



**SANCTUARY**  
LYNNE NORRIS

# *Sanctuary*

by

**Lynne Norris**

*Yellow Rose Books*  
*by Regal Crest*  
**Texas**

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## **Dedication**

To Catherine

## **Epigraph**

There is a brokenness out of which comes the unbroken,  
a shatteredness out of which blooms the unshatterable.  
There is a sorrow beyond all grief which leads to joy  
and a fragility out of whose depths emerges strength.  
There is a hollow space too vast for words  
through which we pass with each loss, out of whose darkness  
we are sanctioned into being. There is a cry deeper than all sound  
whose serrated edges cut the heart as we break open to the place inside  
which is unbreakable and whole, while learning to sing.

*~Rashani*

# Chapter One

DOCTOR REGINA KINGSTON looked out the large plate glass window of the fourth floor pediatric wing of Saint Xavier's Medical Center. The slate gray, September sky hung low, heavy with rain sodden clouds. They roiled and grew as a cold front collided with a warm humid air mass. Four stories below the pediatric wing of the hospital a steady flow of headlights moved around the circular drive. Raindrops splattered on the window of the empty resident's lounge and rolled down in long drips pooling onto the brick-faced ledge below. A helicopter approached from the west with the familiar markings of the air medical services of the Office of Emergency Management.

A windsock was blowing to the east and a stiff tailwind buffeted the helicopter while it hovered above the landing target and started its descent. She heard the heavy thudding of the main rotor blade. From her vantage point in the staff lounge Regina watched the propeller shut down and a tall, lithe figure ran out from an entryway hidden from her view to meet a flight nurse exiting the aircraft. Alex, Regina realized, and felt a flood of relief course through her.

She tried not to remember how close Alex came to dying. Time may have lessened the horror of watching a distraught father shoot Alex in the Emergency Department. It was one thing to run a trauma on a complete stranger but another thing altogether when the person who was dying on the table was the woman she loved.

Her eyes wandered from the helicopter and for a brief moment she was distracted by her ghost like reflection in the glass. She paused to look at herself. Regina straightened her shoulders and tilted her chin in an effort to bolster her confidence.

All day she'd avoided calling her mother. Now she needed to hurry and here she was staring out the window, procrastinating.

Regina sucked in a deep breath, pulled out her cell phone and selected her mother's telephone number. She pressed call and paced a few steps while she waited. She knew her mother wasn't happy with her; the list of grievances seemed to grow with each conversation.

"Hi, mom. I got your message."

Ann Kingston's voice greeted her in a business-like manner. "We didn't talk about what we're doing for Thanksgiving."

"No, we didn't. I'm on call," Regina said. She didn't want her mother to sense her insecurities, knowing damn well she would be tuned into them.

"You can come for the weekend. It would be nice to spend time with you," her mother said undeterred.

"Is Michael going to be there?"

"No, he's going to his in-laws for the holiday and won't be home until Sunday night."

"Why don't you call Jeff and invite him?" Regina asked, still not committing herself to going. "It's still early enough for him to get a flight."

"Out of the question," her mother replied.

"Mom, he's your son—"

“You know very well how I feel about how he’s chosen to live his life. It’s a sin.”

Regina hung her head, feeling like she’d been punched in the stomach. “So why are you inviting me? Are you ignoring the fact I’m with a woman?”

“Don’t you dare trivialize this,” her mother said. Regina didn’t need to see her mother’s face to know she wasn’t smiling. Her green eyes would be dark and sparking with anger now.

“I’m not. I just don’t understand why you won’t call him and—”

“I don’t know what you call this obsession you have with her,” her mother interrupted. “It’s a relationship and her name is Alex.”

“How can you possibly think it will last? It won’t, you know I’m right. You ruined any chance you had with Derrick.”

“No.” Regina shoved a chair into the table and grabbed the back to keep it from rebounding off the edge onto the floor. “We—you are not going to talk about him.” She could feel her mother trying to manipulate her.

“Look. I tried to do what was best for you.”

“At some point, you have to stop trying to manage my life. It’s mine to live, not yours to direct.”

There was a long pause before her mother continued. “I’m just trying to protect you from making the same mistakes Jeffrey made. I’ve been trying. Obviously, I haven’t succeeded.”

“You need to stop. It’s my life and who I love is my choice.”

“I will not have you bringing her for Thanksgiving. I will not celebrate holidays with her now or ever.”

“I’m not talking about this anymore.” Defeated, Regina slumped into a chair. A headache was starting behind her eyes and she felt nauseous. “I have to go home and finish packing.”

“Why did you pick the Dominican Republic of all the places to go on vacation?”

“It’s not a vacation, mom. It’s a medical mission.”

“I’m not comfortable with the whole idea.”

“We’ll be fine.”

“It’s just another example of you running away from your obligations.”

“What do you mean, my obligations?” Regina heard her voice get louder.

“You should be settling down and dating a nice doctor not traipsing around some third world country.”

“I am dating a nice doctor and her name is Alex. Alex Margulies. Stop acting like she doesn’t exist.”

“A relationship is difficult enough between a man and a woman but two women or two men is unnatural. Just call me when you land.” She didn’t say goodbye or good luck or I love you.

Regina ended the call and dropped the phone into her lab coat pocket. She gazed out the window, the weather matching her mood, as she realized how demoralized she felt and how angry the conversation with her mother made her. The door to the lounge opened and she pivoted to see Tina, one of the pediatric nurses standing at the threshold. Curly blonde hair pulled back in a headband and trim in her pink elephant scrubs, Tina offered Regina a tentative smile.

“Oh, sorry, Dr. Kingston. I thought I heard someone. I didn’t realize...are you alright?” She stepped into the room and shut the door behind her. “You’re upset.”

Regina managed a smile and swiped at a tear threatening to roll down her cheek. “One of the few people who can really get me upset and knows how to do it is my mother.”

“Let me guess, she’s still giving you a hard time about you and Alex.”

“Bingo, you win the prize.”

Tina folded her arms across her chest and tilted her head. "Families do suck sometimes."

"Yes, they do. Sometimes I wish she wasn't a part of mine." Regina covered her mouth and shook her head. "What an awful thought."

