

Spirit Song, Cape of the Red Jaguar

©Sherry Janes 2010

Sample Chapters

Chapter Eight

He tried to keep them in the middle of the river. The current was running too slowly now which Rafael knew should not be happening. He checked the river's depth with one of the oars, but it did not touch bottom. At times he saw low-hanging branches, ghostly still and dripping in the thick fog. There wasn't a whisper of a wind. An unnatural calm saturated the foggy landscape. Occasionally, ghostly lights moved in the distance, but they were not the village fires he hoped to see. They slowly floated through the odor of something sickly sweet burning somewhere. That he didn't know what it was bothered Rafael. What is this? he asked his guide.

Don't worry. Follow the jaguar, Ayar said.

Follow the jaguar? The red jaguar? He glanced at Christina, asleep on the floor just three feet from him. The fog was so thick he could no longer see the bow of the boat, just twenty-two feet ahead. *I will if I can see him, he said to his guide, but I'd like to know why.*

He knew the boat must have drifted away from the main part of the river and into one of the many side streams that dead end several miles in. They weren't lost exactly. He just wouldn't be able to see where they were until morning when, hopefully, the sun would rise and the fog would be gone. But he knew that fog like this could last for days.

The current slowed to almost nothing and the boat finally bumped into a sandbar where it stopped. Rafael grabbed the anchor and stepped out of the boat, looking for something more solid than the sandbar to hook it over. They were only a few feet from shore. He secured it around a tree trunk and got back in the boat before Christina could find him gone.

With this done, he sat on the floor, his back against the stern and pulled Christina to him, making sure his machete was close. She awoke a little, just enough to ask him where they were.

"We're against the shore. It's foggy again, but we're okay. Go back to sleep, *señorita*," he whispered.

She sat up, trying to see. "It feels strange. Supernatural. I can't even see the stars." Her face took on a dreamy look. "Even when I was flying. . . ."

"Flying?" he said softly, his eyes wide.

“Yes, on the big white bird.” She stared into the fog, seeing something he did not. “I went through a tunnel and then came out of it. But I don’t remember where it was exactly,” she said, still staring. “I got off the bird,” she said and suddenly looked at him. “You were there, Rafael, but I don’t know what we were doing.” Her gaze softened. “There was some blood, on me and on the bird when I got off.” She was silent for a moment more. “That’s all I remember.” She looked at him, alert again. “What do you think that means?”

“When was this?” he asked.

“It’s a dream I had. I think. Yesterday or the day before. I don’t know for sure. I just remember it.”

“You know about the shaman’s journey, don’t you? I think you’re remembering what happened to you when our friends were working over me. It’s trying to work its way into your consciousness.”

“Why?”

“Journeying is a way to explore the spiritual world, or to make contact with your guardian spirits and power animals. It also is a way to learn, to recover lost energy and heal. In this case, for you, I think it’s something to heal.”

“Like what?”

He turned to face her. “What happened to you in the Pemon village, Christina?” he said gently.

Christina couldn’t look at him. Her breath deepened and her face paled. A fine sweat formed on her forehead. “Ah. . . .” she said in a tiny voice. “It wasn’t. . . .” Her arms crossed over her stomach. “I can’t. . . .” she said, trying to keep control. “Oh God,” she said, jumping up and leaning over the side where she vomited up what little she had eaten. Suddenly weak, she slid down to the floor, breathing in deep gasps. “You must be really tired of me throwing up all the time,” she said weakly.

“Shhhh,” he said. “I think it is you who is tired, Christina. Rest now. And do not worry.” He pulled her close to him again. She curled into him like a frightened child, drawing her knees up to her chest and holding onto the cape. He could not see if there was blood when she vomited this time. He gave her a little water and tried to wipe her face. It was worse than he thought. But he wouldn’t push it now. She fell asleep that way, with Rafael’s strong arms around her and the natural rocking of the boat quieting her.

Darkness came swiftly. There was nothing he could do until morning when it would at least be light. In total darkness, Rafael gently shifted Christina so he could stand and began the chant that would protect them from whatever unearthly beings inhabited this part of the river. Something very foul had happened here. How long ago, he didn’t know. But he would not allow

it to harm them. He spread the cape over both of them, hoping its magic would protect them both.

