline Lovelace...

Jaguar Night by Lindsay McKenna

When a U.S. General's daughter is kidnapped, Marine Staff Sergeant Josh Patterson is handpicked to rescue her. While they trek through the jungle to safety, her strength and a surprise kiss change everything.

Amazon Gold by Merline Lovelace

U.S. Navy Chief Charlene "Charley" Dawson deftly commands the Riverine patrol boat taking an arrogant U.S. Delta Force Army Sergeant on a very personal op. As she and Jack Halliday penetrate deeper into the Amazon after a rogue ex-pat, they face danger...and unexpected attraction.

Praise for New York Times bestselling author Lindsay McKenna

"Gunfire, emotions, suspense, tension and sexuality abound in this fast-paced, absorbing novel."

—Affaire de Coeur on Wild Woman

"Talented Lindsay McKenna delivers excitement and romance in equal measure."

—RT Book Reviews on Protecting His Own

"Lindsay McKenna will have you flying with the daring and deadly women pilots who risk their lives.... Buckle in for the ride of your life."

—Writers Unlimited on Heart of Stone

Praise for USA TODAY bestselling author Merline Lovelace

"Merline Lovelace rocks! Like Nora Roberts, she delivers top-rate suspense with great characters, rich atmosphere and a crackling plot!"

—New York Times bestselling author Mary Jo Putney

"Lovelace's many fans have come to expect her signature strong, brave, resourceful heroines and she doesn't disappoint."

—Booklist

"Ms. Lovelace wins our hearts with a tender love story featuring a fine hero who will make every woman's heart beat faster."

—RT Book Reviews on Wrong Bride, Right Groom

LINDSAY MCKENNA

is proud to have served her country in the U.S. Navy as an aerographer's mate third class—also known as a weather forecaster. She was a pioneer in the military romance subgenre and loves to combine heart-pounding action with soulful and poignant romance. True to her military roots, she is the originator of the long-running and reader-favorite Morgan's Mercenaries series. She does extensive hands-on research, including flying in aircraft such as a P3-B Orion sub-hunter and a B-52 bomber. She was the first romance writer to sign her books in the Pentagon bookstore. Today, she has created a new military romantic suspense series, Shadow Warriors, which features romantic and action-packed tales about U.S. Navy SEALs. Visit her online at:

www.lindsaymckenna.com [www.twitter.com/lindsaymckenna](https://twitter.com/lindsaymckenna) www.facebook.com/eileen.nauman

MERLINE LOVELACE

A career Air Force officer, Merline Lovelace served at bases all over the world. When she hung up her uniform for the last time, she decided to combine her love of adventure with a flair for storytelling, basing many of her tales on her own experiences in the service. Since then she's produced more than ninety-five action-packed sizzlers, many of which have made the USA TODAY bestseller list. Over twelve million copies of her works have been printed in more than thirty countries.

When she's not tied to her keyboard, Merline enjoys reading, hitting little white balls around the fairways of Oklahoma, and traveling to new and exotic locales with her husband, Al. Check her website at www.merlinelovelace.com or friend Merline on Facebook for news and information about her latest releases.

Course of Action: The Rescue
Jaguar Night
Amazon Gold
Lindsay McKenna and
Merline Lovelace



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[Dear Reader,](#)

This September, you may be ushering in a new school year or enjoying the change of season. Be sure to add a little reading indulgence to your day with the latest adrenaline-pumping romances from Mills & Boon Romantic Suspense!

First off, you'll love the latest military-themed 2-in-1, *Course of Action: The Rescue* (#1815) written by New York Times bestselling author Lindsay McKenna and USA TODAY bestselling author Merline Lovelace. Here, two couples undertake daring assignments and discover true love. *In Return to Copper Lake* (#1816) by USA TODAY bestselling author Marilyn Pappano, a black-sheep hero returns home to save his family, never expecting to fall for his nieces' caretaker...or that he'd bring danger to their door.

Jennifer Morey's *One Secret Night* (#1817), the next in her Ivy Avengers miniseries, features a military man who runs into the right woman at the wrong time while tracking a murderer. In Natalie Charles's *When No One Is Watching* (#1818), a lawman enlists the aid of a victim in solving a serial killer case but finds himself becoming much more involved than he'd anticipated. Don't miss these wonderful tales!

As always, we deliver on our promise of breathtaking romance set against a backdrop of suspense. Have a wonderful September, and happy reading!

Sincerely,

Patience Bloom

Senior Editor

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Lindsay McKenna

To those men and women who served or are presently serving in the U.S. military. Your sacrifices, patriotism and protection of our country does not go unnoticed. You are all heroes and heroines in my eyes and heart. Words are inadequate for all that you have done or do for us. Thank you for your service.

[Chapter 1](#)

Aly Landon would never get used to the heavy Brazilian humidity that cloaked the Amazon jungle. It was as if a visible mist surrounded them. She rode her bay gelding along a path between the spindly trees and dead leaves that littered the gently sloping hill. Above her was a triple canopy of trees, effectively shutting out the sunlight. She missed the sun more than anything. Maybe because she'd been born in San Diego, California, a warm and desertlike city sitting on the sparkling Pacific Ocean.

She heard the snort of Juan's mule, which he lovingly called Loco—Crazy. Juan Vinas, a Barasana Indian, was in his mid-forties. The man always had a smile on his face. He'd been a godsend to her and the Healing Hands Charity for whom she worked as a nurse. Juan could speak the language and he knew enough English and Portuguese to translate for those who were sick. For Aly, he felt like a beloved uncle and he doted upon her as if she were one of his own children.

Looking up at the cool morning, she loved the way the silent fingers of clouds lowered and wove in and out of the trees just above the canopy; it reminded her of a silent, graceful ballet. Were these soft, undulating fingers clouds or fog? They glided softly through the tallest of trees, slow-motion dancing to an unknown music, but Aly saw the rhythm of it, nevertheless. She loved Brazil's jungle whether her Marine Corps brigadier general father thought it a safe area or not.

Her heart turned over and Aly felt sadness mixed with grief. Touching her nurse's uniform, a light blue smock she wore with her light blue slacks, she suddenly frowned. Aly hadn't heard from her powerful military father in almost three months. But then, he never had paid much attention to her. All his hopes and dreams had been set on Adam, her older-by-two-years brother. Only...he'd died with her mother in a car crash that had taken their lives. Aly had been the only survivor, overcoming massive internal injury. That had been a nightmare year for her. And her father had gone into deep shock over the losses.

When Aly had needed holding the most, he was mired in his own grief to understand that a little twelve-year-old girl in a lonely hospital room ached for her father more than ever before. As always, Harrison Landon was never there for her.

Pushing tendrils of chestnut hair away from her face, Aly dropped the reins on her gelding and made sure her ponytail between her shoulder blades was nice and tight. The path was wide, created thousands of years ago by the local Indians as they'd hunted the jungle for birds, reptiles and wild pigs. The call of tropical birds at this time of morning was music to her ears. Often, Aly wished she

could record it. Monkeys howled and screamed nearby, calling out warnings, hurting her ears. They were so noisy and bothersome to the placid, mystical-looking landscape.

She brightened, looking forward to this visit to the village where Juan had been born. There were seventy-five people who still lived in the grass huts. Today, she was going to examine three women who were at different stages of pregnancy. She loved helping pregnant women and new mothers. Babies just made her smile. She would never get enough of holding them, kissing them and cuddling them. In some ways, she had the best job in the world. She brought medicine, knowledge and help to the Indians who had always relied on their medicine man or a shaman. While she didn't pooh-pooh such healing, Aly knew she brought another tool to their healing chest. Best of all, the Barasana always welcomed her with open arms.

And although it would take her a month to make a complete circuit of the ten villages, there was always a celebration when she and Juan walked into any one of them. It was nice to be wanted, Aly thought warmly, a soft smile on her lips. Wanted, loved and respected.

Juan was lustily singing one of his songs she couldn't understand. But sometimes when Loco got peevish, the mule would balk. Or bite. And Loco loved Juan's songs. All of them. And the mule would continue to walk. Aly grinned, turning in her saddle, her hand resting on the rump of her horse. Juan grinned brightly, waving at her. He walked about twenty feet behind her. Aly smiled and wished she knew his language. He was teaching her and she was catching on. Singing meant so much to Aly. In school, she'd always been in the choir.

Her horse suddenly anchored, planting its front feet in the mud. Aly gasped. Grabbing the horse's black mane, she tried to stop from being thrown off. She caught herself, her foot slipping out of the stirrup. She righted herself, her eyes widening enormously.

There, standing in front of them, were four men of varying heights, with hard looks in their eyes. They each carried a weapon. Gulping, Aly gripped the reins.

Juan came up alongside her, patting her leg as if trying to calm her. Despite his effort, she shivered, feeling terror.

The men glared at her. They were tough and their expressions were unreadable.

One, with black hair and brown eyes, wore two bandoliers of bullets across his chest. The tallest one, a white man with a bald head, narrowed his green eyes and slowly raked her from her head to her breasts.

Her heartbeat quickened. Aly held tightly to the reins, trying to understand the situation. No doubt, these were soldiers. She realized they might be the drug soldiers she'd always heard about, but had never seen in the past two years.

"¡Hola!" Juan said, holding up his hand. "Can we help you?" he asked with a friendly smile.

The bald man ignored him. "Are you Allison Landon?" he demanded of Aly in a deep voice.

Aly blinked, feeling shaky, adrenaline leaking into her bloodstream. "Y-yes, I am. Who are you?" she asked in her best, firm voice.

The bald man grinned, revealing that two of his front teeth were missing.

"Barrosa!"

The man with the bandoliers crossing his massive chest moved forward. His eyes focused on Juan, he walked quickly toward him, pulled the pistol out of his holster and shot the smiling Indian in the head.

Aly screamed.

Her horse jerked, shying away, unseating her.

Aly fell hard to the path. In her peripheral vision, she saw Juan crumple, half his head gone. She'd been spattered by the pink mist, the brain matter clinging to her lower smock and across her thigh. Gasping, she stared at Juan, a sob wrenching from her as she tried to get to her feet.

The man who had shot Juan reached down, grabbed her by her ponytail and jerked her roughly to her feet.

Pain radiated from her scalp and Aly grunted. Her hands flew toward her head. She was yanked forward, nearly losing her footing again on the muddy path. Sobbing, she was pushed down onto her hands and knees in front of the bald soldier, who smiled. But the smile didn't reach his dead-looking green eyes.

"Why are you doing this?" Aly shrieked, trying to rise. "You killed Juan! You killed him! How could you!"

The bald soldier's hand snapped out like a snake strike and grabbed her by her shoulder as she got to her feet. "Allison Landon," he snarled into her face, "do you want to live? Or do you want to join your friend on the ground with a bullet through your head?"

Tears poured out of her eyes and Aly choked, whispering, "N-no, don't kill me..."

Her mind gyrated. In shock, terrified and grief-stricken by Juan's murder, Aly tried to stand still. Her chest was rising and falling with sobs she couldn't control. They'd killed Juan! He'd been a gentle man, a beautiful soul whose only mission had been to make life better for his tribe.