"She'll get past it. She has to, you're her daughter."

"Or not." Regina let out a caustic laugh thinking of her brother.

"You always have us. We're your family too."

"Adoption is always a possibility."

In fact, Tina and Sandy had stepped in to help when Alex was first discharged from the hospital and Regina was already back at work. Sandy, an experienced nurse in the emergency department was Tina's longtime girlfriend. The mundane tasks of everyday life on top of work and caring for a recalcitrant patient was more than one person could handle and Regina was grateful for their support.

"Thanks." Regina gathered her composure. "Who are you looking for?"

"You, in fact."

"What's up?"

"You said you wanted to see the latest round of lab values on baby Joseph when they came in."

"Yes," Regina followed her out the door towards the nurse's station on the neonatal intensive care unit. A bank of monitors behind the desk displayed the vital signs of every baby on the unit. A cacophony of alarms and chimes sounded throughout the day and night alerting the staff of potential crises.

"When are you and Dr. Margulies leaving for the Dominican Republic?" Tina asked.

"Tomorrow at some ungodly hour in the morning." Regina tapped her username and password and waited as the computer logged her in to her patient screen. A few clicks later and Baby Joseph's most recent labs came into view and she studied them weighing risks and benefits as she came to a decision.

"And you're still here?"

"Mhmm." Regina studied the numbers in front of her. "His carbon dioxide levels are trending lower and his ph is improving. If his next round of blood gases are normal we can switch the ventilator settings to CPAP," Regina said, as she entered the order into the chart. "Dr. Burke is covering my patients while I'm away. Any calls to my service will switch to his at five o'clock today."

"Wait, before you go we have something to give you." Tina went behind the desk and disappeared into an office.

Regina heard the wireless communication devices the nurses wore clipped to their scrubs. The chimes came from various points around the unit to call the nurses to the desk. Tina returned with two nurses in tow, each carrying a large plastic bag with them.

"Hi Sharon. Maricel I thought you were off today," Regina said.

"The staffing office called me in. We had seven nurses call out sick today on the fourth floor," Maricel said.

"Do we know if any have the flu?" Regina asked.

"Sounds like at least three do," Tina said and continued as several more nurses gathered at the desk. "We got our VP to sign off on donating these supplies for your trip."

"Oh! Thank you all so much." Regina took the offered packages, wondering where they would fit them in their luggage and set them on the counter.

“It’s the least we can do. There are vaccinations, antibiotics, wound dressings and IV kits. Sharon’s been on two trips down to Guatemala,” Tina said.

“Any advice?” Regina asked. “I think this is what’s described as jumping without looking.”

“No. It’s different for every time. Just keep an open mind and roll with it,” Sharon replied.

“Last time I was in Guatemala we hiked nine miles into the mountains to carry down a malnourished child. She was living with her father who was working in the fields. There was no one to take care of her during the day and he had no food to give her. If I remember right she weighed forty pounds and was nine years old. She was starving to death.”

Regina stared back at Sharon in disbelief.

“Here you go, Dr. Kingston.” One of the nursing assistants rolled a cart behind her and loaded the bags onto it.

“You guys are great! Thank you.” Regina gave them each a hug and stepped back.

DOCTOR ALEX MARGULIES entered the boardroom and surveyed the twelve people sitting around the mahogany table in fifth floor executive conference room. It was equipped with high-speed internet access, ergonomic leather chairs, hard writing surfaces, electronic drop-down screens, a built-in LCD projector, and whiteboards with markers.

Dr. Chris Timmons, Director of Pediatrics and Dr. Cassandra Mitchard, Vice President of Medical affairs sat opposite each other. The remaining group were composed of board members who Alex had little to do with in her role as medical director of the Emergency Department.

“Thanks for waiting,” she said as she entered the room and took the one remaining open seat next to Cassandra. Alex was dressed in her well-worn lab coat, scrubs and a stethoscope looped around her neck. She slipped a hand into one of her pockets and removed a thumb drive.

“Dr. Margulies, thank you for taking time out of your day to present this to the board. It’s an important step in moving us forward in what is becoming an ever more hostile regulatory environment in the health care industry,” Cassandra said.

Alex gave her a cursory glance and proceeded to insert the thumb drive into an open port of a laptop. The presentation took a few seconds to load. “Can everyone make out the slides or do we need to dim the lights more?”

“We can all see.”

At one time, Alex had considered Cassandra a friend as well as a colleague. Their relationship changed when Alex found herself on the receiving end of a hospital circling the wagons and protecting its own interests from a Medicare fraud suit while she lay in the ICU fighting for her life. Cassandra was content to see her caught in the collateral damage of her predecessor’s behavior. If it weren’t for Regina and her colleagues in the emergency department, Alex wouldn’t be standing here today.

Alex launched into the presentation. Following her recovery from a gunshot wound, she returned to the Emergency Department and embarked on a multi-disciplinary review of all the processes affecting a patient’s ED visit. With the medical center’s approval she implemented a comprehensive rollout of strategies designed to streamline the ED intake process, increase available inpatient beds, reduce overcrowding in the ED and reorganize staffing patterns.

The next slide appeared on the screen and Alex took a moment to look around the table at the twelve individuals sitting before her. “As you can see within the existing physical structure of the ED we’ve implemented a seven bed fast-track area staffed by two physician assistants. When a

patient arrives, the triage nurse evaluates them and determines if they are appropriate to send down to the fast-track area. We've also enhanced our nursing student program to provide more students with specialized education in emergency medicine."

"Is it really making a difference?" one of the board members asked.

"There's always an upfront cost to training any student. Ultimately, it's a win-win for us. The students get trained to our standards of care and are ready to hit the ground running if we hire them after they've completed their education and are licensed." Several board members nodded their heads in approval and Alex continued. "We added a Patient-Flow nurse who's responsible for tracking all the ED patients. They're responsible for identifying those patients who need to be admitted. They work with the rest of the team from the doctors on down to housekeeping to facilitate in-patient discharges to make room available for the ED patients. When we have multiple traumas and get bottlenecked the patient-flow nurse is responsible for running our code green, which is a process to facilitate stepping down patients to lower care levels in the hospital to open ICU beds, facilitating in-patient discharges and utilizing the discharge lounge in the emergency department."