Rafael stayed awake watching, as the lights in the distance grew closer, then appeared to dance and finally go out, only to reappear in another spot. He heard something in the water far behind them, then listened as it left the water and trotted away on shore. He heard laughter echoing through the trees, a thin, tragic laugh that made even his flesh crawl. When he felt a dark wind brush his arm and shoulder, he began a new, more powerful chant, one that would keep away intruder energy. He called to his own spirit helpers, asking them to keep guard. As if in answer, he heard the distant growl of the jaguar.

He was not able to get whatever had happened to Christina out of his mind. *Dios Mio! How did a female anthropologist from Minnesota end up in that village, with that bastard as chief?* She'd not had a chance. From what she'd said that first day, she'd been sold by her guide to Imoro, the Pemon chief. He had some good ideas about what happened after that. They all made him want to kill Imoro, the bastard son of a Yanomami warrior, who had lied and murdered his way to chieftom. How Christina had survived as long as she did said a lot about her ingenuity and her instincts for survival. He was sure the University of Minnesota didn't offer training in that.

He'd only gone to Imoro's village with his brothers because he wanted the time in the forest to search for plants and herbs and because his brothers came along and thought it would be fun. They were shocked to find a young, white woman lashed to a tree, waiting to be tossed into the steaming volcano. And steaming was all it was doing, at least at first. That it erupted was a complete surprise to everyone. The chief had been putting on a show to keep himself in power; Rafael knew that.

He pulled her closer into him and kissed the top of her head. She didn't let him do that when she was awake. Yet. She would get through the healing ceremony, he knew, but it could be a terrifying experience for her. He hoped to lessen that and help her understand what was happening. But how he would help a North American urbanized female, anthropologist or not, undergo a shamanic healing with what he knew could happen, he wasn't yet sure. Without any doubt, it would be a life-changing event for her. And she'd had plenty of those lately.

He fell asleep still holding her close, stroking her hair and singing her the same lullaby he'd played on his flute for her just a few nights ago. He wondered what his mother would think about her when he brought her home. But that was simple: she'd be thrilled that he had actually found a woman that was willing to go home with him.

He awoke two hours later. Christina was restless, pushing him away, fighting him and trying very hard to scream, yet she was still asleep. Finally, a strangled scream escaped her throat and she woke up, looking wild-eyed at Rafael. And still, he didn't ask, just held her, and spoke softly to her in Spanish, which calmed her and put her back to sleep.

Imoro would pay for this, if he were not dead already. He knew it would come to the heinous chief on its own; Rafael would have to do nothing. But down deep in his gut, he wanted badly to help it along.

Chapter Nine

There was no dawn; the darkness simply receded slowly until Rafael could see his surroundings. The fog remained, curling and swirling around the boat, clearing enough to see the water, and then shrouding it again as if it were alive.

Rafael found Christina already awake but still curled into him with the cape pulled up to her chin. Her eyes were puffy but no longer red and she seemed better. Sleep had submerged the memories trying to come out.

“This is creepy, hero,” she said softly when she noticed he was awake. “Why do I feel like something’s about to happen?”

“I can’t say yet. But I feel like that, too. You are feeling better?”

“Better is relative, but yes, I think so. Being in daylight helps, even if it’s still foggy. Where are we?” she asked. “Do you know?”

“I’m not sure. We left the main part of the river. That much I know. We’re in one of the many branches that simply dead end. But there is something here that I don’t like.”

“Me too,” she said, moving even closer to him. “Do you think whoever was shooting arrows at us will find us here?”

“Probably not.”

“Do we just have to wait?”

“Before we can move, yes,” he stood up, making sure the cape stayed close to Christina. “But, we can have breakfast. Mangos, guavas or plums?” He held up some of what the *Indios* had left for them. “Or fish?”

“Oh boy. Two courses. One of the plums, please, and maybe you’d fix a mango for me. You know just how to do it,” she said, accepting it from him. “I don’t suppose. . . .”

