

Royal intrigue and child trafficking in remote Ratanakiri Province,
Cambodia.

Taming the Savage Monsoon

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CHAPTER EIGHT

TUESDAY, MAY 25, PART I

Olga sat motionless in the canvas sling chair, her eyes closed. The deep verandah of the wooden house was secluded in the waning gloom of early morning, but readily admitted the sounds of chanting from the nearby pagoda, Wat Sambor Meas. Catching a stronger than usual whiff of *prahok*, the pounded paste of fish left to ferment underground until its aroma brought tears to the eye, Olga coughed her way back from her daydreaming. *Prahok* was too strong a taste for her own liking, but since her neighbors in the thatched huts in the compound below enjoyed it with every meal, there was no way of escaping the caustic fumes.

Olga had spent the night in that chair, not an unusual occurrence. Although she'd picked up the pieces of her life and didn't waste time dwelling on 'what ifs,' somehow along the way

Taming the Savage Monsoon

she'd forgotten how to sleep. Especially at night, when the demons slunk closer to her bed. More often than not, Olga's sleep quota was met through afternoon siestas.

She stood, glanced up at the gilt-edged clouds that still shrouded the early morning sun, and began her morning stretching routine. *Only way to keep the old body young*, she muttered to herself, *and the best time to do it is when I'm half asleep*.

While Olga stretched herself awake, Sam was being awakened less gently. "Wake up, Sam, you must come quickly." In one smooth movement, Sam pushed the pink nylon mosquito net to one side and rolled to his feet, landing in a crouch with his big hands in a defensive karate position, his eyes wide and wary.

"Please, hurry," Peter repeated, averting his eyes and thinking that it was lucky he'd come to call Sam rather than sending Annie. Sam was stark naked and erect with early morning vigor. Peter kept his eyes on the open window.

Sam followed Peter's gaze. "What is it, Peter?" he asked. As he spoke, he wound a sarong around his midriff and the two men moved to the window. A bright blue *cyclo* stood just outside the rusted gate of the orphanage. Its driver was bending over the seat, fretting over a small figure huddled in the passenger seat.

"You're right—somebody's in trouble." The last words were shouted over Sam's shoulder as he scrambled down the steps and out the door.

In the street, Peter gingerly pulled the straw mat to one side. "*Lok, lok, juey pong!*" The urgency in the *cyclo* driver's voice was surprisingly well-contained, and he was speaking in a hoarse whisper. "*Knyom klaj geh jap! Yok wia dtao knong, pliam, knyom ot nou ban dteh!*" Sam, not yet conversant in Khmer, continued to examine the figure huddled on the *cyclo* seat. It was human, a girl, a small child he guessed, by the size.

As the *cyclo* driver made room for Sam to get a closer look, Peter whispered a translation of the driver's words: "He says we should

Taming the Savage Monsoon

get her inside fast, Sam. He's afraid of the police if he's caught bringing her here."

Sam lifted the scarf and saw that, despite her diminutive form, the girl was not really a child. Her face was bruised, and blood stains soaked her tattered shirt and sarong. Her feet were bare and callused, with dirt engrained in the cracks on the bottoms of the soles. The nails had been freshly polished with bright pink lacquer.

"Help me," Sam said simply. Together, he and Peter lifted the girl from the seat. The weight of her body had barely cleared the cracked vinyl cushion before the driver leapt onto his seat and pedaled away, his brakes squealing in the quiet dawn.

"*Lok! Mok winh!*" Sam yelled in broken Khmer.

"Sam, no," Peter cautioned. "There's no use calling him back. He doesn't know anything—probably he just found her on the street. He doesn't want to be involved, that's for sure."

As they moved inside the gates, the girl cradled in Sam's arms, Peter took care to slide the gate's bolt home behind them. "But he could be a witness," Sam protested, "or at least tell us what happened."

But Peter was shaking his head. "This kind of accident, there are no witnesses, Sam."

"Are you sure the driver didn't say anything else, Peter? He must have known something." But Peter was still shaking his head.

Inside the orphanage, Sam placed the girl gently on the cushions of the rattan couch. As Peter continued to explain the dangers the *cyclo* driver—and in fact, they themselves—could face if they became involved, the girl moaned and muttered a few words in a clicking language that was clearly not Khmer. "She's not Cambodian," Sam said wonderingly.