The soldier's powerful fingers dug deep into her shoulder and the pain radiated outward. Whimpering, Aly tried to escape him, but his fingers only dug deeper. She stopped, trembling, her eyes on his. She saw nothing but a vat of dead green, swampy darkness. There was no leniency, no compassion in this man. Aly tried to stop sobbing. Tried to stop crying, but she couldn't completely control her emotions.

"You are now the property of Don Gervasio Duarte." He smiled a little. "Do you know who he is?"

Aly barely nodded, feeling some relief of his fingers digging into her shoulder. If she stood still, if she tried to stop crying, the pain eased. "I—I've heard of him...a local drug lord..."

His eyes glittered. "Very good, señorita. You are much smarter than I thought. Now, you are being a good girl. Fight me, try to escape, and I will hurt you. I will rape you. Do you understand?" He leered at her.

His breath was a foul mixture of fish and garlic. Wincing, Aly closed her eyes and turned her face away from his. Instantly his fingers grasped her. She winced, cried out and faced him. His grip eased a little.

"I am Oleg Rusak, Don Duarte's chief of security. You will remember me. You will always obey me in an instant. If you do not, I will hurt you. ¿Comprende?"

Aly risked a look at the other four soldiers. They were grinning. Their faces were sweat-soaked, dirty and the sour smell of their bodies almost made her gag. "Wh-what do you want?" she whispered brokenly.

Instantly, Rusak's fingers dug so deep it took Aly to her knees.

Rusak crouched in front of her, his face filled with rage. "You have no voice, bitch! You do not ask questions! You live to obey Don Duarte and me."

Whimpering, the agony making her lean into his hand, her face so close to his, Aly cried out, "Y-yes, yes, I hear you!"

Rusak released her and stood. "Good. Now get up. You are nothing more than a slave to Don Duarte. You will know your place. You speak only when spoken to. If he tells you to do something, you do it. You never speak unless he asks you to. Understand?"

Yes, she understood, rubbing her shoulder that was surely deeply bruised and currently throbbing. "I understand," she whispered. What was going to happen to her? Oh, God, she was in such trouble. And no one knew. No one would miss her until she failed to check in this evening by satellite phone with the office in Manaus.

"Mount that horse," Rusak growled. "And if you think you can kick that animal and gallop away from us, think about this—" He held the AK-47 up in front of her face. "First, we will shoot the horse out from under you. And then—" he grinned a little "—I will tell my men to watch as I rip off your clothes and take you down on this trail." He rubbed his crotch with his soiled hand, all

the while, staring at her. “If you fight, my man will hold your arms above your head. The other one will spread your legs and I will enjoy having my way with you.” He reached out and ran his large hand around the curve of her breast.

Startled, Aly gasped and jerked away.

Rusak slapped her.

Her head exploded. She saw stars behind her eyes; felt her legs crumple beneath her. Aly didn’t even remember hitting the hard, muddy ground. Moments later she woke, her cheek in the cooling mud. She felt more than saw Rusak walk over to her. She barely opened her eyes to stare uncomprehendingly at his large, muddy combat boots. Her head spun. She couldn’t think, her cheek smarting with excruciating pain.

Rusak leaned down, grabbing her by the shoulder and hauled her up with one jerk of his arm. Aly was wobbly as he roughly brought her against him. He smiled down into her cloudy eyes. “You are a slave. You will allow Don Duarte to touch you anytime he wants. If he thinks you are good for his bed, then you will go without a fight and you will please him.” Rusak sneered. “Because if you do not please him, Allison Landon, then he gives his cast-off women to me. And I guarantee you, little girl, you will have met the devil. I will not be kind or gentle with you. Understand?”

Oh, God, yes! She understood. Aly barely nodded, hating the smell of him, wanting to push away from him. But she didn’t dare. He would do something else to her, possibly rape her. She couldn’t fight back. She felt and heard him laugh, the sound harsh against her ears, his breath fetid, nauseating her.

Everything spun and when he pushed her to stand on her own two feet, she started to collapse again. Someone behind her grabbed her around the waist, held her upright and walked her over to the nervous horse. They threw her into the saddle. It was the last thing Aly remembered.

The brutal death of Juan, being captured, slapped and roughly treated, overwhelmed her. Aly had never experienced violence in her life. But now, her last thoughts acknowledged she was in a violent world and there was no escape.

* * *

Staff Sergeant Josh Patterson was in a lot of trouble. He’d been taken off an important op in Afghanistan and ordered to Washington, D.C. For what? What the hell was more important than targeting an HVT? As a Marine Force Recon, he’d worked three weeks on that op, watching through his sniper scope as the Pakistanis crossed across the border into Afghanistan carrying weapons, fertilizer to make IEDs and bombs. A top man, a war lord, had been scheduled to come across. CIA traffic had picked up a lot of chatter so Patterson knew their HVT—high value target—would be crossing any day now.

Yet he was now taking the broad stone steps up to the Pentagon with orders to see a General Landon. The name didn’t ring a bell, but being an enlisted man, Patterson had nothing to do with officers other than to take orders and direction from them.

He pushed his fingers through his recently cut black hair. His beard was gone, as well. He was in Marine desert camos. Since he’d been flying for thirty hours, exhaustion now stalked him. As a sniper, he was used to catching catnaps where and when he could. Having grabbed an Air Force C-17 out of Rota, Spain, he’d opened up his hammock, strung it between two containers on the deck and slept until they’d landed at Andrews Air Force Base.

He hadn’t been to the Pentagon often, but located the visitor’s desk and found out where he was supposed to be. There were seven rings to this building; even to a Recon, the layout was impressive. Finding General Landon’s office, he opened the door and stepped inside. A woman dressed in civilian clothes, in her fifties, smiled.

“Sergeant Patterson?”

He nodded, taking off his utility cap. “Yes, ma’am. Reporting as ordered.”

“Have a seat, Sergeant. I’ll ring the general.”

Patterson sat, sensing tension around the woman. Her smile was fixed. Her eyes showed anxiety. Snipers saw the details. Missing one could get him killed. He'd downed five cups of McDonald's coffee this morning on the way over. God, it had tasted good. It was one of the few things he'd missed about rich U.S. life.

He heard a buzzer.

"Go right in, Sergeant. General Landon will see you now."

Patterson opened the door into the large room and saw a man in a dark green wool uniform behind a desk, a deadly look on his face. The general had short black hair with some silver at the temples, dark blue eyes and a bulldog-square face. He was about the sergeant's height of six feet tall and around his weight, two hundred pounds.

Patterson shut the door, snapped to attention and gave his name and rank.

"At ease, Sergeant," Harrison said, pointing to the seat in front of the desk. "Sit down."

Patterson nodded and did so.

"This is a black op, Sergeant," the general said. Picking up a folder, he pushed it across his spotlessly polished walnut desk.

Knowing Recons sometimes performed black ops, Patterson reached for the file. "Yes, sir."

"Open it, Sergeant."

The sergeant did so.

He frowned and did a double take. It was a color photo of a young woman. There was a sprinkling of freckles across her high cheekbones and she had soft blue eyes. Her face was oval-shaped, her eyes wide-spaced. She had mussed ginger-colored hair around her face and lying on her shoulders. She was smiling. And she was happy.

Josh looked up at the general, waiting to be briefed. Under ordinary circumstances, he would find this woman very attractive. She was a natural, wearing no makeup, no lipstick or blush. He instantly liked that about her. She wore a bright red tee that showed off the glint of gold, red and burgundy in the strands of her hair. He didn't try to guess anything about her. He was sure this scowling general would tell him, so he waited, his hand atop the file on his lap.

"That's my daughter, Sergeant. Her name is Allison Landon. She's twenty-seven years old and is in trouble so deep I don't even know if you can help her."

Eyes narrowing on the officer, Josh felt the air whoosh out of his lungs. This was his daughter? For the first time he saw the general's game face crack, momentary terror in his expression. And something else he couldn't read. "Yes, sir."

"My daughter is a registered nurse, Sergeant. She works for Healing Hands Charity. It's a global charity. Presently she's down in Brazil, in drug-lord badlands." His mouth thinned and he snarled. "I told her it was dangerous. But she didn't listen."

The powerful emotion slapped at Josh. It was invisible. But it was real. He wasn't sure Allison's father was more angry than worried. "Sir? Do you want my questions? My input? Or do you want me to sit and listen?"

"Sit and listen, Sergeant. When I'm done briefing you, then you can ask questions."

"Yes, sir."

Rubbing his jaw, Landon said, "She's worked down there for two years. About thirty miles southeast of Manaus, an old rubber town that sits on the Amazon River. Two nights ago Aly—Allison, was supposed to make a prearranged sat call to her supervisor in Manaus. It's a safety check-in. She was supposed to have arrived at a particular Indian village. But the super never heard from her. Sometimes, sat phones go out. Especially in that kind of heavy humidity, so the super didn't think much of it. When she didn't get Allison's check-in call the second evening, she called the U.S. ambassador's office in São Paulo, Brazil. That is standard operating procedure. She's declared Allison missing and unaccounted for."

Josh could see sweat making the general's deeply furrowed brow gleam.

“She’s missing,” Landon growled, his hand on the desk flexing slowly into a fist. “There’s a regional drug lord in that area. Duarte is his name. He’s active and his drug soldiers kill and ask questions later. I need you to find her. I’ve cut your orders. You’ll perform a HAHO, high-altitude, high-opening parachute drop, into the area she was last known to be. We can’t use satellites because the area is old-growth, triple-canopy jungle. Once on the ground, you will find her through whatever means at your disposal. You’ll be given a sat phone and anything else you need. If I could send a company of Marines into that friggin’ place, I’d do it, but it’s not possible. I strongly believe Duarte has her. Now, questions?”

Josh sat forward. “Sir, is this a kidnap and ransom?”

“No,” Harrison muttered. “There’s not been one phone call to me requesting money.”

“Why would Duarte grab her?”

The man’s face began to crumple and then he seemed to force himself to remain unemotional.

“Duarte deals in drugs. All kinds of drugs. There’s a dossier in there on him you can study. He...” Landon’s voice cracked for a second, and then he pushed on. “He’s known to deal in the sex trade, young girls and women. He’s got a tie to a Georgian sex ring operating out of that country. The CIA and Interpol have been trying to prove the link.”

“He’s captured Ms. Landon to sell her into the sex black market?” Even Josh felt his gut tighten over that question. But hard questions had to be asked.

Landon’s blue eyes were raw and grief-stricken.

“She’s a nurse,” he muttered. “CIA briefing in that file will show that Duarte is a diabetic. He’s slowly dying of it. I’m hoping, that if he has taken Aly...Allison, it’s because he needs her medical expertise. Duarte is a wanted criminal everywhere in South America. If he shows his face in any hospital, they’ll arrest him. And he knows it.”

With a shake of his head, the general growled. “He may need medical help and that’s why they captured her. God...I hope that’s correct...” He rubbed his face with his hand, his voice trembling for a second.

“And where is he right now?”