“No, *señorita*, there is no coffee or cinnamon rolls. I promise one day to serve you breakfast in bed at my mother’s house with the coffee made from the very best coffee beans she roasts herself.”

“I’ll look forward to that,” she said, offering him a smile. “Tell me about your family, Rafael. You said you had five brothers?”

“I do. Miguel, Gabriel, Mateo, Tomas, and Pablo.”

“Mateo is—Matthew? You’re all named after people in the Bible. Do you have a nickname?”

He smiled. “Just ‘Rafe’ sometimes.”

“Rafe. I like that. Rhymes with ‘safe,’ which is how you make me feel, at least some of the time. Are your brothers married?”

“Three of them are, to Consuela, Mercedes, and Ramona, all trying to get me married. Or they were. I think they have given up.”

Christina laughed. “What do your brothers do?”

“Gabriel is a psychologist. Tomas, a teacher. Mateo works for the government. Pablo is into computers. Gabe, Tomas, and Mateo work very hard to keep their wives in jewelry and dresses!”

“That’s not what you want, I know,” she said.

“You see how I live, and what I love. Women like that are not interested in it, or in me, once they see that. I need someone who . . .” he looked into her wide-open brown eyes. “Can live it with me, someone who is happy in jeans and,” he looked at her bare feet, “can live without the latest style of shoes.”

He stared at her silently. *Someone who is not afraid to help fight a crocodile or talk to Indios she thinks might kill her.*

“I’d be happy with clean underwear and some sandals about now,” she said, brushing the bottoms of her very dirty feet.

He had to laugh and she laughed with him, until something bumped the boat, making it turn in the water.

“What was that?” she asked.

Rafael peered over the edge on both sides and saw nothing.

“Crocodile?” she asked.

“Maybe,” he said. “But I don’t think so.”

The fog thickened around them again, and then cleared toward the bow, now pointing directly toward shore. Faint noises filtered through the fog from a distance.

“How strange,” she said. “It sounds like. . . .” She strained to listen. “Metal. Or some kind of hammering.”

The fog cleared until they could see well onto the shore in front of the bow.

“It’s almost like the fog wants us to go,” she said. “That’s too creepy.” She stood up and held Rafael’s arm, which he instinctively put around her.

He was not listening to her, but trying instead to see what forces might be causing this. He saw nothing and felt nothing, no dark force at work, and it was that fact that allowed his decision to go forward. The guides would let him know if it were otherwise.

“Christina, there is something out there.” He looked at her. “Something real. But I cannot imagine what it is. There should be nothing there but the forest and its inhabitants.”

Clanking noises echoed through the forest.

“You want to go see what it is, don’t you?” she asked.

“I feel like we are supposed to go. But. . .” he looked at her. “We do not have to. In fact,” he said, looking at her bare feet. “You don’t have any shoes. And we may not be able to find our way back to the boat.”

Rafael was giving her excuses if she wanted them. He knew that darker thoughts still swam in her subconscious, and whatever was out there could make them explode.

“Well, I have these,” she reached under the pile of palm fronds and pulled something out. “I made them for myself yesterday afternoon. They sort of tie around my feet. What do you think?” She tied a makeshift sandal made from the palm fronds she had been weaving onto her left foot and held it up.

“You did that?” He held her foot and examined it. “Quite amazing.”

“What about your wound? You’re not exactly healed up yet, you know,” she said, lightly poking the resin covering his wound and examining the bruising. “Does it hurt?”

“A little, yes. Otherwise I am fine.”

She examined his chest more closely, then felt his forehead. “Hmmm,” she said, making him laugh.

“You are *el doctor* now?” he said.

“You’re the one that knows the way home. I prefer you healthy. And I’ll stay with you until we are out of here.”

“Christina, I would not leave you here alone. We don’t have to go. But. . .” He looked toward shore.

“Are you kidding? If I don’t want to go, you’ll just pout all day! No way, hero, I’m going with you. You know how to survive,” she said.

He grinned and taking her face in his hands, kissed her hard.

“Damn it! I wish you wouldn’t do that!”

“You do not wish that. You like it,” he said.

“I do not!” she said emphatically, trying to lie as convincingly as possible.