The small dark eyes fluttered open briefly, closed, then opened again, staying open as the girl took a deep breath. As she returned to consciousness and became aware of the two men looking down on her, her eyes widened in terror. A thin high-pitched wailing shivered from her throat, and her body began to quiver uncontrollably.

"Get Annie and *Om*," Sam said softly. Not wanting to make things worse for the girl, he stepped away, but continued his

Taming the Savage Monsoon

examination from a distance. The bruising beginning to show on the girl's neck and arms, and the stains, thick and dark on the skirt of her sarong, left Sam with the certainty that the girl had been brutally raped.

Annie and the housekeeper rushed into the room moments later, gasping when they saw the girl looking up from the couch with the despairing eyes of a rabbit watching a hawk circling in the sky above it. Their voices soothing, speaking the soft reassurances that women know so well in every language, they knelt beside the couch. "Peter, bring me a basin of warm water and some clean cloths," Annie said softly. "And Sam, you've got to get help." As she spoke, Annie kept her eyes fixed on the girl's, rubbing her arms with a soothing rhythmic stroking that seemed to calm her.

"But Annie," Sam said, "Peter says we shouldn't call the police. But she needs more than just warm water! Shouldn't we get her to Calmette?" Calmette, the city's largest hospital, seemed, even as he spoke, to be an unlikely solution. The girl was indeed in need of medical treatment, but she needed it to be accompanied by the kindness and understanding that she was already getting from *Om* and Annie.

"No police, Sam. Don't you know anyone from those meetings you go to that you'd trust to help us?"

And suddenly, Sam remembered Olga. He hadn't seen her since their meeting the week before, but he was certain that she would know what to do. But would she come?

Hell, he thought, as Olga's phone rang for the eighth time. The worst Olga could do was say no. But she couldn't even do that if she didn't answer her damned phone.

When she finally answered, Olga's "Hello!" was exasperated, not, as Sam thought, because he'd awakened her, but because she was still dripping from the shower. "Who is this?" she demanded.

Sam explained as briefly and clearly as he could, while Olga listened in silence. "It's Sam Jarrett. I'm calling from our orphanage in Toul Tompong. A few minutes ago a *cyclo* driver banged on my gate and delivered a bloody parcel that I am just not equipped to deal with." The sound of the girl's wailing could be heard in the background as he continued. "We're ready to help, but

Taming the Savage Monsoon

we don't know what to do. And she isn't letting Peter or me get anywhere near her. Can you help?"

Olga broke in on him. "Have you called anyone? The police?" To Sam's emphatic denial, she said, "Good. I'll pick up a doctor I know on the way. She's dealt with this sort of thing before." And the connection was cut.

A wave of relief washed over Sam, and he began to attend to details that would make the girl—Meng, Annie had called her—more comfortable. The commotion had awakened the rest of the children, and they were crowded around the door of the room, eyes wide and mouths clamped shut. Sam shepherded them gently out the back of the house, turning them over to Mathak to get started on breakfast. When he returned to the front room, he was carrying an armful of kapok pillows and three brightly colored blankets. "I've got Valium, too," he said to Annie, holding up a small amber vial, "but Olga said she'd be here with a doctor in minutes. I'd rather we wait and see what she thinks before we give her any medicine."

Olga's stentorian voice, when he finally heard it in the courtyard below, brought a smile of relief to Sam's worried face. By that time he'd brewed a carafe of strong coffee and started a pot of *bobor* cooking. He'd quickly adopted this traditional Khmer response to fatigue or illness or misfortune, a thin rice gruel he'd been offered upon his arrival, "to help you get strong again, after your flight," he'd been told.

At the sound of footsteps on the stairs, Sam stopped his pacing, and waited while Olga and a tall, thin Khmer woman clutching a bulging olive drab canvas duffle bag approached. Olga made no introductions and limited her greeting to a terse, "Where is the girl, Sam?"

Sam gestured toward the open door of the living room, and followed Olga as she and the doctor moved into the room. Olga's confidence and empathy were obvious, and her matter-of-fact approach to the injured girl was perfect. With no hesitation, as if she'd been put on earth for just this purpose, Olga knelt beside the couch and wrapped the girl in her arms, rocking her as a mother

Taming the Savage Monsoon

comforts a crying baby. After a few moments in Olga's arms, the girl's whimpers collapsed into heaving sighs.