“He owns a villa. The map is in the file. We’ve got a few bad photos from the satellite. We simply can’t penetrate his hideout because it’s protected from all satellites by that damned triple canopy. That’s why I need you, Sergeant Patterson. You’re the best of the best. You’ve taken that jungle training course down in South America several years ago and were one of the few men to graduate from it. I need someone who can recon, sniff out the land, find her and then rescue her.” He shook his head and gave Josh a hard look. “Sergeant, she’s my little girl. The only family I have. Aly is simply incapable of dealing with something like this.... She’s fragile...idealistic.” His voice deepened and became annoyed. “Aly thinks the world is filled with hope. That there are no bad guys around. I don’t see how she can operate that way,” he muttered with a shake of his head.

“Is she capable of fighting back, sir? Does she have heart? Because if I can find her and rescue her, we’re going to be running for days. I know the Amazon jungle too well. There are no openings to get to a helicopter and be lifted out of there. The only possible route of escape is by utilizing Navy Riverine boats that ply the Amazon.”

“Aly—” Landon shook his head. “Okay, maybe this will answer your question about my daughter having heart. My wife, son and Aly were hit by a dump truck going seventy miles an hour one morning when they were being taken to school. Aly was the only survivor,” he said, his voice lowering. “She suffered many internal injuries, a broken leg, arm, jaw and nose. She was twelve years old when it happened, Sergeant. That kid fought with everything she had to get well. She was critical, but she had a fighter’s heart and soul. I was with her in ICU for two weeks before she came out of that damned coma. And from that moment on, Aly took the fight to her body. She got well faster than any of her team of doctors had ever seen. I know she looks soft, Sergeant.” He gestured to the file folder. “Don’t let it fool you. She’s softhearted, but she’s got a steel spine when the chips are down.”

Josh's heart wrenched in his chest. Because the photo of Allison Landon spoke of a sensitive, warm, compassionate-looking woman. Not a fighter. "Thank you for sharing that personal experience with me, sir. I needed to know."

"Yes," the general said heavily, "you do. You're not going to be able to extract her without her direct help. I know that. And there's not a damned thing we can do to help you in this scenario. Your closest help, if you can extract, is a hundred miles downriver, working your way toward the Amazon and that Riverine Squadron boat crew who knows you'll be coming with her. You're going to be up against some of the most ruthless killers on earth, Sergeant. You think the Taliban is bad? Try drug soldiers. They like to torture, kill and maim even more than the enemy you're presently fighting. They have no religion pushing them. They have pure greed, a love of raping and hurting others. They're all sociopaths. No conscience. No human anything left in their dead souls."

"Yes, sir," he said. "I understand."

"And you're still willing to do this, Sergeant?"

For a moment Josh hesitated. He lived for these kinds of missions. He knew he was the best. And right now, Allison Landon needed help. His heart twisted and that surprised him. It meant he was getting emotionally involved and that just couldn't happen. Josh could not afford distraction because it would get him and possibly Aly—Allison—killed. "Yes, sir, I'm more than willing to do this."

Landon grunted and looked at his watch. "Wheels up in two hours, Sergeant. Get your ass over to Andrews. I have a car waiting for you outside. My attaché, Major Durmond, will take care of the details for you. You just check over the equipment before you board that C-130 heading for that GPS point in Brazil."

Chapter 2

Aly tried to hold on to her escaping terror as the drug soldier, Barrosa shoved her from behind, making her walk faster across the red-dirt courtyard within the villa. She had ridden for three hours through the jungle, in a direction she did not know. The ten-foot green concrete wall surrounding the villa appeared slowly out of the jungle, camouflaged. She would never have known it was nearby. She'd had time to recoup from the slap that Rusak had given her, but her left cheek was badly swollen and throbbed without relief.

It was the least of her worries as Barrosa kept her walking down a red-tiled walkway. Other men, armed drug soldiers, turned and looked at her. What were they going to do with her? Was she a slave? Aly couldn't wrap her mind around what was happening to her.

Her ponytail had come undone when Rusak had slapped her and now, as she hung her head, not wanting to see the stares of the other soldiers, it provided a wall between them. She was dying of thirst.

"In here," Barrosa snarled, grabbing her by the shoulder, yanking her to a stop. He kept a grip on her as he opened the door and pushed it open. "Get in!" He shoved her hard.

Aly gasped, almost losing her footing. She saw three women, all dressed in what could only be described as designer clothing, staring at her as she nearly fell into the huge room.

Barrosa growled, "Jakun, get her cleaned up. Don Duarte wants to see her as soon as possible. Put her in jeans and a T-shirt. She's his medical doctor."

Aly watched a very tall woman, who was painting her nails at a desk, rise. She was stunningly beautiful, her red hair piled up on her head, her oval face heavily made up with cosmetics. It was her huge green eyes, painted and emphasized, that got her attention. The woman wore white capris that showed off her long legs, a tight bustier that more than showed her breasts barely hidden by the dark green material.

"Of course, Barrosa. I will take care of everything."

The door shut.

Aly stared at them. They all stared at her. Only Jakun, who swayed toward her like a model on a runway, bearing five-inch heels, didn't seem surprised.

“I am Jakun,” she said in poor English. “Welcome to Villa Duarte. They had told us that Don Duarte was getting a medical doctor. You must be it?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Aly swallowed tensely. “Who are you? And why am I here?” She wondered if the tall woman was going to slap her for asking a question and tried to prepare herself.

Jakun’s red lips pulled into a smile. “I can see that Rusak has already trained you to be subservient.” She flicked a long, elegant finger toward Aly’s face. Her smile disappeared. “You are now the property of Don Duarte. I am his mistress and these two...” she said, shrugging, “are his play toys when he desires a change from how I can pleasure him.”

A sickening feeling rolled through Aly. “Why am I here?”

Jakun pointed toward the white-tiled hall. “You are his doctor. He needs medical help. Come, I must get you out of this medical uniform, get you a shower and change of clothes. He’s been expecting you.”

“I—I’m thirsty. Do you have any water?” Aly looked around the opulent living room. The other two women, also dressed and made up, were reading magazines where they sat on two buttery-yellow leather couches. They ignored her.

Jakun nodded. “Yes, of course. Come to the bathroom. Everything you need is there.”

She followed the swaying Jakun. Everything about this apartment was elegant, richly appointed, modern. In the bathroom, which was as large as the living room, Aly saw bottled water on the counter. She grabbed it, twisted off the lid and gulped it thirstily. Jakun seemed amused, her arms across her breasts, a faint smile on her red mouth.

Aly drank all of it and half of another bottle. “Thanks,” she whispered, rubbing the water off her lips.

“You are welcome. What is your name, please?”

“Allison Landon. My friends call me Aly.”

“I am responsible for you and you must do as I ask.” She sniffed through her fine, thin nose. “Otherwise, Rusak will come in here and beat me. And I have had enough of his fists to last me a lifetime.” Her eyes narrowed on Aly. “You will obey me instantly. If you do not, I will call in Rusak to deal with you. Do I make myself clear?”

Oh, yes, perfectly clear. Aly had no desire to be anywhere near that bastard again. “Yes. What do you want me to do?”

Jakun smiled. “Thank you.” She turned and pointed to a stack of fluffy pink towels, soap, comb and brush. There was also shampoo and conditioner nearby. “Get washed as soon as possible.” She walked over to a stack of clothes with a set of sandals on top of them. “Rusak called me by radio and told me your height and weight. He guessed about your shoe size.” She picked up the strapped white sandals. “If they do not fit, I will get you a pair that does.”

“Okay,” Aly said, seeing that there was a pair of jeans, a pink tee, bra and panties. Nothing fancy. Thank God she didn’t have to wear those dresses and five-inch heels.

Jakun seemed pleased and left, closing the door behind her.

Aly ignored the gold faucets and showerhead. She felt as though she’d stepped into some rich man’s estate. Her mind whirled with terror and thoughts of how to escape. She knew she was in shock from being roughed up by Rusak.

As she took a cooling shower, she cried for Juan, her hands against her mouth so no one would hear her sobs. She washed her shoulder-length hair and quickly dried off. The clothes fit. But the designer jeans were too elegant for her. She was a plain Jane, liked utilitarian clothes, not gussied up with embroidery as these were.

The pink tee was loose-fitting and she was grateful. Aly wanted to hide in the clothes. Compared to the other women, she was lush and curvy. The three women reminded her of starving sticks.

Runway models. Who were they? Jakun had said she was Don Duarte's mistress and that the other two were play toys. Did that mean Aly was safe? That the man would leave her alone?

As she walked out of the bathroom and into the living room, Jakun gave her a scathing look.

"I cannot say that Don Duarte is going to be pleased by how you look." She sniffed. "Really, you look more like the common Indian laborers he employs here."

Aly said nothing. A quick glance at the other two women, who gave her bored looks and went back to reading their magazines, said it all. In Aly's opinion, ugly was good.

Jakun came forward and handed her a rubber band. "Put your hair back," she ordered.

Aly nodded and took the rubber band. In no time, her ponytail settled between her shoulder blades.

"Are you hungry?" Jakun asked.

"No." Her stomach was a tight knot of unending terror.

"Well, you will be later. I will have the chef make you something. Come." She gestured toward the main door.

Aly followed the beautiful, graceful and gazelle-like Jakun down the red-tiled walkway. On either side was bougainvillea in bright bloom, fuchsia and other white and red flowers. She took in the details of her surroundings.

There were two levels to the villa. Two floors. The trees practically embraced the villa, some of their limbs hanging over the wall and into the courtyard itself. The smell of orchids, in trees somewhere, provided a hint of clean fragrance. The humidity was high and she was perspiring.

At the dirt plaza that led to a massive ten-foot-high wooden door, Jakun halted. She gestured sharply.

Aly's heart squeezed. It was Rusak. Oh, God...

"She's ready," Jakun said, stepping back. "She's yours."

Rusak nodded. He gave Aly a slow appraisal. "Come," he growled. "Follow me."

To her relief, Rusak turned on his heel. She hurried to catch up with him as he took the red-tiled walkway around the villa. She saw two black Jeeps and a black Mercedes-Benz being cleaned by several young Indian boys. There were also two women, wearing long, dark blue dresses, with huge baskets on their heads. It appeared as if they were carrying laundry.

Rusak took her inside a huge foyer that led into a massive living room. He then sharply gestured for her to precede him up a circular tiled staircase with black wrought-iron handrails.

The sandals were a bit too big and Aly nearly tripped once, catching herself. At the top, Rusak moved to the right and she followed him down a long, wide hall. On either side were red doors and blue doors, and at the end of the hall, a yellow door. Rusak halted in front of it and knocked twice, sharply.

Aly held her breath, not knowing what to expect. A young, beautiful Indian girl with long black hair halfway down her back answered. She bowed to Rusak and stepped aside. He turned, jerking his head, a sign for Aly to enter before him.

Her throat tightened. She felt as if she were being thrown into a den of lions to be eaten.

The room was large, opening up into an airy patio. Soft Latin music was playing in the background. Aly saw two more Indian girls, both in their teens, perhaps, and dressed in skimpy costumes similar to Jakun's.

