

## Excerpt 11 - Heart of a jaguar

Jack and Alexis rode the top of the ridge, and came to the edge of a precipice. Looking out over the vast panoramic view of a grand forested valley to the north, there was also an awe-inspiring three-hundred foot cliff of limestone to the west, its immense white face pockmarked with hundreds of caves. A solitary king vulture in magnificent plumage of white, black, and red, hovered effortlessly on the thermal updrafts. Loosening their reins, they allowed the horses to graze while they talked.

Jack tried to validate her. "You've only done what you had to do."

"I've told that to myself a thousand times," Alexis replied. "There's no comfort in it. What I want is to be vindicated, to be understood."

"Emerson said 'to be great is to be misunderstood.'"

"It's more than being misunderstood. Innocence is never important to the guilty, but it is critical to the falsely-accused. Sometimes I wish I could tie Max to a chair, tape his mouth shut, and tell the world what really happened."

"Why don't you?" Jack said, with a smile. "Tell the world, express yourself. Write it all down, the whole story. The jungle and the injustice. Survival of the fittest. Perhaps you'll get your vindication, with interest, and inspire others at the same time."

"Me?" Alexis shrugged modestly. "You're the role model. You're the adventurer. You're the one who's larger than life."

"Don't sell yourself short. I know you feel that way about me, but did you ever stop to think how many have been influenced by you? Think of the inspiration you have provided to hundreds of tourists here on your horseback rides, the sense of wonder and fantasy. I've ridden the trails, I've experienced it myself, and I've read their comments in your little guest book. What's more, I know the context of their lives and how they assimilate the experience after the fact. Those people return to their big cities, their jobs, their computers, and their otherwise fatuous little lives, but they go back with renewed faith in their own abilities. Don't you see that you have shown them the kind of reality that can be accomplished when someone dares to dream?"

"I... don't know what to say," she stammered.

"Think about the abuse issue," said Jack. "Thousands of women are abused by their husbands. Battering is a disease; it ravages American society. Don't you realize how reading your story could inspire them to do something, to take action? You could save lives. And," he said, lovingly, "you have inspired me as well."

"You?" Alexis looked at him incredulously. "In what way?"

"I have known many fascinating people in my life: writers, photographers, inventors, athletes, the famous, the wealthy, super models, movie stars – even a couple of presidents and kings. I've had many cherished friends, young and old, men and women both. I've had countless lovers, and have been involved in hundreds of relationships. But you are especially dear to me, Alexis, because you are one of the most vital people I have ever known. Like me, you refuse to be anything less than unstoppable. You act the part until you feel the part if necessary, but you still keep going, despite all odds, and for that I love you. You have the soul of a poet and the heart of a jaguar. You are one of the most precious beings in my life, and they are less in number than the fingers of one hand."