While Olga comforted Meng, the doctor moved a small wooden table from the side of the room to the foot of the couch. With a flip of her wrist, she opened a clean cloth and spread it over the top of the table, then proceeded to select items from the depths of her bag and place them in precise positions on the cloth. To Sam's surprise, the woman hummed softly as she prepared her instruments. He was further puzzled to recognize the tune—*No One Shall Sleep* from Puccini's *Turandot*—as the moving solo that brought Sydney Schanberg close to madness in *The Killing Fields*.

Seeing Sam's glazed stare, Olga said, "Some coffee for us, Sam? I will take mine white. Kek takes hers black and sweet."

"It's already brewed, Olga," Sam said. "And I've got a pot of *bobor* cooking, too."

Smiling at Sam's eagerness to be of help, Olga laughed. "That is a good boy, Sam. Do not bring it in, though—keep it hot until we come out."

Sam closed the door softly behind him and walked to the kitchen. *What a woman*, he thought, amazed by Olga's competence and compassion, and flooded with gratitude that she'd come when he'd called.

Nearly thirty minutes passed before Olga emerged from the room. Kek, the doctor, remained inside with the girl. Olga's face looked even more worried now than it had a half hour earlier. "How bad is it?" Sam blurted, "I mean, I know she's been raped. But is she going to be okay?"

Olga nodded slowly. "Well, she survived. That is a good start. There do not seem to be any serious internal injuries, and she does not have any broken bones. She has lost a lot of blood, and there is some tearing. There is always tearing, when this happens. But tears heal more quickly than the emotional scars. I hope the bastard does not have AIDS, because with all those tears she would be infected for sure. Kek will give her many antibiotics anyway, to keep her from getting any other infections."

Sam's face suffused with emotion. "But she's so young! What kind of man would brutalize a child like that?"

Taming the Savage Monsoon

But Olga didn't answer, her mind elsewhere. When she spoke, her voice was soft, but the inflection was hard. "It has been one year," she said. "And now it is starting again."

Sam couldn't believe his ears. "What are you talking about? You mean this has happened before? What are you saying?"

But Olga's eyes were closed, and again she ignored his question. After a moment's, her eyes opened and she looked directly at Sam, her gaze suspicious. "Why did you call me?" she demanded roughly.

Sam was taken aback by this shift in Olga's attitude, and his response was defensive. "I know it sounds stupid, but I couldn't think of anyone else. Maybe I was inspired, I don't know. A sort of inspired panic. My Khmer friends didn't know what to do, especially since the girl doesn't seem to speak much Khmer. And I sure as hell didn't have a clue how to help her."

"You know, Sam, your friends are more clever than you think." Olga said. "They know a lot more about the darkness of Phnom Penh than you—and they know that the way to survive is to stay away from trouble. Being Khmer, they are vulnerable, and they have a lot to weigh before they decide to get involved. They want to protect you, too, I am sure."

Sam accepted her words in silence, his face preoccupied. He got up to stir the *bobor*, then returned to the small table where they sat sipping their coffee. Sam broke the silence a few minutes later. "Olga, I may have called you because I didn't know what else to do. But I know I called exactly the right person. How were you able to find a doctor so quickly? Who are you, Olga?"

Putting the intent of Sam's question aside, Olga held out her hand. "Sam Jarrett, I am Olga Herrin. And you—you were very sensible not to call the police, and not to take little Meng to the hospital," she offered, her face opening like a flower with a growing smile.

But Sam wasn't about to be diverted. "Tell me what's going on, Olga," he demanded, softening his tone by putting a gentle hand on her shoulder.

Again she fixed him with a direct gaze, the light color of her eyes guarding her thoughts. "Sam, I—it is not my story to tell. How can I know that you will not share information that could bring

trouble to people whose lives have already fallen apart? Maybe later....”

Sam persisted. “How much later? Do I have to wait for more of these kids to get brutalized? Or killed?”

Olga eyes widened at the anger in Sam’s voice. She looked at him speculatively, then made a quick decision. “All right. But we cannot talk here.”

She got up and tapped softly before opening the door into the living room. Kek was sitting quietly beside the couch, where Meng slept curled on her side, a delicate hand cupping one cheek. The blankets were smoothed over her, and Kek held the other small hand in her own. “We are going out for noodles, Kek,” Olga whispered, handing her the mug of steaming black coffee. The doctor nodded and waved them on their way.