"It sounds effective in theory but how is it working?"

"Discharge delays continue to be a major contributor to patient bottlenecks. The case management department has instituted a 'discharge by noon' policy but it's not consistently meeting the benchmark of ninety percent."

"Why not?" asked a bespectacled portly fellow sitting at the opposite end of the mahogany table.

"Patient and family circumstances can hinder timely discharges. We're working on the logistics of a discharge-staging lounge on the med-surg floors."

"Explain to me what you mean," one of the women said.

"Exactly what it sounds like. Discharged patients don't need to be staying in a room waiting for a relative who can't pick them up until after work so we move them into a lounge with a television, snacks and Wi-Fi and now we have a bed we can utilize. The bottom line is we need to increase our capacity. With Saint Jo's closing its doors we can expect to get an increase in the numbers we see daily."

"I suppose you have the preliminaries worked out?" Cassandra asked.

Alex advanced the slides and brought up the statistics. "We treat on average two hundred and eighty patients daily. Saint Jo's may add an additional twenty percent to our volume. My recommendation is we plan and build out a five-bed inpatient-staging unit allowing us to relocate the admitted ED patients waiting for a bed assignment. It would be staffed with an RN and a nursing assistant from seven am to seven pm."

"Why a five bed unit? Why not eight or nine beds?" one of the women asked.

"A five bed unit allows us to stay within the New Jersey nurse-patient staffing ratio requirements for a med-surg floor and contain our labor costs."

"You're asking for quite a financial commitment," one of the board members replied.

Alex spread her hands in acknowledgment. "This unit will allow the hospital to provide an inpatient standard of care to patients while they're waiting to be transferred to a room. It will increase the capacity of the ED, allow us to be more efficient and bill for our services appropriately."

Chris, a tall broad-shouldered, man with keen eyes who sat listening throughout the meeting, leaned forward. Alex met his inquisitive gaze recalling as she did how he had become a staunch



ally and friend during the past year. “With the changes made so far, what’s been the overriding result?”

“Since the fast-track area was opened our ‘left-without-being-treated rate’ has decreased seven percent. We project an additional eight percent drop if we are able to move forward with the inpatient staging unit.”

“We’re essentially talking about funding for two different projects,” the stocky gentleman at the end of the table concluded.

“We need to work the problem from both ends. We need a transition point so we can move the patients out of the ED while they wait for an in-patient bed and we need to accelerate our discharges out of the hospital. If we don’t do both we just create a bottleneck somewhere else in the pipeline.”

“You understand we’re trying to keep capital expenses to a minimum, Dr. Margulies.”

“Sometimes capital investment is warranted. Thirty-eight percent of hospital admissions come from the ED, but the patients can’t be transferred when beds aren’t available. Those delays translate into lost revenue and increased length of stays and non-reimbursable days.”

Alex flipped open a folder and handed a sheaf of papers to Dr. Timmons to pass along. “I have copies of the presentation, estimated construction costs and more statistics you can read at your leisure. Are there any other questions before I leave?” She watched and received several headshakes as the board members collected their belongings and quiet side conversations started along the length of the table.

“Thank you Dr. Margulies.” Cassandra stood. “When does your plane leave?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

“Leaving on vacation?” a woman wearing a black dress and a choker of pearls asked from her seat across the table.

“No, I’m travelling to the Dominican Republic on a medical mission.”

“How interesting,” she said. “Cassandra make sure we get an article written about the mission into our quarterly newsletter.”

“Yes, of course, Beverly.”

Alex gave Chris a sideways glance. She strode out of the conference room and felt his presence beside her. She stuck her hands in her lab coat pockets and continued towards the elevator.

“Board meetings aren’t your cup of tea, eh?” Chris asked.

“I don’t mind giving the presentations. I resent the hypocrisy to the board’s decision making. The hospital spends thousands of dollars on travertine tile and cherry trim to decorate its latest wing and departments are literally begging for new equipment and space. I want one of them to come down to the emergency department, spend a day in the trenches. They don’t have the credibility to stand here and debate with me whether we should invest capital to improve our operations. They have no first hand knowledge of what goes on. For all the gloss and glitter they like to throw on the PR front there’s still a lot of inhumanity ingrained in the day to day operations of this place.”

“You won’t get an argument from me or the nurses on any of the floors. You’ve ever been on a medical mission before?”

“No.”

“Neither have I. What made you decide to go?”

“A friend of mine from medical school, David Ivez, has gone on many of them. He came down for a week while I was recuperating and we talked about going on one together.” Alex stopped at the elevator and punched the button. “It’s something I’ve always wanted to do.”

“Now I know why Regina was back at work so soon after you were discharged. I couldn’t imagine her leaving you home alone.”

“She didn’t have a choice. She had to be at work. Besides, I was in good hands. Between the two of them and some good friends, they got me through the worst of it.”

“Are you still having nightmares?”

“When things get crazy and stressful, I do.”

“Your subconscious is still working through what happened.”

“Great, I wish it would hurry and finish processing.” The elevator arrived and they both stepped on. Much to Alex’s relief, the doors slid closed on the sound of approaching voices and they rode down together.

“Did you ever get around to talking to anybody?”

“No, I can deal with it myself. It was awkward enough being a patient where I work,” Alex said with a sharp edge to her tone and Chris changed the topic of discussion.

“David Ivez, He’s the infectious disease doctor from Boston?”

“Yes he is.”

“I hear he’s a brilliant physician. He’s been in the forefront of some of the research being done about the migration of diseases from sub-Saharan Africa to the Americas.”

“It’s the dark side of globalization. David always says we’re one plane ride away from being ground zero for an outbreak of a contagious disease.”

“Should we try and recruit him here?”

“You’d never get him to leave the Boston area.”

“Too bad. So how many trips did you say he’s been on?”

Alex raised an eyebrow at her colleague. “Am I sensing some concern Chris?”

“I’ve got two of my best doctors and friends, I might add, leaving for a medical mission in a country where the poorest half of the population receives less than one-fifth of the gross domestic product. Significant income inequality equals a place ripe for civil unrest. I just want to make sure you’re in good hands.”