Her gaze moved to a man sitting in a very large black leather chair. He wore a white peasant-style shirt and black slacks. Her eyes caught the fact that his feet were bare. She glimpsed that there was something wrong with some of the toes, but feared being slapped for staring at the man. He was a heavy man, rolls of fat beneath his round face. He had long black hair pulled back into a ponytail and a thick black mustache that emphasized his full, thick lips. His dark brown eyes scared the hell out of her. They held the same flat, dead look she'd seen in Rusak's eyes.

"Come, come," the man said. "Sit here." He pointed to a leather stool near his feet.

Aly instantly obeyed, her heart hammering with fear. When the man smiled, it made her stomach roll.

He seemed pleased that she easily obeyed. Looking up at Rusak, he said, "Leave."

"Don Duarte," Rusak protested, "I should remain. Her medical bag contains sharp objects."

Duarte shrugged. "Then stand over there. Out of the way." He turned his attention to Aly. "And you, my new physician... What is your name?"

Aly's eyes went wide and she almost blurted that she wasn't a physician. She remembered what Rusak had said earlier. "M-my name is Allison Landon, sir."

Duarte chuckled and gave Rusak an amused look. "Rusak. Look, an American who calls me sir. Isn't that sweet?"

Rusak glared at Aly.

She gulped, belatedly remembering to call him Don Duarte. She tensed, waiting to be slapped by Rusak. Or by this man who looked jovial in comparison. She didn't dare speak.

"Tut, tut," he told her, slowly leaning forward. "You may call me sir if you want. It's a sign of respect and I can see you are frightened, Allison Landon." He touched her jaw, peering at her swollen cheek. "Hmm," he murmured. "You must be a fighter? Rusak had orders not to touch you...." Duarte turned, glaring at his Russian security chief. "What happened?" he demanded, anger in his voice.

Rusak told him the details, and then added, "She needs to learn to be subservient to you, Don Duarte." The Russian smiled a little. "I would be complimented if you'd allow me to bring her into line for you."

Aly gasped, freezing. Her heart went wild in her chest, adrenaline pouring into her bloodstream. Rusak had roughly touched her breast. She automatically gave Don Duarte a pleading, silent look to not allow him to touch her.

"Well," Duarte murmured, sitting back, giving Rusak a glare. "Under the circumstances, you'd have my new physician incapacitated and unable to cure me. Your request is declined, Rusak."

Relief skittered through her. Aly closed her eyes for a moment, her emotions raw.

"My dear..." Duarte said. "Look at me. You don't need to be afraid any longer." He gave her a slight smile. "I own you. No one, not even Rusak, touches my property. Now, we must talk of my health and you must listen closely. I have need of your services."

"Y-yes, sir...I mean, Don Duarte."

His eyes gleamed with delight. "You are very refreshing to me, Allison. You're a scared little rabbit. Not very pretty, but I will not blame you for that. What I'm most interested in is that you can cure my feet." He held up one bare foot and placed it across her thigh. "Unfortunately, I'm a diabetic. I cannot go to any hospital to be treated because they will arrest me and throw me into prison." He scowled, but then went on pleasantly, "That is why I had to kidnap you. My sources in the region have spoken highly of you for the past two years."

Aly's brows shot up.

Duarte smiled. "Yes, my dear, I have eyes and ears all over South America." He made a flourishing gesture with his manicured hand. "I must hide here, in my jungle villa, while being hunted by the police and Brazilian army. I am safe enough here, but I cannot get help for my toes." He pointed to them. "I need you to help me, Allison. My diabetes is severe. I have gangrene on several of my toes. I need it stopped. That is why you are here."

* * *

Josh was standing near the open ramp of the C-130 as it flew through the dark night over Brazil. He'd double-checked everything, including the eighty-pound pack hooked to the front of his parachute harness. That ruck contained everything he'd need for this op. It was a lot of weight, but it couldn't be helped.

He looked through his goggles, which protected his eyes, as he moved the oxygen mask on his face, making sure it was sealed and he was getting a good flow on an inhale. They were at forty

thousand feet, circling and adjusting for the winds. The roar of the four-engine turbo prop, the not-so-subtle vibration through the transport, moved through him.

The air was freezing cold, whipping and slapping against Josh's body. With his gloves on, he checked the helmet strap one more time. He wanted nothing loose before he strolled off the end of the ramp and into the black space.

The jump master, who stood opposite him on the ramp, would give him a voice and hand signal once the C-130 had adjusted to wind changes at various altitudes. Strata of wind could carry him too far from the GPS point where he needed to land. There was a small clearing, very small, not enough for a helicopter insertion, on the same trail Aly Landon had been taken from three days ago. He would work his wedge-shaped chute into it. If he had luck... If not, and the winds were acting up, he could find himself crashing through three layers of canopy, and the chances of breaking an arm or leg or busting up his ribs would become a reality. Not something he wanted to do.

The jump master gave him the signal. He heard the man's gruff voice in his earphones, as well. A HAHO jump was something he practiced every six months. He'd gone over everything three times. As he walked further out onto the ramp, he literally walked out into space, the wind tearing and catching at him.

Josh dove into blackness. He heard the C-130 rapidly being left behind and above him. Stretching out arms and legs, he stopped the tumble and used the flat plane of his body to glide silently downward. The cold was icy. The wind whistled constantly around his helmet. He brought his right wrist up and looked at the dials on his special altitude watch. Thirty-nine thousand. Another watch gleamed with green numbers that gave him his distance from the GPS point where he needed to land.

He made adjustments, loving the freedom that the HALO gave him. Some Recon Marines hated jumping out of a plane, but not him.

At thirty-eight thousand feet, Josh yanked the cord to his main chute. He'd been plummeting like a rock toward the earth. As the chute deployed above him, he knew the snap of it opening would jerk him hard. He grunted, feeling his entire body being yanked. Then, using the risers to keep on target, he turned the silent chute to the left. Dangling, moving slowly back and forth, he pulled his NVGs down off his helmet and, pushing aside his flight goggles, set the night-vision goggles over his eyes. Instantly, the dark lit up with green and black objects. Josh sailed through the blackness for nearly twenty miles before reaching his objective.

He spotted the opening and manipulated the risers. The ground was coming up fast and he sailed silently over the opening. As he made a ninety-degree turn, he slowed his forward speed, almost, for a second, hanging in the sky.

The earth rushed up at him, long, green strands of grass and a few bushes in the opening. Making his knees soft, Josh hauled hard on the risers at the last second. The wedged chute pulled up, stopping nearly all his forward speed. And just as light as a bee landing on a flower, he hit the damp, slippery grass with his combat boots, landing and then running a few feet to maintain his balance. The heaviness of the ruck pack nearly toppled him, but Josh leaned back, slowing to a walk. And then, he was down.

Swiftly, he got rid of the oxygen mask, turning off the small tank on his harness. Kneeling, he looked around the tree line. Nothing. He had to get rid of the chute. He knew in this part of the Amazon basin, there was a six-inch layer of dead leaves and below that, nothing but sand. It was easy digging with his small shovel and in no time all the gear he didn't need was permanently buried, never to be found again.

He made his way to the edge of the tree line before crouching and keying his sat phone. He clicked it twice. The CIA in Langley, Virginia, was responsible for keeping tabs on him. Anything he needed, he was to call them first.

Josh gave the two-click signal to the operator back in the States, which would indicate he had landed safely and on target. He quickly put the sat phone in a special pouch on his harness. So far, so good.

It was 0200. The middle of the night. He had a map and compass as well as his GPS equipment. The next order of business was to find the path that would lead him directly to Duarte's villa. Luckily, a CIA satellite passing overhead had intercepted an encrypted message from the villa. Someone had called to tell another person that the medical doctor had arrived.

As Josh knelt and quickly covered his face with dark green, black and gray camo paint to blend into the jungle environment, he hoped like hell that message had meant Allison Landon was there. It was a risk, but one that his handler at Langley had ordered him to verify first, before tramping through the jungle for days on end, trying to find her.

It took him three hours to reach the villa. Dawn was coming, so Josh chose a tree that would allow him to recon the courtyard. He stashed the ruck pack nearby and slowly climbed the tree, not wanting to attract attention even though night was just beginning to lift. Once in a position with his back against the trunk, legs spread out on two strong limbs forty feet above the ground, he pulled his M-4 rifle off his shoulder harness. Quickly opening up the Night Force scope and turning on the infrared capability, he began to scan inside the villa.

As he spotted a heavily armed guard, he wrote the timing down on a knee pad with a grease pencil. Eventually, there was a second guard, but there were no dogs that he could see. They were the biggest threat of all and he knew many drug lords kept Dobermans, rottweilers or Belgian Malinois for security as well as for their aggressive temperament and teeth.

Drinking water from his CamelBak to keep hydrated, he wiped the sweat off his face with his glove. He'd chosen a perfect hiding place, the leaves thick in front and on all sides of him. Someone would have to stand beneath the tree and look up to spot him. With his camouflage clothing and painted face, Josh blended in like a chameleon.

As he continued to scan and memorize the layout in his head, he couldn't keep his emotions out of the mix as much as he wanted to. The color photo of Aly Landon hung in his heart, of all things. He'd been divorced for two years and hadn't even thought of getting into a serious relationship. Not now. He wasn't willing to risk time or his heart on a woman who couldn't accept his long deployments and short time at home with her.

Still, it was the radiant look in Aly's deep blue eyes, the gold in their depths, that lured him. She had the most beautifully shaped mouth he'd ever seen. Already, much to his chagrin, he wondered what it would be like to kiss her, to feel her lips against his.

Josh hadn't been intimate with a woman in six months. But he wasn't the type to find a prostitute to satisfy his needs. Nor could he do one-night stands. Usually his partners would want a second, third and fourth night. Celibacy was easier in many respects than having to deal with women or marriage. But that didn't stop his heart from wanting to know Aly better.

He had such strong, gut intuition, which had saved his life too many times, that he couldn't idly dismiss the feelings he had toward her. Josh couldn't get out of his mind the tragic car wreck she'd survived. And he also wondered how her Marine Corps father, probably a major around that time in his life, had dealt with his critical daughter and grieving for the loss of his wife and son simultaneously. Josh wasn't sure he could handle it. The emotional fallout must have been brutal for Aly.

It was none of his business, so he dropped it for now. Still...that picture spoke strongly of someone who was kind and compassionate. A woman with tender sensitivity toward the plight of others. She was a nurse. She put her own life in jeopardy to help relieve the suffering of others. Aly might be a romantic and idealist about life, but at least she lived what she believed.

And that was something Josh respected whether he agreed with her decision to work in one of the worst areas of Brazil for drug lords and drug trafficking. He smiled a little, one corner of his mouth hooking upward as he continued to recon the villa. Her father might think her soft and

incapable, but Aly's life decisions spoke differently. How far apart were she and her father emotionally from one another?

He shifted slightly, seeing a door at the main entrance open and close. A tall, bald man, armed and looking important, met and talked to one of the guards in the plaza.

Slowly allowing his rifle to hang from his left shoulder harness, Josh took out his digital camera, turned it on and, utilizing the long lens, snapped photos of each of them. As the second guard came around, he took more pictures.