They walked through the early morning traffic, dodging the motorcycle taxis, ducking beneath dangling electric lines, and ending up in a tiny noodle shop two streets away. An elderly Chinese couple greeted Olga with the enthusiasm of parents greeting a long lost daughter. After ordering iced coffees and *ktiov gok*, dry noodle soup, Sam glanced around the shop. “Are you sure it’s okay to talk here?” he asked. “I don’t even know why I’m asking—couldn’t we have talked at the orphanage?”

Olga laughed. “This is one of the few places I am sure of, Sam. You saw the owners come out to greet us? I rescued their daughter over a year ago. As for the orphanage, well, I do not know. And I do not talk in places I am not sure about. Now sit still and listen. I am about to tell you more than you ever wanted to know about sex, lies, and Cambodia.”

Olga paused to gather her thoughts, then very succinctly explained what she had seen herself, heard from others, or deduced about the serial rapist-killer, who was once again stalking the street children of Phnom Penh.

Sam listened to the details, horrorstruck, until he could stand it no longer. He stood abruptly, knocking over their small table. Oblivious to Olga’s worried question and the shocked faces of the proprietors, he strode from the restaurant.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WEDNESDAY, MAY 26, PART IV

This is the right field...?” Lindsay said, turning to Max with some doubt in her voice. “Definitely,” he said, his face serious, but his voice amused at her concern. “Hoktha’s probably off checking out another part of the reserve. It’s a big area, and there’s a lot to see.” He pointed ahead to a shaded area. “Let’s just make ourselves comfortable, and wait, shall we?”

Max immediately began studying his map, which, Lindsay realized later, probably signaled his own concern over the situation. Determined to stay calm, she refused to listen to the voice in her head that was whispering the warnings of Bopha’s fortuneteller. Instead, she pulled out a tattered paperback copy of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, grateful that she’d thought to stick it in at the last

Taming the Savage Monsoon

minute. Slowly, she sank into the adventures of Little Nell and her grandfather, sipping frequently from her water bottle.

Max's interruption a half hour later dragged her back into the present. "You might want to take it a little easy with that water," he suggested. "We don't want to start dipping into the waterfall unless we absolutely have to. Giardiasis, you know."

She studied him for a moment, wondering if he knew more about their situation than he was admitting. *He's probably just used to contingency planning*, she told herself, determining not to dwell on negatives that she couldn't change anyway.

Dickens held her attention for another hour, and this time the interruption that disturbed their concentration was her stomach rumbling. "Ay-ay-ay, that poor thing. Let me see if I have something for it," Max said, reaching for his pack.

"Thanks, I've got some lunch, too. We could share...but Max, look at the sky," she said, pointing to the horizon, where the sun had already dipped below the mountains. "I don't think we're going to get back tonight." She paused, then added, "What do you really know about Hoktha, anyway?"

He met her gaze, then moved over to sit beside her, wriggling a little to make himself comfortable. "That's better. Well, I met Hoktha through Princess Juliette. It seems they know each other from Paris."

Lindsay ignored the fact that Max had avoided her question, letting herself be distracted by his mention of the princess. "And how did you meet Juliette?" she asked.

"Hard not to, really. The King heard about my work in the Amazon from an old friend of his from the Association of Nonaligned Nations. When he invited me to come here as special advisor on the nature reserve, Juliette was one of the first people he introduced me to. Whenever Queen Monique is away, she serves as a kind of Royal Hostess at the palace, you know."

"She's very beautiful."

"Yes, magnificent. Reminds me of that fishing cat I brought you, wouldn't you say? Could eat me in one gulp, I imagine."

Taming the Savage Monsoon

Max's tone left Lindsay unsure whether Max found this an enjoyable prospect or not. "Did you understand what was going on with the governor this morning?" she asked.

"First tell me what you made of it?" he shot back.

"He's no imbecile," she ventured, "no matter what Hoktha says. And... it seemed to me that he knew Hoktha, or at least understood him pretty well, and that he was afraid of him, somehow. Which made me wonder who Hoktha might be when he's not directing a nature reserve."

"You put together quite a lot, on some pretty scarce evidence, Lindsay," Max said, his eyes keen. "But you may well be right. What else?"

"Well, I know that there are dual heads of government in most provinces. Usually, when the governor is a member of FUNCINPEC, somewhere below him there's a Cambodian Peoples Party Deputy who wields most of the power. I was surprised we didn't meet him, because he would probably have a lot more to say about the nature reserve idea. I'm sure Hoktha would know that. If not, he's awfully naïve, and we may run into trouble getting the province on board with the plans for the reserve."