“David’s been on a bunch of these trips with this aid organization. They’re well funded and they’ve been running trips for eighteen years.”

The elevator came to a stop in the lobby of the ground floor and Alex stepped off with Chris a step behind her. The lobby teemed with people, administrators, staff and patients alike all hurrying to different destinations.

“Give Regina my regards,” Chris said. “She’s a damn good pediatrician and an excellent addition to our staff.”

“I will,” Alex extended her hand and he returned the gesture with a smile.

“Good presentation today. Take care of yourself while you’re gone.”

## Chapter Two

WALKING THROUGH THE crowded hallway in the emergency department lined with patients lying on stretchers, Alex barely avoided colliding with a transporter as he rounded the corner with a fragile and frail looking white-haired woman lying on a stretcher.

Alex put a hand on the gurney stopping it's forward motion, leaned in close to him reading the name on his badge. "Frank, use the mirrors." She caught his eye and nodded at the one fastened to the wall behind him. "So you can see who's coming around the corner before you mow them down."

"S-Sorry, Dr. Margulies."

"Slow down. We don't need any injuries." She looked down at a frail hand clutching at the sleeve of her lab coat.

"You...you're a doctor?" the woman managed to ask.

"Yes, ma'am," Alex replied as she clasped the woman's hand in hers. The woman looked to be in her eighties and her frail frame was lost beneath the blanket covering her. Clouded blue eyes regarded Alex.

"Can you help me? I've been waiting all day to see a doctor."

Alex glanced at the transporter who shook his head. "Where are you taking her?"

"Radiology."

"What's your name?" Alex studied her.

"Lucy Donahue."

"Is there anyone here with you?"

"No. My son works in New York. He's always so busy working. He never has time for his mother."

"Does he know you're here?"

"I don't know. I just laid there on the floor calling for help and no one came. My neighbor heard me. She has a key so she let herself in."

"Who brought you here?"

"Well, the ambulance of course."

Alex reached for the chart at the head of the stretcher with her free hand and flipped it open. Dr. Martin, one of her residents, was in charge of her care. At least he was competent and she trusted his judgment unlike some who passed through her emergency department. "When your report comes back from radiology Dr. Martin, one of my doctors, will come and talk with you about the results," Alex explained.

"Why can't you do anything?"

"Because another doctor is already taking care of you. He's a good doctor. I trust him."

"Ma'am." The transporter moved to where she could see him. "If Dr. Margulies says he's a good doctor, he is. I trust her."

"You're in good hands." Alex let go of her hand and stepped back glancing at Frank.

"You treated my baby brother last month. No one else believed my mom. She knew something was wrong with him. You and Dr. Martin figured it out."

"I told you I've been waiting all day to see a doctor," the woman said. "You're all the same. We're just cattle being herded around."

Alex watched as the woman was wheeled down the hallway. She strode into the female staff locker room. She removed her soiled scrubs and tossed them into the biohazard hamper. She

dropped her clogs into the bottom of her locker and removed her clothes from the shelf inside. She dressed as she sifted through the remaining tasks.

In less than twelve hours she would be boarding a plane with Regina to travel to the Dominican Republic. The last two weeks leading to their departure were a whirlwind of activity tying up all potential loose ends in their respective departments at the hospital. It was an endless stream of tasks. It made Alex feel like everyone depended on her. She sent the last email, feeling the weight of responsibility lifting and changed her automatic reply to “out of office.” When she left the Emergency Department today she was leaving it and all her responsibilities behind for the next ten days.

She headed out of the locker room and found Sandy searching for something in one of the supply rooms.

“Hey, Sandy.”

“Oh, no! You’re leaving?” she asked. “Wait, don’t go yet. Dammit. Why can’t people put stuff back where they found it instead of where they drop it? How’d the meeting go?”

“I talked, they listened. Not really sure what it accomplished.”

“Did they give you an idea of what they thought?”

“They consider it a large financial commitment. Whether it aligns with their plans is anyone’s guess.” Alex squinted and pinched the bridge of her nose at the headache announcing itself behind her eyes.

“Travertine tile and cherry molding trumps our five transition beds in the ER. Gotta love the priorities.”

“We’ll see. Everything’s done. I emailed you the next two week schedule for the residents so you know who’s on call.”

“Want to stay and help out? I have a woman who swallowed a chicken leg bone and perforated her esophagus, or there’s the trauma en route. Motor vehicle versus a tree or let’s see...Eddy’s back looking for us to give him medication because he blew off his clinic appointment last week,” Sandy offered.

“No thanks.” Alex smirked. “I’m done.”

“Fine. Be a party pooper.” Sandy stuck her hands into her lab coat pockets. “It’s going to be weird without you here. I don’t like the way it feels.”

“I’ll be back before you know it.”

Alex started to leave, but stopped. “There’s a patient I met in the hallway. Her name is Lucy Donahue. Can you check on her? She was on her way to radiology.”

“Is something wrong?”

“No, she’s here alone. I don’t want her to fall through the cracks.”

“Sure. I’ll check on her. Now hurry and get out of here while you still can. You have a plane to catch.”

Alex gave Sandy a quick hug and hurried out the door to make the ten-minute drive to her condo where Regina was meeting her. Her two-story condo was stone-faced and from the rear a sliding glass door in the living room overlooked a pond frequented by a blue heron hunting for fish.

Pruned box-wood shrubs lined the walkway and the beds in front of her home. A brass lion head knocker adorned the midnight blue entryway door. The color was the only alteration the association allowed to the exterior of the condominiums.

Everything was packed. The mail was stopped. Their bags were lined against the front wall and ready for the limousine service when they arrived to take her and Regina to the airport in the

morning. Their two duffel bags filled with medical supplies and medicine the hospital donated would be checked. They each had a backpack filled with clothing and a few items to make the living conditions more bearable.

When Alex arrived home, she climbed the stairs to her bedroom, stripped out of her clothes and headed into the bathroom. A thick deep blue rug covered the tile floor and cushioned her tired feet. She turned the water on as hot as she could stand it and climbed into the shower. She let the hard spray pound on her neck and shoulders hoping the stiff muscles would relax. Her mind wandered to Regina. She hadn't seen her all day at the hospital and hadn't expected to given their respective schedules. Alex knew Regina had planned to call her parents before they left for the airport and wondered if she had talked to them and how it had gone.