Rafael slipped the strap for his machete over his shoulders and fastened it. He dug through his bag, pulled out several things and stuffed them into his pockets, then put the folded cape into his bag and tucked it under the seat in the stern. He poked under the palm fronds, talking to himself. “Just maybe . . . ah! They did! Another calabash!” he said, and held up another large gourd with a looped cord.

Christina tied on her other makeshift shoe as Rafael reached over the side and held the calabash in the water to fill, then looped the cord over an oarlock.

He hopped out of the boat onto the sandbar. He motioned for her to let him pick her up and carry her to shore.

“I can walk now, hero,” she said, pointing to her palm-wrapped feet. “And you shouldn’t risk opening that up again.” She pointed to his wound.

“I am saving you from the sea creatures. This is three times now that I have saved your life.”

“Oh, *please*,” she said. “You just like an excuse to get your hands on me.”

“I will not deny it. Grab the water, please. What does it mean, ‘pout?’” he asked.

“It means you’d sulk around and be crabby all day.”

“Crabby?”

“Like I was yesterday morning.”

“Oh. I am never like that.” He set her down on the bank, took the water from her and looped the cord over his shoulder.

She took a few steps, testing her new shoes.

“Hmm. They may last a while if I’m careful. The good thing is, there are lots of palm fronds.”

“They may be slippery when you walk,” he said, watching her.

She took a few steps. “They seem okay. I’ll risk it,” she said.

The fog closed in around the boat, making it invisible to them. They looked at each other.

“Are you sure? It could be dangerous.”

She laughed. “When hasn’t it been dangerous for me in the last several weeks? A volcano, sea serpents, crocodiles . . .” She looked pointedly at him. “Sex-starved men.”

The clanging sound of metal hitting stone suddenly cut through the fog. As if on cue, the fog cleared in that direction revealing a path with logs embedded into the ground at regular intervals. A shadow crossed the path just where the fog closed in several yards ahead. An animal perhaps.

Like a jaguar, Ayar said.

“This path shouldn’t be here,” Rafael said.

“Well, it is,” she said, “and we might as well follow it.” She stood up straight, took a deep breath and took a step toward the logs.

Rafael grabbed hold of her shirt and pulled her back. “You do not walk in front, *chiquita*. I do. Here,” he said, placing something over her head and around her neck, then smiled and tucked it into her cleavage.

“Hey!” She said, pulling his hand out of her shirt, and then reaching for the end of the necklace. It was a whistle on a cord.

“If we become separated, blow it. I’ll find you.”

“You’re kidding,” she said.

“No, I’m not. And take this as well.” He handed her his hunting knife. “It may come in handy.” He buttoned up her shirt all the way.

She unbuttoned the top button. “That’s uncomfortable. Why are you worried about that? Do you think some ghost will be interested in my cleavage?”

“It’s not *fantasmas* I am thinking about. I’ve no idea what’s out there and neither do you! You will stay behind me unless I tell you otherwise. And beginning now, talk only in a whisper, if you must talk at all. *Entiende?* You understand?”

Christina looked hurt. He lifted her chin. “We don’t need to alert anyone to our presence. That’s what I meant.” He kept staring into her eyes.

“Don’t you dare kiss me again.”

He moved toward her slowly making her back into a palm tree. He leaned over her until his nose was just an inch from hers and lifting her chin, stared directly into her eyes. He spoke in a low, sexy tone with such strong intention it resonated into Christina’s spine, sending shivers down her back. “The next time I kiss you, *señorita*, you will not want me to stop.” He paused for effect. “For now, you will stay close behind me. Do whatever I tell you and do it fast. And no, I am not kidding. Do you understand?”

She hesitated for a moment or two, then whispered, “*Sí, señor!*” and saluted.

“Christ, you are impossible,” he said.

“Don’t forget evil. Impossible and evil,” she whispered.

“God!” he said. “Remember what I said.” He turned and stepped onto the path. He took a few steps, then checked to make sure she was behind him. In the distance, he heard the jaguar’s screeching call.

* * *

Want to read the rest?

Order directly from my page on Independent Author Network

Receive a \$4 discount by ordering through my website, www.sherryjanes.com