"I don't think he's naïve, Lindsay. He has powerful connections—that's what makes him think he doesn't have to worry too much about following protocol. Even Juliette seems to be a little afraid of him, which surprises me a lot. I suppose I'm expecting his western education—the one he got before his recent dip into the field of forestry, I mean—to make him rational."

Lindsay laughed. "So am I, Max. We're quite the bigots, aren't we?"

Max checked his wristwatch, then reached into his pack. "Enough of that," he said. "Let's grease ourselves up with repellent and take a walk around the clearing. Maybe there's a track leading off from the other side they might have taken."

After applying the pungent lotion to every square inch of exposed skin, Lindsay got up and dusted herself off. As they strolled along the perimeter of the clearing, keeping in the shade along the forest edge, they listened to the piercing whistles and squawks of the birds just within the foliage. A half hour later they

Taming the Savage Monsoon

had circled the meadow, but there was still no sign of the Land Cruiser or its occupants—and the afternoon had slipped into early evening.

Returning to the top of the glade, they brought out their respective lunches and began a picnic, sharing their food but reserving enough for a second meal. As they ate, Lindsay returned to her questions. “Something else, Max. What was the strange conversation with the driver all about?” she asked him.

“I have no idea,” he said dismissively, speaking around a cracker piled high with herbed cheese. “It might have been important, but I’m a lot more worried about those.” Lindsay followed his finger, which pointed into the distance where the mountain of cumulous clouds had darkened and lowered.

“Oh great,” she said. “I thought Hoktha said the weather would be clear all day up here.”

“We need to think about shelter,” Max said. “After that, we can plan our vengeance on Hoktha.”

Lindsay looked at him, realization hitting her with the impact of a battering ram. “You don’t think they’re coming back, do you?” Several terrible possibilities crossed her mind in rapid succession. Their car had been waylaid by bandits! Hoktha’s so-called guards had turned on him! The villagers had taken the Land Cruiser hostage!

Max’s voice intruded, reading her thoughts of disaster. “I’m sure it’s nothing, Lindsay. Hoktha probably took his boys off for some booze, to reward their loyalty or something, and drank too much himself. At some point he’ll remember to send the driver out after us. But in the meantime, well, let’s just be sure we’re prepared.”

He got up and studied the area. “That looks like a good place,” he said pointing to a spot at the top of the clearing. “High ground, so there’ll be good drainage when the storm hits, and the trees will provide some shelter. Let me see what I can rig up.”

“I’ll scout around for some firewood, then,” Lindsay said. “I’d like a campfire, and it will help them find us. Just in case they’re looking.”

“Good idea. It’s probably pretty cool here during the night, anyway. You don’t happen to have a poncho with you, do you?”

Taming the Savage Monsoon

She did, since it was part of UNOIC's regulation kit for fieldwork. She handed it to Max and headed into the forest. Gathering dead branches and twigs as she went, she began to hum. *It's surprising, she thought, how quickly a strange situation begins to feel normal.* She laughed, remembering the affirmation she'd practiced in college. *I am in exactly the right place, doing exactly the right thing, at exactly the right time,* she whispered, bending over to grasp a particularly large branch. Glancing back to see Max hard at work on their shelter, she added thoughtfully, *...with exactly the right person.* Although she felt less certain about the last bit.

It took a surprisingly short time for Lindsay to amass an impressive pile of firewood in a neat stack right beside their campsite. As she returned with the last armful of branches, Max was just covering the shelter with the second poncho. He'd used the first to line the floor of their makeshift tent.

Stepping back to survey his work, he announced proudly, "Just the right size for two, *querida*. Although now that it's done, they'll probably be showing up any minute."

Lindsay cocked her head, hearing a distant rumble, but it was only the growing roar of the wind in the trees—and an echoing crash of thunder. She thought she'd come to an acceptance of their predicament, welcomed it even, while she'd been gathering wood, but out here in the clearing, the sky was wilder, more powerful and threatening. She shivered.

Max looked concerned. "You're cold?" he said.

"No, just expecting to be," she laughed.

He bent down to her woodpile, selecting some small pieces and arranging them in a neat cluster just outside the gap he had left as an entrance to the tent. "You're a bureaucrat, you must have paper," he said.

She scowled at him. "Don't stereotype me, Max, and I won't typecast you. But...I do have some paper." When she looked back at the sky after digging some scraps of paper from her pack, she realized with alarm that the storm had arrived.