Alex allowed her eyes to track over the thin, vertical scar running the length of her sternum. It had faded as the months passed and bothered her on rare occasions. Close to a year had passed since her brush with death. She remembered little from her time in the intensive care unit.

She washed her shoulder length hair not once but twice and scrubbed her body with an exfoliating sponge and a scented liquid soap to get the smell of the hospital off of her. The glass door of the shower was fogged with steam by the time Alex finished and stepped out, grabbing a towel to dry off with.

A few minutes later she was dressed and sitting on the edge of her bed zipping her toiletry bag. She dropped it into a duffel bag beside her on the floor.

Outside she heard a car door slam and stood from the bed. A moment later a key twisted in the lock.

"Sorry, I'm late," Regina said setting several bags down inside the front door.

"Hey, I was getting concerned you got delayed at the hospital," Alex said from the top of the stairs.

"No, I didn't."

"How'd everything go?" Alex detected the look of anguish in Regina's face.

"Lousy." Regina shrugged out of her coat and hung it in the closet next to the door. "I drove to the reservation and sat by the lake for awhile. I needed time to think. I'm sorry, I should have called you."

"It's all right. You talked to your mom?" Alex started down the steps.

"I think I need a TUMS. Do you have any?"

"Sure. Hold on a minute." Alex returned to the bathroom and rummaged through the shelves in the medicine cabinet until she found the familiar shaped bottle tucked in a corner. "Here." She offered her the plastic container when she got to the bottom of the stairs.

The tablets rattled out of the bottle as Regina shook a couple into her hand. Alex waited while Regina chewed and swallowed them.

"What did she say?" Alex asked.

"She said I could come alone or not at all."

Alex heard the crack in Regina's voice and wrapped her in a hug. She felt Regina's shoulder shake and heard a sharp intake of breath. "I'm sorry she's been making this so hard for you."

"If I didn't care it wouldn't hurt so much. But I do and it sucks."

"Of course you care. She's your mother." Alex rubbed her back in a circular motion. She rested a cheek on Regina's head and closed her eyes, feeling Regina tuck her head against her shoulder. Alex wasn't prepared for the tears and the emotions. She just held onto her until Regina pulled away.

"She said—oh, I made a mess of your shirt."

“It doesn’t matter.”

“She said she didn’t want you there for the holidays,” Regina said, wiping the tears from her eyes.

Alex released Regina and tugged her down to sit beside her on the couch. “Listen, it’s a weekend. If it makes things easier, go by yourself when we get back.”

“No.” Regina scooted around so she was facing Alex.

“Okay, I just thought it might be easier for you not having to go through all this emotional turmoil. It’s been eating you up inside for weeks.”

“You’re missing the point. I am not going to play this charade where I live my life one way when I’m here and pretend you don’t exist when I go visit my parents.”

“You don’t need to do it on my account.”

“You don’t understand my mother. If I give in this time she’ll think she’s won and it will just get worse, and every time, every time, there’s some family affair, this will be an issue. I am not going to compartmentalize my life so the order of her precious world is undisturbed.”

“I don’t think I’ve heard you talk about it this way before,” Alex said.

“I guess I’ve moved to the anger phase of whatever this is.”

“Coming out of the closet?” Alex supplied with a wry grin.

“I have an idea. Why doesn’t the rest of the world who has a problem with us step inside the closet and disappear?”

“I think you need to be prepared for her to put up a battle. She did throw your brother out of the house.”

“And she’s so damn stubborn she won’t even call him. How much of his life is she willing to miss? I wonder if she ever thinks about having regrets at the end of her life? Does she worry about what she’s missed?”

Alex sat back against the couch and folded her arms across her chest, considering what Regina had said. “At least she still talks to you. You’re her only daughter. I’m no expert on families and probably the last person who should be giving you advice but I think she needs time to adjust to the idea two of her children are gay.”

“It’s not like she hasn’t known about it for awhile now.” Exasperation crept into Regina’s voice.

“True, but she doesn’t know you except for being her daughter, who’s a doctor and who she thought was going to plan a life with Derrick. She has a story loop playing in her head, hopes and dreams for you. Those dreams didn’t include you being in a relationship with a woman. As far as your mother’s concerned I came along and ruined her happy ending.”

“Not as far as I’m concerned.”

“Glad to hear it.” Alex leaned closer until she nudged Regina with her shoulder. “I’m sure Derrick painted a very ugly picture of who I am to your parents when he was at their house last fall.”

“Ugh. The thought of him and everything he did last year makes my skin crawl.”

“Sorry to bring him into this.”

“It’s hard for me to even consider her perspective when all she’s done is attack me every time we talk,” Regina acknowledged as she tucked her hand around Alex’s arm and leaned against her. “And just for the record it’s not just any weekend. It’s our first Thanksgiving even if we are going to be working at the hospital so it’s not okay if I go alone.”

“It would be nice to spend what time we have together.” Alex smiled at Regina and kissed her temple.

“I’d sooner stay here than go by myself.”

“Maybe we should,” Alex offered.

“They would be alone.” Regina wrung her hands together. “God, I hate being the dutiful daughter.”

Alex thought for a moment. “Invite them down here to your place.” Alex brushed Regina’s hair back behind her ear. “It’s changes the dynamic of the situation if they’re in your home and not theirs.”

“Hmm.” Regina gazed at Alex. She pressed her lips to Alex’s.

Alex closed her eyes and leaned into the kiss, enjoying the familiarity of their bodies as they shifted closer to each other. She felt a light touch to her face. Regina pulled away and bold green eyes met her gaze. “For someone who doesn’t think they should be giving out advice, you do an outstanding job of it.”

“Outstanding, huh? I’m glad you think so.” Alex let her head touch Regina’s.

“What’s in the bags you dropped by the door? Something else we need to pack?”

“Yes. I bought some protein bars, extra batteries for the headlamps; powdered Gatorade, baby wipes and Tina gave me more stuff from pediatrics to bring. I don’t know where we’re going to fit it all.”

Alex stood and retrieved the packages. “We’ll fit it in. The limo arrives at four thirty tomorrow morning and our flight leaves at seven.”