Later, when he opened up his laptop and connected with a satellite, he would send the photos to the CIA in Langley to be identified. Josh wanted to know who he was dealing with. Later, after he got the gist of the rhythm of the villa and its occupants, he would begin a thorough search of the perimeter. Sometimes, he knew from his Recon experience in Peru, villas often had a tunnel that ran from the inside directly into the jungle. It was an escape route should the villa be overrun.

He watched as a tall red-haired woman emerged from a nearby tiled walkway. She was dressed in one of the skimpiest outfits he'd ever seen and she was drop-dead gorgeous. She wore a red halter, breasts pushed up, the nipples damn near showing. The tiny red shorts she wore hid just about nothing. Makeup heavy, her hair up on her head, gold bangles in her ears and at least six or seven gold bracelets on one arm, Josh let out a low breath. He snapped several photos of her: full face, quarter face and profile. Grinning to himself, he was sure the agents at Langley would enjoy the eyeful of this woman.

The bald-headed soldier looked up. Yeah, damn right he was giving her a look that spoke volumes. The redhead tossed her chin upward, as if dissing him, turned and swayed like a runway model to the main door of the house and disappeared. Josh remembered that Duarte dealt in sex slavery. Was this one of his slaves? Because she sure as hell couldn't survive out here in an outfit like that. Now, if he could spot Aly... Would she be dressed similarly? Where were they keeping her? Was there a section where sex slaves were kept? Guarded? So many questions. No answers. Not yet.

Chapter 3

Aly slept restlessly in her new room. She'd been removed from the apartment with the three women who serviced Duarte. The windows in her quarters had iron bars over them, though she had opened the shutters to let in the sluggish, humid nighttime air. The only door was locked from the outside. She could not escape.

A hand suddenly clamped over her mouth.

She screamed and fought, eyes wide with terror.

The man who leaned over her held her shoulder down so she couldn't move and rasped out, "Allison Landon?" His voice held a Texas drawl.

An American! Nostrils wide, breathing in explosive breaths, her eyes slowly acclimated. There was a small night-light in the room, shedding just enough light for her to see him.

Oh, God, he was a soldier! An American soldier! And he was holding his large hand over her mouth so she wouldn't scream. His eyes were narrowed, his face was painted in dark colors, and he wore a flop-brimmed hat on his head. He was also wearing jungle camos.

"I'm Marine Corps Staff Sergeant Josh Patterson. I've come to rescue you. Now, don't scream. I'm going to lift my hand away."

Aly sobbed and shot into a sitting position, staring up at the large man. He put his hand to his lips, cautioning her not to speak. He was carrying a rifle on his left shoulder. She saw a huge knife in a sheath on his right calf. In a drop holster low on his thigh sat a pistol. He eased a small ruck off his broad shoulders and set it on the bed.

"Get into these," he told her quietly, pulling out a dark green T-shirt, black cargo pants, socks and a pair of combat boots. "Hurry!"

Shaken, Aly gave a jerky nod. How had this man gotten in here? She noticed the door was still shut. Somehow, he'd gotten into her room. Oh, God, she was going to be rescued! Climbing

off the bed, her knees weak with adrenaline, she grabbed the clothes and hurried to the bathroom down the hall.

Josh looked around, moving like a shadow to the nearest window. The soft scuff of boots on the tiled walkway could barely be heard. It was guard number one walking by her door. He pulled the cover off his watch and read the dials. In ten minutes, guard number two would patrol past her door.

He glanced down the hall, trying not to be emotionally affected by Aly Landon. Even in the grayish darkness of her small room, he'd seen the color of her wide, beautiful eyes. She'd been so frightened when he'd clamped his hand across that mouth of hers. Feeling badly, but knowing it couldn't be helped, Josh waited impatiently for her to reappear.

She didn't disappoint him, swiftly moving down the hall. Josh grinned to himself. Aly gave new meaning to that T-shirt of his. He'd brought along a pair of women's cargo pants and combat boots he'd guessed would fit her. He watched as she quickly wrapped her hair up into a ponytail as she approached him, pleased he'd been so accurate.

Aly reached out, gripping his arm. "Thank you," she said, her voice quavering as she met his eyes. "You're risking your life to help me." Her lower lip quivered and then she closed her fingers more firmly around his lower arm. "I'm so grateful..."

The swelling on her left cheek upset him, along with the large bruise. Anger moved through him. Then he saw bruise marks around her throat. What the hell? What had happened to her?

"Ms. Landon, are you ambulatory?"

His voice was low. Calm. She certainly wasn't.

"Yes, I can walk."

"Good. Wear this." He pulled the last piece of clothing from the small ruck. It was a camo blouse with long sleeves. It would hide her white skin out in the dark jungle, making her less easy to spot. And Josh knew that Duarte, once he found Aly gone, would launch an immediate, all-out hunt to find her. And kill her.

Aly's hands were shaking as she pulled on the lightweight blouse. She tried to button it.

"Let me," he growled, pushing her hands aside, quickly buttoning it up.

"I—I'm sorry," she said, meeting his shadowed eyes. She saw his stoic facade drop for a split second; saw the compassion in his eyes. And then it was gone.

"I've located a tunnel nearby. It's an escape route. I need you to grab my belt here—" he hitched up his shirt to reveal the nylon webbed belt and pointed "—and hold on. Never speak. Don't make any noise. All right?"

She nodded, her heart starting a hard beat, adrenaline drenching her again. He was so tall, so confident.

He went to the door and looked both ways before gesturing for her to follow him. Once out on the cool, humid walkway, he turned and quietly shut the door. Pointing to the belt, he paused as Aly quickly slid her fingers around it.

Her mouth was dry. Aly was scared to death, wanting desperately to hurry, to escape. Duarte had raged at her yesterday. His gangrenous toes had not improved in the week since she'd started treating him. He'd reached out, grabbed her by the throat and choked her. No one had made a move to stop him as he'd twisted her until she'd fallen across his lap, his black eyes drilling into hers. She hadn't been able to help herself. Her response had been automatic as she'd tried to pull his hands off her throat as she'd choked and gasped for air.

It was then that Rusak had intervened, grabbing her wrists and squeezing them tightly between his massive, powerful hands. She'd heard Duarte screaming at her in Portuguese, seen her vision graying, unable to breathe as he'd squeezed his fingers deeper into her soft throat. She'd lost consciousness.

Minutes later she'd woken on the cold tile floor, gasping for breath, her throat aching, her wrists throbbing. Rusak had grabbed her and hauled her to her hands and knees in front of the hard-

breathing Duarte who'd glared at her. If his feet were not better by tomorrow morning, he'd told her, he would enjoy Rusak raping her in front of him.

They moved quietly down the walk. At a juncture, Aly moved with Patterson, crouched as he was. He had his rifle in his hands, ready to do battle if it became necessary. Her heart was pounding in her sore, aching throat. Tears burned in her eyes. If she didn't get out of here now, she would be raped in the morning. Oh, God, get us out of here. Please...

Aly had no idea the tunnel existed. The Marine knew where he was going. She never heard him walking so she tried to emulate his gait, making no sound. Her knees wobbled. She felt so scared that she might faint. It wouldn't be the first time. But now was not the time to have it happen!

Girding herself, Aly felt the Marine grip her arm firmly after opening the tunnel door. He gently guided her into the darkened area. She had no NVGs as he did. Standing, shivering and arms around herself, she waited until he closed the door. He turned and gripped her hand, placing it on his belt once more. Just his touch made her feel better.

They moved down the damp tunnel. It had been dug out of the earth and moved in a gentle slope upward. Aly touched the wall once. It was concrete and it was wet and damp beneath her fingers. The Marine, she swore, was more shadow than man. He seemed to check his stride for her sake. He was over six feet tall, his legs long, and her stride was a lot less than his. She breathed through her mouth, trying to remain quiet.

Aly felt Patterson slow down. She couldn't see anything but blackness ahead of them. But at least he could see for them. His hand moved to hers and then to her arm. He pulled her to his side. The scent of his sweat entered her flared nostrils as she stood tensely. She wanted to ask what was wrong, but didn't dare speak. And then he put his arm around her shoulders, tugging her against his body, slowly moving forward, mincing steps.

Her boot sank into mud. Aly gasped as she suddenly fell forward. She threw out her hands. Patterson caught her, firmly brought her against him. Panic went through Aly as she found it tough to pull her boot out of the hole and the exposed roots. She couldn't see them, but she felt them. Finally, her foot freed and she sucked in a ragged breath as he took her forward. They were on earth now, no longer in the tunnel.

Just having his arm around her made Aly feel so much better. He seemed to monitor how much pressure he placed against her as he weaved and bobbed through and around things she simply couldn't see. There was no moon. No nothing except to rely on the Marine.

Aly had no idea how far they had gone tucked together that way when he stopped, released her and turned to her. She could feel his powerful presence, swore she could even feel the heat radiating off his body. "I want you to sit down. I need to get my other ruck. It's near this tree you can't see."

His voice was low, not a whisper. Aly nodded and sat. The seat of her pants quickly got soaked on the decomposed earth. She felt him kneel very close to her.

"I need you to drink water from my CamelBak," he told her, finding her hand, guiding it to the tube affixed to his shoulder epaulet. "Drink a lot. We're going to be traveling as fast as you can go for a long time. All right?"

His voice was gravelly but warm. Aly could tell he was concerned about her. She gripped the hose. "All right," she whispered hoarsely, her voice rough since Duarte's attempt to strangle her to death. After drinking a lot, her throat hurting, she said, "I'm done. Thank you."

He moved away without a word.

How relieved Aly was. They were out of that hellish place! She heard very little but thought she knew where the Marine was. Rubbing her face, she tried to collect herself.

"Here," he said, picking up her hand. "NVGs. Put them on. Do you know how?"

Aly felt helpless. She hated the feeling. "No...sorry..."

“Don’t be,” he rasped, settling them around her eyes and making sure the strap fit enough, but not too tightly around her head. Lifting her hand, he said, “There’s a switch here. Push it forward. It turns them on.”

The instant she did, she saw everything around her. She gasped softly. “I can see!”

He chuckled. And watched her as he unwound and walked over to a huge ruck that he hefted onto his broad back. He belted it up, turned and held out his hand to her.

Aly slipped her hand into his large, callused one. He easily helped her to her feet, but didn’t let go. Instead he pulled her closer and turned her so there was about a foot between them. He had something in his hand.

“This is a radio,” he told her, settling it around her left ear, fitting it and then pulling the small microphone near her lips. He turned it on. “If we get separated—or if I hide you somewhere—you need to know that radio has a two-mile radius. Leave it on at all times.”

His eyes were covered by the NVGs but she felt the seriousness of his instructions. “H-how long until we can get away from here? Back home?” she asked, her voice breaking. She was shocked as he lifted his hand and grazed her uninjured cheek. The brush of his knuckles against her flesh sent wild, arching fire downward. Her breasts tightened.

“Listen, Ms. Landon, we have to go nearly a hundred miles through this jungle to reach our rally point. It’s going to be long and hard. You need to keep drinking water. I’ll stop periodically and we’ll hydrate, eat a protein bar and then keep on going.” His voice dropped. “This isn’t going to be easy for you. But judging from your face and throat, you know any energy you can throw into this will be worth it. Okay?”