The wind swelled to a roar, the canopy of trees thrashing in a frenetic dance. Lightning flashed in jagged spears that jabbed into

Taming the Savage Monsoon

the earth. Their position at the top of the clearing provided a front row view of the majesty of the storm.

"This is going to be fantastic," Max said slowly, his eyes on the gathering heavens. "Come on, Lindsay. We might as well stay dry." He crawled through the opening into their teepee, and, pivoting, held out his hand to her just as the first drops of the storm spattered to the ground. Clutching his hand for balance, she crawled in after him, twisting to avoid landing in his lap. As it was, there was no way to avoid the contact of their legs and shoulders, although it was surprisingly roomy inside. Lindsay realized that she could probably stretch out comfortably if they ended up spending the night here. Max would have to leave his feet outside, she thought, giggling at the picture this would present to any nocturnal visitors. The image of their bodies stretched out in the tiny teepee made her wonder exactly how they would spend the night, whether it would seem awkward or natural.

She flinched as Max brought his hand to her face, gently wiping the raindrops from her cheeks. As the storm increased in force, they craned their necks to watch the show. So far, at least, the inside of the tent was perfectly dry. The ventilation Max had arranged by interweaving branches kept the plastic from feeling stifling, and Max had fastened everything together with almost military precision.

The pounding of the storm was deafening. Lindsay leaned against Max to speak directly into his ear. "Thanks, Max," she murmured, but he just shook his head and smiled, unable to hear her words. Then he held up one finger, signaling her to wait, and reached into the bottom of his pack to pull out a chased silver flask. He opened it and held it up for her inspection. Bending over the neck of the flask, her nose was hit with the heady scent of brandy, very good brandy. She took a swift swallow, feeling the mellow fire burn and numb all the way down. "Perfect," she mouthed, handing the canteen back.

They passed the canteen back and forth, consuming most of its contents before the storm abated to a steady drumming on the roof of their teepee. Max had stretched his body into a loose curve, conforming to the inner perimeter of the teepee, his head propped

Taming the Savage Monsoon

up on his elbow. "There are very good ghost stories in the Amazon, Lindsay," he said, his voice deepened and slowed by the brandy.

Lindsay sat cross-legged against the opposite wall. She looked down at him. "*Digame*," she said, still aware enough to know that the brandy that had slowed Max's speech was filling her with a sense of infinite well-being.

He told her five different stories in all, each one a path for inane conversation, although the last two were decidedly lascivious in nature. Throughout the night, the rain pelted down and the wind howled through the forest. At one point, the lightning struck close enough that they smelled ozone, followed by an instantaneous and violent crack of thunder that sent Lindsay into Max's arms. He squeezed her tightly, then released her and went on with his story.

They continued to sip from Max's flask, achieving a companionable and whimsical drunkenness. He sang a song, a folk song of the Andes, and applauded when she reciprocated with an aria from *Nozze di Figaro*.

By the fifth story, they had reached the dregs of the flask, forgotten their missing vehicle, and were at peace. He fell asleep first, pulling his shirt off and curling up like cat, his pack under his head. The storm had passed, and Lindsay crawled from the shelter to appease her brandy-swollen bladder. Outside, the stars were emerging from the clouds. *I could stay here forever*, she said aloud, before returning to Max's side in the teepee.

The starlight outlined his tousled hair, the rise and fall of his chest. In wonder that even half a flask of brandy had not dulled her libido, she reached out to run her hand over his smoothly muscled torso, the sculpted marble of his chest and shoulders. When she found her hand wandering further, she stopped and spoke sternly to herself. *Take it easy, Lin*, she thought. *In case you've forgotten, you're not supposed to take advantage of the guys you get drunk.*

Oh, all right, you old fuddy-duddy, she responded to her conscience, this time speaking aloud. *Go ahead then, go to sleep, and throw away the best opportunity you've had in years.* She giggled slightly as she curled herself into the hollow of Max's shoulder, realizing the humor in being torn between gratitude for

Taming the Savage Monsoon

Max's courtesy—and her frustration that she wasn't being swept up into that magnificent chest.

They were both awoken by furtive movements just outside their shelter. As can happen in the wilderness, Lindsay found herself immediately alert despite having only a few hours of sleep. Looking up, she saw that dawn was just breaking, the gray tones of the early morning sky tinged with delicate pinks and golds. Already, the earth and the air were growing warmer. Looking around, she saw that Max was awake as well, his head tensed and listening.