“Is David on our connecting flight in Miami?”

“Yeah, he is. He texted me today to let me know he got his seat changed. He’ll be sitting with us.”

“Ooh, this will be fun,” Regina teased.

Alex rolled her eyes, imagining the conversation Regina and David would have.

DAVID IVEZ WAS a dark and attractive man with salt and pepper hair. He adjusted his tall lanky frame in the chair as he waited at the gate for his flight to be called. He wore faded jeans, running shoes and a blue tee shirt with UMASS emblazoned across the chest. He stared off into space before responding to two more emails from members of the team who would be meeting him in Santo Domingo later today.

He found it hard to feel optimistic before any trip. No matter how many times he had served on a medical mission the stories were always the same wherever they went. He suspected as long as humans lived on the planet there would always be corruption, poverty and inequality, the strong exploiting the weak.

Overhead the speakers paged latecomers to their flights. He glanced around as crowds of people hurried by in different directions on the concourse dragging wheeled luggage behind them, moving like a herd of animals. He checked his watch before he focused his attention back to the screen of his laptop.

He never knew until a group got together and they were onsite how a mission might turn out. There were too many variables to consider and few he could control. He selected the team members based on their expertise and education but what he couldn’t always account for was individual motivations. He prepared people as best he could for the demands of a medical mission.

The trip would test each individual, push them to their physical, mental and emotional limits. When they didn't think they had any of themselves left to give it would ask them for more. He hoped he made good decisions in the people he selected knowing he could only rely on the honesty with which they had filled out the surveys prior to serving on a medical mission.

Through the years he'd been on a dozen or more medical missions to South America, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. This was the first time he was handling the logistics for a trip and responsible for coordinating everything. Most of the medical and dental supplies and equipment for this trip were donated from hospitals, clinics, professional organizations and individuals.

"Flight Sixteen Eighty-Seven, Miami to Santo Domingo. Now boarding all passengers."

David closed his laptop, tucked it into his backpack and zipped it closed. He paced out of the boarding area and glanced around the crowded terminal. Halfway down the concourse he recognized a familiar pair of individuals making their way at a brisk pace toward the gate. They drew closer and David recognized Alex's athletic build and dark shoulder length hair as she weaved around a couple of stragglers focused on their electronic devices. He caught sight of Regina who was half a step behind Alex.

"I was getting worried you were going to miss the connection," David said as they approached.

"We were delayed taking off from Newark," Regina said.

Alex re-adjusted the backpack on her shoulders. "We would have been here earlier if people would walk and pay attention to where they were going instead of their damned devices."

"They just called our flight to start boarding. How are you, Regina?" he asked and found himself caught in a snug embrace.

"Good," she replied and smiled at him as she released her grip. He'd forgotten about those disarming green eyes and her infectious smile.

"You should have heard her mouth at three in the morning when the alarm went off," Alex teased.

"Hey," Regina complained and poked Alex in the ribs eliciting a surprised grunt from her. "Three o'clock in the morning is not fit for man or beast."

"I agree. It's an early flight but it gets us down there with enough time to combine and organize all the supplies." David glanced at Alex who tilted her head and fixed him with a cool expression on her face.

"You realize this is the first time we'll work together since we were interns?"

"Oh, I bet you have some good stories to share," Regina said.

"Don't get any ideas." Alex spun Regina around and directed her towards the boarding gate. "Start moving. We're holding the line."

David sauntered along next to Alex, straightening himself to his full height. It just brought him even with his friend. "I get the aisle seat," he declared, casting a sidelong glance at Alex, enjoying the look of pained resignation in her eyes.

"I'll sit in the middle," Regina offered back with a wink and a mischievous smile.

"I think I should sit in the middle to keep the two of you separated. You're just going to egg each other on." Alex shook her head and held her passport out to the gentleman when she got to the gate.



REGINA WASN'T SURE how long they'd been in the air when she felt a nudge in her side and lifted her head from Alex's shoulder. She blinked and rubbed her eyes trying to pull herself out of the deep sleep she had fallen into soon after takeoff. She glanced at Alex whose eyes were closed and her head tilted against the wall of the cabin, arms folded across her torso. The rhythmic rise and fall of her chest told Regina she was sleeping.

"Look out the window," David pointed. "The pilot just announced we're crossing from Haiti into the Dominican Republic."

Regina leaned on the armrest between her and Alex and peered out the window to the island below. Verdant green mountains and valleys passed below intermittently cast in shadows from the cumulus clouds floating above. Rivers snaked like veins coursing through the body of Mother Earth. Her eyes tracked to the coast and she could make out long expanses of pure white beaches running along the coastline.

Beside her, Alex stirred and opened her eyes. "What are you looking at?"

Regina was inches away from her face and smiled. "See for yourself, sleepyhead." She leaned back to give Alex room.

While Alex peered out the window, Regina traced a random pattern over her back with her fingertips. "I didn't know it was so mountainous," Alex glanced back at David.

"The ranges run north to south on the island. The rainwater drains off the mountains down to the coastal plains where they grow most of the sugarcane. It's where we're going."

"Why there?" Regina asked.

David said, "Most of the country's economy is derived from tourism. Anything associated with those service sectors does well comparably speaking. It's the farmers and the migrant workers who live in extreme poverty."

"What are those brown marks on the mountainside? They look like scars."

"Landslides from too much rain. The trees were torn away by the force of the mud."

The seat belt sign blinked on and a few minutes later Regina felt the pressure build in her ears as the plane banked and started its descent. A loud rumble from the undercarriage of the airplane signaled the landing gear lowering.

She felt Alex's hand cover hers and squeeze. Regina returned the gentle pressure and peered into pale blue eyes. A warm smile passed between them and Alex pressed the back of Regina's hand to her lips before she released her.

They both focused their attention out the window watching as green patches of land and flat-topped aluminum roofed dwellings rusting from exposure to the elements raced by the window. Pieces of metal and other non-permanent structures were scattered across the landscape. The plane banked and the view changed in dramatic fashion as the pilot brought the aircraft around for its final approach. Hotels and resorts with creatively shaped pools dotted the coastline of crystal white sand beaches. Colorful beach umbrellas, cabanas and catamarans bobbing in the ocean flashed by the window and disappeared from view.