Nodding, Aly said, “Yes...I understand.”

“Do you have any other injuries that might slow you down? To your feet, legs or knees?”

She grimaced. “No...just my face, arms and neck.”

“Your father said you had heart,” he told her. “I need all the heart you can give me because we’re in a very dangerous situation. And there’s no help if we get into trouble.”

“My father?” she asked, hope suddenly in her voice.

“Yeah. He’s the one that called and asked me to try to find and rescue you. Are you ready?”

Her heart melted over his low, husky words. Her father had come to her rescue! Tears jammed into her eyes. She couldn’t cry now. “I’m ready,” she said firmly.

“Grab my belt.”

Aly wasn’t prepared in any way for this cross-country trotting. Yes, she had NVGs and she could see where the Marine was heading, where the roots were sticking out of the ground, but very quickly, she was gasping for air. She felt horrible. Felt frightened. The Marine slowed to a stop.

She leaned over, hands on her knees, gasping. She felt his hand against her back and he leaned down near her.

“What’s going on with your breathing, Ms. Landon?”

She straightened, unconsciously touching her swollen throat. “Are you familiar with medicine, Sergeant?”

“Yes, ma’am, just a little.”

She heard slight amusement in his voice. “Yesterday afternoon Duarte suddenly grabbed me by the throat.” She closed her eyes, feeling helpless. “I—I couldn’t stop him. When I tried to get his hand off my throat, Rusak, his security chief, grabbed my wrists and pulled them above my head and held me there. I lost consciousness...” She trembled in memory of it.

“Okay,” he breathed softly, “let’s take a moment to rest. I’m going to examine your throat. I’m not going to hurt you....”

Aly was breathing poorly and she knew it. The moment his large fingers moved gently across her throat, she relaxed. He was a man, but he wasn’t hurting her. Aly could feel him assessing the swelling. Finally his hand dropped away.

"I'd like to kill that son of a bitch," he growled. He dug into one of the pockets on his harness. "I need you to take these two ibuprofen. They'll help to reduce the swelling, which will start opening up your windpipe so you can breathe easier."

Aly took the two white capsules. "Thanks," she whispered. God, why did she have to sound as though she was on the verge of tears? Because she was. The Marine had been so gentle with his examination of her throat. She wanted more of his touch because he made her feel safe in a world that wasn't.

"Take my water tube," he told her, turning, his arm against her shoulder, holding the tube out to her.

Aly took the capsules one at a time. It hurt so damn much to swallow. But she did it, drank a lot of water and didn't complain. She could feel Patterson watching her. Monitoring her. "What time is it?"

"Zero five hundred. Sorry, 5:00 a.m. to you civilian types," he teased.

She smiled a little. "Sergeant, I'm a military brat. I know Zulu time. I'm pretty familiar with military lingo, okay?" She looked up and saw his white teeth against his painted skin. Warmth flowed through her, calming her. Taking away some of the adrenaline burning through her bloodstream, making all her senses even more alive than normal.

"Yes, ma'am," he drawled.

"Call me Aly. I hate military formality."

He chuckled as he tucked the tube back underneath his epaulet. "Fair enough...Aly."

"Can I call you...? What?"

"Josh will do. You ready, Aly?"

"Yes, let's go."

This time Aly was determined not to slow down as much. Within twenty minutes her airway had improved. She wasn't in the world's best shape, but she kept up with his slow trot, the leaves sometime swatting at her. Josh seemed to know where he was going. Every time she thought about Duarte and Rusak, terror sizzled through her, made her want to keep up with the pace Josh had set for them. She had no idea how long they'd run but she suddenly realized there was grayness to the misty-looking sky. Her breath was coming in harsh gasps; her lungs burned with exertion and her leg muscles ached, as well.

"Let's take a break," Josh told her, slowing as he pushed the NVGs up on the rail system of his helmet. His eyes adjusted rapidly; they could push on without the goggles. He turned. "Remove your NVGs. You don't need them anymore."

He watched her hands tremble as she slowly eased them off her eyes. Josh got his first good look at Aly Landon. The left side of her face was bruised and swollen. And then, there were deep purple bruise marks around her throat. Rage moved through him. She looked lost. Like someone who had been abandoned by the world, her eyes huge and dark blue as she lifted her head and met his gaze.

Josh felt his heart do more than twinge when Aly looked soulfully up into his eyes. He saw terror, pain and hurt in them. As his gaze dropped from her long nose to the shape of her opened lips, he felt his lower body tighten. Groaning inwardly, Josh wanted to roll his eyes and swear. God, her lips were...well...world-class. The lower lip was naturally a pout, her upper lip softly bow-shaped, a little less full. The corners of her mouth were deep and curved upward. He bet she had dimples when she smiled or laughed. But she was doing neither right now. The sheen of perspiration made her face glisten in the early morning light. Tendrils of ginger-colored hair curled at her temples from the high humidity. Her brows were thin and arched; a frame to emphasize those long lashes that held those amazing marine-blue eyes of hers. Yeah, she was soft-looking, all right. But Josh reminded himself of his image of her when she was twelve, terribly injured, critical, but fighting her way back.

"How's the breathing now?" he asked, pulling out a protein bar and handing it to her.

"Thanks.... Better."

“You weren’t rasping as much,” he observed, quickly eating his bar, looking around, his ears keyed to any sounds out of the ordinary.

“How far have we come?”

“Five miles. Not enough.” If he’d been alone, he’d be twelve miles away, but he said nothing. She felt bad enough, beaten up, her life threatened continually.

Aly chewed little bits of the bar, unable to swallow hardly anything, but she knew she had to get energy back into her body. There was no way she was ever going back to Duarte’s villa. She’d die first.

“How far should we be?” She looked up at him, thinking the camouflage paint hid his face to a degree. Aly wondered what Josh Patterson looked like without it. Despite his size, his large hands, he had a gentle touch with her. And he tried to not sound gruff to her, she realized. It spoke of his sensitivity and she desperately needed someone who wouldn’t batter her any more in any way.

“A ways more,” Josh replied, finishing his bar. He noticed she winced every time she swallowed a little bit of hers. His hand moved into a fist and he relaxed it. Those bastards. Anger threaded through him. A part of him wanted to hide her, to go back and find those who had hurt her and put them out of their misery. Permanently. It was wishful thinking.

As he watched her eat, the way her lips moved, he could feel himself growing hard. Not what he’d expected. But there it was. Aly wasn’t model-beautiful but she had a natural beauty that appealed strongly to him. And more than anything, she wasn’t a whiner. In fact, Josh knew she’d be the last person to tell him she was hurting. Life had toughened her up early because she’d lost her mother at twelve. Josh couldn’t imagine losing his mother at that age. Mothers were damned important because not only were they nurturers, they were protectors; they made their children feel safe.

Had Aly Landon ever felt safe since she lost her mother?

“How are you doing?” he prompted, holding her shadowed gaze. She was taking mincing bites. She needed to eat the whole thing, but they didn’t have that kind of time. Josh weighed leaving now or waiting for her to finish. That would be another ten minutes. A mile further in his mind; half a mile with her in tow.

He cursed himself for noticing how her T-shirt was damp and darker between her breasts. And then, which he realized with a start, that she wasn’t wearing a bra. Worse, he saw her nipples standing out against the fabric. His mouth thinned while he instantly jerked his gaze off that area of her body. She didn’t need to feel threatened by him, too.

“Did Duarte have dogs at the villa?”

“I don’t think so. I never saw any. Why?”

“Because they can be used to follow our scent. Hunt us down.”

“Oh...”

He saw the sudden terror come to her eyes, her lips compressing.

“They aren’t going to catch us,” he told her firmly, holding her unsure gaze. God, he wanted to wrap his arms around her, to squeeze her and tell her everything would be all right. But he wasn’t sure of anything with Duarte. There were at least twenty drug soldiers he’d counted. And Josh knew they’d be sending them out to find them. He’d been careful; choosing areas to cover his tracks, taking her over small streams here and there and walking along a stream if it was going where they were headed. Still, he knew a good tracker could follow them, but he hadn’t made it easy.

“I’m sorry this all happened,” she said lamely, shrugging, wincing because her left shoulder where Rusak had grabbed her that first day on the trail, was injured. Aly thought there might be a ligament tear in her shoulder. “I’m sure your wife is going crazy wondering where you are. If you’re okay...”

The utter sincerity in her eyes gut punched him. What was it about Aly’s blue gaze, those deep-set sapphire eyes that seemed to gently look through him, to see him clear to his soul? Frowning, he muttered, “I don’t have a wife that has to worry about me.” Adding, more gruffly, “Or a girlfriend.

So stop worrying about me. Okay?” Josh knew she didn’t have a steady man in her life, at least not according to her file. But he never trusted files.

“Do you have someone back at the Charity that should be contacted?” he asked, hoping there wasn’t. He saw sadness come to her eyes for a moment and then it disappeared.

“Once. But not now,” she admitted. “Did you contact my charity in Manaus? Let them know I’ve been rescued?”

Josh grimaced. “The only one who knows I’ve extricated you is your father and the boys at Langley. That’s where it stays until I can get you ninety-five miles away from here where we can pick up that U.S. Navy Riverine boat.”

He was privately euphoric over the fact she didn’t have a man in her life. He felt as though he was getting sucked into her and, more surprising, he wasn’t fighting it. What was it about Aly Landon that totaled his heart?

Aly was a victim right now. She hadn’t flirted with him. She just seemed like...well...a lost little girl. Oh, she wasn’t a girl. He knew that, but every time he saw that momentary expression of utter abandonment flit across her face, those sprinkling of freckles across her nose and cheeks, it got to him. Why?

“I’m ready,” she said, tucking the wrapper in her pocket.

“How’s your throat?”

She managed a quirk of her lips. “It’s okay.”

“Wouldn’t lie to me, would you?” He grinned a little, catching her glance. A blush spread from her slender neck up into her face, emphasizing her freckles. It was then he realized she felt the connection, too. The one that sizzled, popped and throbbed between them.

“What good does it do to complain?” Her voice was stronger. Conviction settled in her eyes as she stared up at the Marine.

Josh shook his head. “Because it’s me asking, that’s why. I want to know, Aly.”

He wondered how many times in her young life had she been hurting without her father there to comfort her. To ask her if she was all right because he could see the pain mirrored in her eyes. And then, he saw her falter, her brows dip, confusion in her gaze and that soft mouth of hers parting. God, how he wanted to taste her mouth. Feel how soft her lips were beneath his.

“Sorry,” she said, avoiding his look.

Aly chewed on her lower lip, trying to get a handle on her escaping emotions. Just by the way Josh had asked her, she knew in her heart he really did care. “I, uh... I’m not used to people asking me such a question, is all.”

To hell with it. Josh moved forward and slid his arms around her hunched shoulders. “Hey,” he murmured, folding her against him, feeling her yield, feeling her move without hesitation against him. “You’re worth caring about. All right?” For just a moment he inhaled the scent of vanilla in her hair, realized how firm and yet soft she felt against him. Even more importantly, Aly had not resisted, as if she needed exactly what he’d just offered her. A moment of sanctuary. A second to feel safe.