Moving soundlessly, he shifted toward the entryway and looked out. Joining him at the door, she gasped. Three feet away sat a sunbear, studying their pile of firewood. He looked like a loveable little teddy bear, but Lindsay knew that the sunbear was another endangered animal prized by the Chinese for its medicinal powers. The bear sat sedately, cleaning itself with an incredibly long tongue.

"They can catch termites with that tongue," Max whispered, his breath warm in her ear. "That firewood you brought in was probably full of bugs; that's what brought him here." They sat motionless, watching, but the bear had sensed them. It turned, looked them straight in the eyes, then rolled onto all fours and lumbered off into the forest.

Lindsay stretched luxuriantly, feeling as rested as if she'd slept on a down duvet. "I don't even miss my coffee," she said.

Max was sitting up, pulling on his boots. "Come on, let's get to the waterfall before they come back," he grinned. "Can you imagine how gorgeous it's going to be in this magical light?" He scrambled from the tent, extending his hand to help her. He pulled her from the tent easily, without wrenching, and kept her hand clasped firmly in his own as they retraced their steps to the waterfall.

Max looked great. The body she'd traced blindly during the night was even more appealing in the dawn light. His skin glowed with good health and well-toned muscles. The hand holding hers was gentle and strong at the same time.

With a final scramble up the bank, they were there. Max was right—the place was enchanted in the early morning light. Mists swirled above the pools, and a small rainbow wavered in the single

Taming the Savage Monsoon

ray of sun that fell on the spray rising from the falling waters. They stood mesmerized until the rising sun caught them full in the face. Max whooped with exhilaration. "Race you to the bottom!" he cried, clambering over the rocks to the first pool. The mist, rising from the pool, felt warm against Lindsay's skin, warmer than the ambient temperature, a strange sensation.

"I can't wait to get into that water," Max shouted, pausing on a damp rock just above the water to kick off his boots and socks. For a minute he dangled his toes into the water, seeming to ponder something. "Lindsay...I hope it's okay with you if I swim?" he asked politely.

"I'm right behind you," she said, watching Max as he nonchalantly stripped off his pants. She watched his powerful muscles stretch as he leapt from the rocks, landing in the water with a resounding splash. Surfacing, he turned onto his back and floated low in the water, with just his head above the surface.

But Lindsay was no longer watching, suddenly feeling shy. *Oh, no*, she thought. *None of that. This moment will never come again, and you are going to live it.* After pulling off her own shoes and socks, she tugged her t-shirt over her head, then reached back to struggle with the snap of her bra. She had worn, as always, black French lace lingerie, a matching set. It was a conceit and she knew it, but at least it was a hidden one. Usually. While she didn't dare to look directly, her peripheral vision told her that Max was watching her struggles with appreciation.

Suddenly, it seemed that the past twelve hours had prepared her for this new level of intimacy. She became acutely aware of her body and of his, and her awareness translated into a new grace in her movements. Turning to face the pond, she arched her back and reached up, stretching languorously, a soft smile spreading across her face. Slowly, her breasts straining against the lace cups of the bra, she released the clasp and let the bra fall to the ground. Then her hands moved to her belt, smoothly unbuckling it and unfastening her khaki trousers. These, too, she allowed to fall to the ground, raising each leg in turn to release it from the binding fabric. Hooking one finger around the elastic of her panties, she slid

Taming the Savage Monsoon

them to the ground, fully aware of the slim firmness of her body and the glowing paleness of her skin.

Moving closer to the water's edge, she executed a shallow but graceful dive. The water was delicious against her skin, cool but comfortable, like crisp clean bed linens. In a moment, Max was there. He was standing, she realized, although the water was well over her own head. Leaning back to submerge her head into the water, she felt his touch on the back of her neck. As his hand drifted over her shoulder and down her spine, setting her nerves tingling, she watched his face descending. Her last thought, as she felt his mouth moving on hers, was that his lips were softer than the fur of the little *chmar prei*. For those few moments, the world contained nothing but their two mouths, teasing, biting, tasting each other for the first time in many long years.

When she finally opened her eyes, she found him looking down, a somber expression of awe on his face. "You are very beautiful, Lindsay March," he said simply.