Moments later, there was a shuddering bump as the wheels touched down. The engines reversed thrust and the brakes engaged as the airliner decelerated down the runway.

## Chapter Three

THEY LANDED AT Las Americas International Airport. It averaged seventy-two flights a day and was the largest airport in the Caribbean. There were seven gates in the main concourse and the foot traffic was sparse as they strode through the terminal at mid-day. It took hardly any time at all for them to collect their luggage and walk out to where David said the buses would be waiting for them. While David was busy gathering the other medical professionals who were arriving on various flights, Alex and Regina found a bench to sit on away from the luggage carousel. The mid-morning heat was palpable seeping through the automatic door when it slid open and closed as travelers hurried to their destinations.

“How long did David say the ride to the plantation was going to be?” Regina asked, peeling off her windbreaker and tucking it into the side of her pack.

“Three hours.” Alex glanced at Regina who was gazing out the floor to ceiling windows. Palm trees dotted the lush green landscape and enormous ferns grew in the understory of the manicured shrubs and trees lining the roadway outside the terminal.

“You okay?” Alex stripped off her fleece top and stuffed it into the top of her backpack.

“Just wondering what it’s going to be like.”

Alex heard the reticence in her voice and took a guess at what was bothering Regina. “You don’t want to talk to her. Do you?”

“Huh?” Regina asked. “Oh, my mother. No...I should just get this over with.” With a sigh she pulled her phone out of the leather case clipped to her belt. She called the house and after a couple of rings her mother answered.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Are you there?”

“We just got off the plane. We’re waiting for some other people to arrive. We have a three-hour bus ride. I had an idea.” Regina caught Alex’s attention and held her gaze. “Why don’t you and Dad come down between Thanksgiving and Christmas? We can go into the city for a matinee and dinner. Maybe it will be less stressful if our visit isn’t tied to a holiday.”

There was silence. Her mother said, “Is she going to be there?”

“It would be nice if you met Alex.”

“You know I don’t approve of this at all.”

*I don’t need your approval* flowed through her synapses and got stuck at the tip of her tongue as she thought better of starting a war with her mother. She didn’t need more conflict with her on top of everything else. “Just think about it. Please?”

“I will. Here’s your father.”

“Just wanted to say bye,” his gruff voice came through the line. “Be careful. Did you know there are no poisonous snakes in the Dominican Republic?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You know how you’re mother is. She’s worried sick about you being someplace she considers unsafe.”

“I know. We’ll be fine. I asked her to consider coming down between Thanksgiving and Christmas.”

“Still trying, eh?”

“What else am I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know. Well, stay safe.”

“Bye, Dad.” Regina tucked her phone back into its case and studied Alex’s expression. “Was do you think?”

“I’m surprised you suggested it. I think it’s a good idea. Neutral turf for all of us.”

“Good, I wanted to get this resolved and out of my head before we started this trip.”

“The ball’s in their court now.”

“Excuse me.” A petite strawberry blonde woman approached from the luggage claim area carrying a backpack. A bandanna pulled her wavy hair back from her face. “Are you two with the medical mission going out today?”

“Yes,” Regina replied.

“Oh, good,” the woman replied with a cheerful smile. “I saw David waiting by the gates and he directed me down here. I’m Claire Roberts.” She offered her hand to Regina.

“I’m Regina Kingston.”

“What specialty?” Claire asked.

“Pediatrics. You?”

“I’m an OR nurse.” She surprised Alex by saying, “You must be Alex. David’s told me a lot about you.”

Alex shook her hand getting the distinct impression Claire had a problem with her. “You know David.”

“This is the fourth trip I’ve been on with him. Have you done any missions before?”

“No, we haven’t,” Regina said.

“I don’t know about you guys but I’m starving. Anyone want something from the food court? Last chance before we leave.”

Regina exchanged glances with Alex and nodded. “I didn’t touch what they offered as food on the plane.”

“We should get something. Knowing David, we’ll be on the road as soon as everyone arrives,” Claire said.

“You go,” Alex said to Regina. “I’ll wait here with our bags.”

“Any requests?”

“See what they have. Bring something we can snack on along the way. My gut tells me it’s going to be a long day.”

Alex watched as Regina and Claire rode the escalator. She smiled thinking how easy it was for Regina to make friends. She had an uncanny ability to read people and engage them in conversation after a few minutes as if she had known them for all her life.

It had never been easy for her. Making friends and letting new people get close was fraught with the insecurities of her childhood experiences. She let her work consume her. It was easy to get lost in the day in and day out assault of traumas, desperately ill and dying, to be consumed by the totality of it all and lose sight of all the other vital experiences in life. Being with Regina changed her priorities.

It wasn’t long before Alex saw David riding the escalator down from the upper level with a group of people tagging along behind. She couldn’t help smiling as David approached. Another man with a shaved head, aviator style sunglasses and a cheerful smile ambled alongside him.

“Alex you remember Sean Fleming. We were studying for our boards and he went to get us something to eat and came back with a tray of Jell-O from the cafeteria.”

Standing from her seat, Alex laughed as she recalled what happened next. “You dropped the tray and the Jell-O exploded all across the floor.”

“Wonderful memory.” Sean held out a hand, which Alex grasped. “You don’t look any older than the day we were interns. Where are you now?”

“Saint Xavier’s Medical Center in New Jersey.”

“Doing what?” Sean asked.

“Emergency Medicine. How about you?” Alex queried.

“Duke University Medical Center. Ophthalmology.” He patted the messenger bag he had slung across his body. “I have two hundred donated glasses with me.”

“I see you’re still carrying your beat up six string around with you,” Alex said, eyeing the worn guitar case.

“Never know when a little music will come in handy.”

The sound of a loud boisterous voice calling Sean’s name caught their attention. A man with crew cut dark blond hair sauntered closer to the group.

“Ian, how are you, man?” Sean asked, each slapping the other on the arm. Alex remembered meeting Ian at a medical conference she attended with David a few years ago. Born in Australia, Ian had moved to the States with his family when he was fifteen. He hated leaving his native country and in an act of rebellion volunteered to join the military on his eighteenth birthday. It wasn’t an altogether bad decision. The military paid for his medical training and he traveled the world until he’d finished his required service and returned Stateside. It wasn’t long after he joined the medical staff at Duke and met Sean shortly thereafter.