[Chapter 4](#)

Aly pressed her face into Josh’s shirt. It was damp with sweat, it smelled of him, and she dragged his masculine fragrance into her nostrils as if it were life she was breathing into herself. His arms held her snug, but not tight. Closing her eyes, for just a moment, she wanted to feel safe. Really, honest-to-God safe, when she knew she would never feel that way. But with him...with this tall, strong Marine whose smile melted her heart and made her yearn again, she was confused, wanting and needy.

He awkwardly caressed her hair, as if trying to make her feel secure. And she did feel his genuine warmth—even if it was an awkward attempt—more than at any other time in her life. She wanted to slip her arms around his narrow waist, to pull closer, to never be let go. But Aly knew she was being romantic and unrealistic, as her father would accuse her. Yes, she was.

Gently she pulled out of his Josh's arms, his masculinity still surrounding her. It had felt so good to be held. To actually have someone who cared for her. So much of her life, especially as a nurse, she'd cared for others. She'd given until she was exhausted on every level. Aly didn't regret it.

Looking up at Josh, she saw his eyes burning with desire. For her. It shocked her and she stepped back, wildly aware of her breasts, her tightening nipples thrusting against the damp T-shirt she wore. Tearing her gaze from his, she whispered, "I'm ready to go."

Aly was blushing. It became her. Josh started to apologize. For what?

He was driven to embrace Aly, to hold her because, damn it, she needed it. He had felt it in his heart, his gut. And he'd seen the soft look in her blue eyes, a hunger maybe, as she'd reluctantly pulled out of his arms. His body throbbed and he was so glad she couldn't see his erection. That would have been a disaster under the circumstances.

"Hold on for just a moment," he told her harshly, kneeling by a thin stream at their feet. He pulled out a dark green washcloth he kept in another pouch. In a few quick, hard, scrubbing strokes, he washed all the camouflage paint from his face. As long as they were ahead of any party Duarte sent after them, he wouldn't need it.

Aly's heart quickened upon seeing how handsome Josh Patterson was without any camouflage paint. He had a square face and straight black brows across gold-brown eyes. His nose had been broken but it appealed to her. When her gaze fastened on his mouth, she felt her lower body contract. She felt anything but neutral about this Marine. His mouth was strong and chiseled. A mouth of a leader. One that she wanted to taste.

Aly decided she was certifiable. No doubt, she was in shock. Her mind wasn't functioning normally and everything, her senses especially, was raw and heightened. Her skin still tingled from where Josh had unexpectedly held her. His shoulders were incredibly broad, shouting of his confidence and capability. When he lifted the flop-brimmed hat off his short black hair, she glimpsed a man who truly was a warrior. Josh wasn't pretty. Rather, ruggedly handsome. His face was weathered; there were deep lines at the corners of his eyes. His gaze was like that of an alert eagle waiting for prey.

The hardness she detected didn't translate to the way Josh had touched her earlier, or the way he'd gently embraced her. He'd invited her to come into his arms. He hadn't forced her. Her heart kept opening up a little crack more at a time.

Aly had thought she was so done with men. But this man seemed to naturally trigger every female hormone she owned. It was so embarrassing. They were running for their lives and she was thinking about sex?

"Ready?" Josh asked, turning to her after tightening the straps on his ruck.

"Do you still want me to hold on to your belt? I know I'm slowing us down."

He smiled a little. "Yes, hold on. Because if you trip or something, you can grab on to me and I'll try to catch you. And—" he arched a brow "—you're doing the best you can, Aly. I'm fine with it."

Pursing her lips, Aly wanted to say, You have already caught me and held me, but she nodded and kept her eyes on the ground in front of them instead. To look into Josh's golden gaze would make her weak with longing.

* * *

Two hours later the mist that always hung silent in the jungle, glowed with the golden light of an unseen sun as Aly struggled to keep up the rhythm Josh had set for them. Her breathing was better and it allowed her to go further this time without collapsing. Josh seemed to realize she had pushed as far as she could and slowed. He guided them over to what looked like a flying buttress tree. The roots were like the wings of a plane, the buttresses tall enough on each side to hide a person easily from sight. He led her over to the tree and gestured for her to settle inside the U-shaped area.

Aly never welcomed sitting more than now. She wiped the sheen of sweat off her face, her T-shirt drenched and sticking to her skin and breasts. She tried to pull it away but the fabric hung heavy

and so she just let it go. Now she wished she'd thought to put on her bra. At least she had panties on. Josh eased out of the huge ruck and set it gently on the ground. He opened it, pulling out a gallon of fresh water in a plastic jug. Handing it to her he said, "Drink all you want."

He pulled a sat phone out of his harness and continued to look around, always circumspect that someone might see them. Right now, the birds and monkeys were singing and calling. If something threatened them, they'd immediately stop singing. The monkeys would start their screaming warning. She watched him as he wiped his brow with the back of his arm, turned on the sat phone and punched in numbers, connecting, she presumed, with Langley.

Aly sat with the jug in her lap, listening to him talk in a low tone. His profile was strong-looking. She closed her eyes, tipping back her head against the wall-like root, feeling exhaustion steal upon her. In moments, she was dozing.

* * *

Josh looked down as he put the sat phone into the harness. Aly was asleep. His heart tugged in his chest. She was pale and now, in brighter light, he could see the damage done to her throat, her cheek and the bruises on her upper arms. She'd been pretty well beat up, threatened either with death, rape or both. Her long, slender hands were relaxed in her lap, the jug between them. He didn't have the heart to wake her and carefully lifted the gallon jug off her lap. Moving quietly, he refilled his CamelBak and then finished what was left of the extra jug of water.

They'd traveled another five miles in two hours. Worrying about Duarte's soldiers tracking them, he looked at the regional maps and plotted new courses to throw them off. The Amazon River was a hundred feet below them, about five miles to the north. It would be tough, even dangerous, to try to scale a hundred-foot cliff with someone who didn't know what to do or how to rappel. Further, the cliffs were nothing but sand. If one of them accidentally hit a weak area, thousands of tons of sand could bury them in an instant, suffocating them to death. It wasn't an option.

Meeting the Riverines at the LZ down below would be safe. But the real question: Could Aly keep up this kind of trotting and fast walking? He looked at her long legs and smiled. What he'd give to undress her, run his hands up and down those slender legs of hers—

The monkeys started screaming.

* * *

Aly jerked awake, confused. She'd heard the monkeys. Scrambling to her feet, she handed Josh his hat and gulped. She watched as he packed the ruck and quickly pulled it over his shoulders. His face was expressionless, his eyes glittering, as he took out his M-4, released the safety and loaded a bullet into the chamber.

Aly's heart bounded. Her father had been right: she'd been foolish to come here knowing it was a hotbed of drug activity.

Josh made a gesture for her to grip his belt and they took off at a fast trot. Adrenaline shot into her and she suddenly felt more afraid. The look in Josh Patterson's eyes scared her. Now, she was seeing the man who would protect her at all costs.

Josh had committed the maps to memory. He crossed several small streams, sometimes trotting down their sandy depths, ankle-deep water wetting their boots. He kept Aly in the water for nearly an hour before pulling up on the land. She was panting hard, her hand pressed to her chest, head down, holding on to his belt as if her life depended upon it. He eased her fingers off his belt, taking her under his arm because she was trembling with fatigue. Guiding her to another large buttressed tree, he sat her down, and pulled off the ruck, retrieving the gallon of water for her to drink from.

He looked at his watch. It was 10:00 a.m. The jungle was bright, the sunlight stopped by the perennial mist that hung in the equatorial region. Glancing at Aly, he saw that she had gone even more ashen. She kept touching her neck. Damn. He turned, kneeling down. Taking her hand away, he rasped, "Let me." She nodded, allowing him to examine the larynx area of her throat. When he

pressed a little too much, she winced. But she didn't pull away. Aly trusted him. He dropped his hands to his knees and studied her.

"You've got some cartilage damage to your larynx. It has to be hurting you."

Aly nodded, feeling stricken. "I'm slowing us down. I'm having trouble breathing because that area's swollen."

"You're doing damn good, Aly. Stop cutting yourself down."

She frowned. "Are they still coming?"

"They will. Being in the stream for an hour will buy us some good time." He glanced down at her soaked leather boots. "How are your feet holding up?"

"Okay."

He cupped her uninjured cheek, smiling into her eyes. "Who taught you to never speak up for yourself, Angel?"

Aly blinked once, digesting the roughened endearment, the warmth radiating from Josh to her. She was exhausted but in those moments she felt as if Josh was invisibly feeding her the strength to get up and move. She knew they had to run some more. His touch was so healing. Even her heart stopped pounding so hard in her chest. His palm was callused, warm, supportive, and without thinking she closed her eyes and laid her cheek into his opened hand, seeking just a moment of safety because that's what radiated from him like sunlight.

Josh closed his eyes. Aly was a trooper and she did have heart. A huge, giving heart with no thought or regard for herself or her own suffering. He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her brow. "We're going to get out of this," he rasped, tucking some strands of her hair behind her ear.

He watched Aly's eyes slowly open, saw the tiredness in them coupled with desire. Josh had no idea what the hell was going on between them except that it was. Now, he had a personal reason to get Aly to safety. Because—general's daughter be damned—he wanted to know this courageous woman a lot better. He smiled faintly as she sat up and rubbed her eyes. Wondering if she wanted to cry, Josh watched her scrub away any telltale evidence.

"Drink more water," he urged her. "We're going to be leaving in a few minutes."

Nodding, Aly did as he instructed. His kiss on her brow had been so unexpected. But so needed. The strength of his hand cupping her cheek, the tenderness of his kiss buoyed her, as if he'd known what she'd needed to keep fighting. And when she looked up into his gold-brown eyes, Aly saw his raw desire. Josh wanted her. She managed a half smile and took his hand when he offered it to her. As she got up, he held her gaze, pulling her near. He released her hand and framed her face.

"I want the right to get to know you, Aly Landon." He searched her face, finding shining radiance in her blue eyes, telling him everything he needed to know. "I don't know what's happening between us, but something is. Something good...so you just hold on to that. Keep fighting with me...."

* * *

Aly was never as grateful as when Josh led them to another large tree after dark. She collapsed between the wooden wings, well hidden. They'd made thirty miles. Taking off her NVGs, she began to rub her knotting calves, the pain excruciating. She'd tried to keep hydrated all day, taken salt tablets, but she knew she was losing a gallon or more of water through constant sweating in this humid blanket of a jungle. She heard Josh rid himself of his gear and set it nearby.

"Cramps?" he asked quietly, kneeling by her feet.

"Yes...terrible ones..." She kept trying to massage out the knot, gritting her teeth in pain.

Josh quickly ran his hands down both her calves. Each was knotted like a fist. "Stand up," he ordered, helping her to rise. She staggered and he placed her hand on one wing of the root. "Hold on."

Aly couldn't see him but knew he still had his NVGs on and could see. He pushed her pant leg up to just below her knee. With his large, roughened hands, he began to knead the cramped leg muscles. Aly bit back a groan of pain. It hurt like hell! But the more he worked on it, the less pain there was. Finally, it disappeared, much to her relief.