"So are you," she said without thinking, trembling a little, yearning for his touch. That special link had definitely not disappeared during the night. She felt Max's hand sliding across her skin, propelling her into shallower water. He guided her around like a floating boat, one hand at her neck, the other now low on her belly. As he came to a halt in the chest-high water, he set her upright and brought both arms swiftly to her back, cupping her buttocks before moving further down the backs of her legs. Gently, knowingly, he pulled her legs toward him, parting them and guiding them around his waist. From below, she could feel his insistent erection nudging against her.

Lindsay arched her back, biting off the quick intake of breath as he moved his palms up over her ribs and cupped her breasts. She held her breath, keeping herself high in the water until his arms went around her again and his strength pulled her up from the water, her breasts level now with his mouth. His lips and tongue were hot against her nipples, and she tightened her legs around him, sensing the hardening of her own erection as she felt the tip of his penis against her. Cradling Max's head against her breast, she moved with him as he guided her body down to join with his, his

Taming the Savage Monsoon

hands urging her hips steadily forward until he was entirely, fully, inside her.

They were both ready. The tension that had been building since the King's reception, when they'd seen each other for the first time in over a decade, had reached the boiling point. Now his hands set the rhythm, his mouth fastened on one breast, as they danced the world's oldest dance beneath the spray of the pounding waterfall. Their mutual explosion came as the sun's full glory burst through the canopy above.

Finally, Max released her, raising his hands into the air with a victorious whoop, then collapsing backward into the water. Lindsay's knees were shaking with her own release, but a sense of wellbeing flooded her as she remembered her mantra of the previous evening: *the right time, the right place, the right person—and doing the right thing.*

But as she slowly returned to earth, she became aware of the fading mist, the warming air, the buzzing insects, the vanished rainbow—and the reality of their predicament. A battered Pepsi can bobbed up in the water beside her, and her eyes were drawn to the algae scum floating around the edges of the pond. What had she done? She tried to suppress her growing unease. Max, too, seemed restless. Standing, he took her hand and pressed it to his lips. "Thank you, *querida*, for bewitching me," he said.

But to Lindsay, the words did not ring true. They sounded like a packaged pitch, words grown weary through repetition. For the moment, she ignored the warnings flapping in her brain, instead reaching up to kiss him, lingering a last moment before swimming for the bank.

By the time they had dressed, gathered their belongings, and returned to the clearing, another hour had passed. Lindsay's fatigue was catching up with her, and she was wondering yet again what would happen to them, when the sound of an approaching vehicle reached her ears.

Before it arrived, Max drew her to him in a tight hug. "This will be our place, *querida*," he whispered, kissing her ear. "We can be together here. But Lindsay, no one must know."

Taming the Savage Monsoon

Lindsay was puzzled. “Why would we worry about that, Max?” she said, tracing his jaw line with an uncertain finger. “If we want to be together, why would we want to keep it a secret?” But her true thoughts went unspoken. For she was ashamed to realize that she, too, would rather keep this adventure secret from the rest of the world. And her question to Max went unanswered, because at that moment the Land Cruiser roared into the clearing.

Moments later, Hoktha was climbing down from the driver’s seat, his face plastered with an insincere smile. He was dressed in an outfit even more trendy than that of the previous day, and his hair was again styled immaculately.

“*Mon Dieu!*” he said. “Are you all right?” He’d expected to find Lindsay and Max tired, dirty, hungry, and thoroughly annoyed. But here they were, full of smiles and glowing with health—or something.

“Actually, we were worried about you, Hoktha. What happened?” Max demanded.

“Oh, it was ridiculous. I was taking the boys into town, giving them a lift, you know, and the damn car broke down. A military truck came by and gave us a tow, fortunately. But by then it was after dark. I was able to stay at the governor’s house, but I couldn’t sleep at all, knowing you were up here without any supplies or shelter. I wanted to send someone after you, but I had no one to send.”

He glanced around, spotting their small shelter. “But it seems you’ve managed to take care of yourselves,” he said, his voice changing into a leer as he pointed to the teepee and directed a sly wink at Max. “I see you even constructed your own virgin hut for the night,” he said, clapping Max on the shoulder. Max’s answering laugh was hearty, and Lindsay looked the other way, wondering again just what she had done—and what it had meant to Max.

Hoktha helped them load their packs into the Land Cruiser, and with no further conversation they set off on the road back to Banlung.

Royal intrigue and child trafficking in remote Ratanakiri Province,
Cambodia.

Taming the Savage Monsoon

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