“Now,” he murmured, “let’s get this other one....”

The pain was horrendous at first but the magic of his long, strong fingers working out the muscle made her groan with pleasure by the time he was done.

“Thank you,” she said, sinking down, laying her back against the root.

Josh smiled and grabbed two MREs from his ruck. He opened one for Aly, explaining it to her. Then, he pushed his goggles up on his helmet and sat to eat with her.

The night was filled with insects singing. The Amazon was a place of mystery and deadly beauty. There were poisonous snakes, insects, spiders and the biggest predator of them all, the silent jaguar who stalked these jungles in search of food.

They ate without talking. When she was done, Aly gave Josh the empty MRE packet, wanting to leave no clue they were here. She was cold. Her clothes were damp. Even though the temperature never got below fifty-five degrees at night, she was cooling off from running or trotting all day. “Do you have a blanket or something?” she asked, wrapping her arms around herself.

“Cold?”

“Yes.”

Josh settled next to her and opened up his shirt. “Only blanket in town. Interested?” He couldn’t see her or her expression. Never had Josh wanted anything more than to have her against him, sleeping. It was better than nothing and he knew, because of her exhaustive trek, she would be chilled to the bone tonight. People who lived in the jungle acclimated. For him, he’d be warm all night. But not her.

“Yes,” she said, scooting toward him. Once she moved up against him, her head resting on his upper chest, he wrapped the shirt across her upper body.

“Better?” he asked, inhaling the scent of her hair. He held her close. Her breasts were soft against him and he closed his eyes, savoring the rich contact with Aly. He heard her sigh, felt her palm across his heart.

“Yes. Thank you, Josh....”

Her words were slurred, undoubtedly due to the bone-deep tiredness stalking her. Tipping his head back, he knew he shouldn’t concentrate on her soft lushness against him. His skin tightening, his lower body came to life, aching, wanting.

They couldn’t sleep more than a few hours. He put nothing past Duarte’s men who he knew instinctively were following them. His mind ranged over the pattern of their trail.

God, now that he’d found this woman, he didn’t want to ever let her go. He couldn’t explain the powerful protective feelings that rose up in him. They staggered him. There was nothing but kindness and softness to Aly. She had a fighter’s heart. She never complained, just doggedly kept going. She didn’t quit unless her body collapsed in on her first. He gently tightened his arm around her, hearing a softened sigh issue from her lips.

How he wanted to kiss her. Would she allow him that gift? He’d seen it in her eyes this morning. Something life-changing was happening to him. It unnerved him because his marriage had fallen apart two years ago....

Jody Carter, an independent, modern woman, hadn’t wanted a husband who was gone much of the time. Josh recalled having carefully explained his life as a Force Recon Marine, that his deployments were long, often dangerous and that he could be called from his base, Camp Pendleton, to pick up and leave on an hour’s notice and not be able to tell her anything. It hadn’t worked. Their loved had died.

Josh drifted off to sleep, snapping awake every fifteen minutes or so, listening. As long as the insects continued to sing, it meant they were relatively safe. If they stopped, it meant there was a predator nearby. And the two-legged variety was what concerned him the most. Aly had tried her best today. Her father was right: she had one hell of a fighting spirit. To look at her open, kind face,

no one could guess at the steel in her spine. But he'd seen it. Up front and close. She deserved better. She deserved to be happy. And, damn it, Josh knew he was the man who could do just that.

* * *

Josh jerked awake. All his senses were screamingly alert. With a sinking feeling, he realized that it was dawn. They'd slept a lot longer than they should have. As he lifted his head, out of the mists he saw the jaguar no more than six feet away, staring at him. He knew jaguars did not roar; they were the only member of the cat family worldwide who did not. They had a low sound, almost subsonic, and humans couldn't pick up on it. The cat's brownish-yellow coat was spotted with black circles. His tail twitched and the gold of his eyes rimmed as his black pupils grew large.

Josh heard Aly's shallow breathing. She was still asleep. Slowly, he reached downward, toward his KA-BAR knife in the sheath along his right calf. If the jaguar attacked, he didn't dare use his pistol. It would give their position away to Duarte's trackers.

The jaguar gave a low, deep growl. His ears moved back and forth.

Josh pulled the knife into his palm. The cat looked to its right and then back at him. It turned and slowly retreated into the mist along the ground, disappearing silently inside it.

He took a deep breath. God, that was close. Too close. It was barely dawn. Looking at his watch, it was 0500. And then he hesitated. Where was the tropical birdsong at this time of morning? They always sang at dawn. The monkeys were also silent. That was not a good sign. Unsnapping the safety over his pistol, he pulled it out, his hearing acute. With a strong squeeze, he woke Aly. She jerked awake, confused.

"Quiet," he said in a low tone. "Be still..."

And then Josh heard the whispers. Loud. And they carried. In Portuguese. Excited. He felt Aly freeze and tense against him, her fingers taut against his chest. She'd heard them, too. Before he'd settled down with Aly, Josh had created two fake trails of footprints leading away from their tree in case Duarte's men got close to their hide.

Everything was silent. As if Earth herself was holding her breath. The mist was thick, on the ground, nothing but white glowing as the sun rose a little more over the equator. Josh couldn't see anything. But then, neither could Duarte's trackers. And he was sure it was two trackers. The main group was probably miles behind, still sleeping in a camp. He knew they'd have radios and that they'd call in once they'd discovered them. And then, it would be a race. One that he knew Aly could never win.

Mouth tightening, he pulled her close, lips against her ear. "Stay here. Don't move. Don't leave. I'll be back."

Aly nodded and rolled away from Josh, giving him the ability to slowly rise to his feet. He put the pistol in the drop holster and shifted the long, savage-looking KA-BAR knife into his right hand. His face was set, his eyes narrowed, and he moved with utter silence, disappearing in the mist.

Her heart pounded with terror. He was heading toward the men whispering in Portuguese. She knew it was Duarte's men. Oh, God...

Within five minutes she suddenly heard a man scream. There was a low growl. And then another man screamed. There was sudden movement. She couldn't make out what was going on. And then...silence...

Aly jumped as Josh appeared out of the mist. Her eyes widened at the sight of the blood dripping off his fighting knife. Her gaze went to his face. It was expressionless; his eyes glazed with intensity. Putting his finger to his lips, he came to her side as he slid the knife back into its sheath.

"We need to leave in five minutes," he warned her in a guttural tone. "I just killed two of Duarte's men. The rest of them are probably five miles behind."

Fear made her move quickly. By the time she was ready, Josh was waiting for her. Wrapping her fingers around the side of his belt, Aly felt as if the world was slowly closing in on her. Never

before had she wanted to live more than right now. She glanced up at Josh as he chose a route and began a slow trot, her clinging to the belt, getting her balance. Find her rhythm with him.

In the mist of the Amazon, his sharp, rugged profile stood out. His mouth was thinned. His focus intense. And her heart cried and begged that they could escape, could live, to know one another. To love him because he had held her heart gently in his hands. And Aly wanted a chance to explore him...to cherish him...because she was falling in love with Josh Patterson.

Chapter 5

They were in trouble. Josh estimated the main camp of Duarte's soldiers, who had gotten a good night's sleep, unlike them, was five miles behind. No matter how much heart Aly had, they'd never outrun these drug soldiers. He couldn't fault or blame her for her lack of physical strength. It wasn't that she was a woman, because he knew female Recon Marines who could have easily hit a pace akin to his and run him into the ground. The nature of Aly's job wasn't physical and that was their Achilles' heel.

To compensate, Josh used every trick he knew to make their movement through the soft, bare ground beneath the canopy a problem to follow. The best use of a stream was to be in it where they would lose the tracks. But staying in water for an hour made a person's feet waterlogged and blisters would begin to form. His feet had thick calluses from years of being out in the badlands of Afghanistan, but Aly's feet were probably without any protection at all. If she got blisters, she'd be in constant pain. He made it a priority to haul her boots off her by midday when they took a rest and look at them.

Because of the triple canopy, the Amazon basin was fairly clear of obstacle, brush and plants. Sunshine rarely reached the jungle floor so it was easier for them to move with speed. Josh knew the drug soldiers tracking them were toughened men, usually ex-soldiers or hired mercenaries with a black-ops background. These men could haul ass and move out and make nearly fifty miles in a day even with a heavy ruck. They had the hardened, muscular body to do it. So did he. But Aly didn't. He heard her becoming winded and slowed a little. She was game. His heart opened to her. Most of all, Josh didn't want her captured. It hardened his resolve to keep her safe and protected.

When had he started falling for this woman? How the hell had it happened? She was a package, an objective, an op. Not someone to get emotionally entangled with. And yet, he had. Cursing mentally, Josh knew when it had happened: when he'd seen her photo. And then, hearing the father tell him of the life-changing accident, Aly the only survivor. He'd grown up on a working cattle ranch in Texas. Women on those ranches were like Aly. They were tough, they didn't whine, they just dug in and did what had to be done without complaining. There was so much he didn't know about her. So much he wanted to know.

* * *

Aly was relieved when she felt Josh slow down. It meant a break. Her throat ached and she was sure that her larynx was, indeed, injured. If she got out of this alive, she hoped she wouldn't need surgery. As a nurse, she hated surgery, feared it. So much could go wrong. Not every nurse felt that way, but she did, memories of her weeks in casts in the hospital brutal reminders along with the pain.

She felt Josh grip her hand and take it from his belt. His hand was warm and sweaty, but steady as she curled her fingers around his.

There was another of those huge trees and he led her behind the wall of wooden wings. She was grateful these trees were everywhere. The only problem with them for her was their roots, which always snaked out across the surface some thirty or forty feet from the trunk. And leaves that had fallen earlier would cover up the thin root and she'd trip over it. Aly had lost count of how many times she'd tripped. Every time, Josh would stop and catch her before she fell.

So far, Josh had been there for her. Unlike her father. Unlike the man she'd fallen in love with who'd betrayed her... When she'd found out Dr. Stephen McKeon was married and had two children, her world had been torn apart. Men lied.

“We can take a short break,” Josh said, listening to the jungle sounds around him. So far, they were normal. That meant the men hunting them weren’t close. Not yet. But it would happen sooner or later.

Aly sat, her face glistening with sweat, strands of her ginger-colored hair sticking to her temples and cheeks. She gave him a shake of her head.

“You look like this is a breeze,” she muttered.

Josh grinned and began unlacing her combat boot. Her boot was damp between his hands. “It’s called conditioning. Don’t worry, you’re doing okay. I want to check your feet out this morning. We’ve been in water for two days straight. I worry about blisters.” He pulled the boot off. Her sock was damp.

“They’re okay,” she said, trying to pull her foot out of his hand. “Really, Josh, they’re fine....”

Scowling, he pulled off her sock. The heel of her sock was bloodred. “Aly, why didn’t you say something?” he demanded, giving her a pleading look. Gently turning her foot, he noticed a huge blister had developed and then ripped open on the back of her heel. Her skin was wrinkled, ripe for them.

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