“Twenty-five pounds heavier than the last time you saw me. Too many bourbon night caps.” Ian guided a sandy blonde haired woman forward toward the group. “This is Emma. We met on the plane.”

“Hi.” She stepped out of his reach. “And just so we’re clear, I’m not with him, even though he tried to pick me up five minutes after the flight started.”

Sean slapped him hard on the back knocking him off balance. “She’s got your number, man.”

“What can I say? She’s a lovely young lass.” The banter continued as they waited in the lobby.

Claire and Regina rejoined the group a few minutes later.

“Quick! Let’s get a picture,” Claire said, pulling out her camera. She commandeered a young man passing by and the group huddled together with Alex and David standing in the back row next to Sean.

Regina peered into the preview screen and saw David with his arm draped across Claire’s shoulders and Sean making horns over Ian’s head.

As they broke apart, David strode toward the doors and called out to them, “Hey, our buses just arrived. Let’s get everyone’s bags loaded so we can get on our way.”

Alex settled her backpack on her shoulders and handed Regina hers. “Here you go.” Parked in front of their bus was a van already filled to capacity with people and luggage. A young couple ran past Alex carrying daypacks and squeezed aboard.

“Thanks.” Regina handed Alex a bottle of water and a couple of trail bars.

Alex waited for Regina to walk ahead of her. A hot tropical breeze lifted the hair off her shoulders as she moved through the automatic sliding glass doors.

“Holy crap,” Sean exclaimed. “They look like old tramcars.”

“Please tell me they have air conditioning,” Ian said as he eyed the green and white vehicles.

“The Ministry of Health loaned them to us. They passed safety inspections but I can’t vouch for air conditioning,” David replied and waved a hand out in front of him. “Ladies first.”

“It’s vintage,” Regina said.

“Quaint.” Alex watched Regina climb the steps and followed her. She looked at the small fan mounted to the left of the driver’s seat.

“Not a good sign,” she muttered into Regina’s ear.

Regina laughed. “I hope everyone wore deodorant.”

There were two rows of seats on either side and Regina picked one in the middle of the bus. “Ooh, vinyl seats.”

“Great. We’ll leave our skin on them when we stand up,” Alex said, as she placed her bag under the seat in front.

“Why don’t you sit?” Regina asked.

“Been sitting too long already,” Alex said watching as Claire entered the bus followed close behind by David. A smile twitched at the corner of Alex’s mouth when Claire tugged on one of David’s belt loops and pulled him into one of the front seats, both disappearing from view. As the minutes passed and the heat rose, the bus filled with the stragglers from other flights who were also part of the medical team for the mission.

“What’re you watching?”

Alex gave Regina a wry smile. “Claire and David.”

Regina looked over the seat and frowned. “I don’t see them...oh for...Alex sit down.”

“Now I know why I got a weird vibe from Claire.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just a feeling I got with Claire when we met her.”

Alex flopped into the seat beside Regina and leaned against her. “This is going to be a long ride.”

“Next time don’t watch, silly,” Regina said. “It’s not nice to be a voyeur.”

“I am not any such thing. He wouldn’t admit he was seeing anyone when he was visiting me.”

“Maybe they weren’t together.”

A moment later David stood. “Alright we’re all here. There’ll be time enough for everyone to introduce themselves once we get to the compound.”

“No fair. You got a head start on introductions,” someone called out from the back of the bus followed by several catcalls and bursts of laughter.

The bus driver settled into his chair and a moment later the engine rumbled to life. There was a lurch as he put the bus into gear and the tires started to roll. The two-lane expressway led them away from the airport and crossed a suspension bridge where a sign riveted to a metal support indicated they were crossing the Ozaam River. Once they were across the bridge, the road headed southeast across the island. They passed acres of land with outcroppings of rock surrounded by lush foliage. Palm trees grew in random clusters interspersed among deciduous trees.

The flat countryside transformed to more mountainous terrain. The engine down-shifted as the bus traversed a steep uphill climb to the highlands. Alex gazed out the window at the beautiful landscape. She could make out the rugged and forested slopes of a mountain range in the distance. A fertile green valley opened to their right as they crested the steep slope. They rode down a series of sharp breathtaking switchbacks. Between them and oblivion stood wooden guardrails.

Around the next bend, miles from anything resembling a town, Alex witnessed a man and a woman waiting beside a moped. Three children stood barefoot along the narrow shoulder of the

road. Clouds of dust enveloped them as the bus rumbled past and in seconds they disappeared out of sight. The image of the family standing there was etched in her memory.

She glanced at Regina who was dozing beside her. Around her, Alex could hear murmurs of conversation above the rumble of the engine.

At the front of the bus David stood and staggered back to her holding onto the backs of each seat. He sat down across from Alex and pointed out the window. “Pico Duarte is the highest mountain in all the Caribbean islands,” he said, pointing to the peaks she admired in the distance.

“Did you see those people standing by the side of the road back there?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“They’re out in the middle of nowhere with a moped.”

David looked down at his clasped hands. “They’re one of thousands out there trying to get by.”

“When was the last time you were here?”

“Eighteen months ago. We built a clinic the last time we were here. The batey—”

“The what?” She leaned forward to hear David.

“It’s the village where the laborers who work in the sugarcane fields live.”

“Oh. Who staffs the clinic when a medical mission isn’t there?”

“The soldiers watching the plantation have basic training in first aid. We’ve trained a couple of the nuns in simple evaluations and procedures the last time we were here. The nearest hospital is three hours away by car.”

“Who can afford a car here?”

“Not many. There are pockets of obscene affluence in the cities with resorts. The government relies on tourism to support the economy. Out here in the country these people scrape together a meager existence—if they’re lucky.”

“You didn’t mention there were soldiers before.”

“I didn’t?”

Alex met David’s steady gaze and held it for an uncomfortable few seconds. “No.”

“Many of the plantations are owned by the government. They like to keep a close eye on their investment.”

“How do they feel about Americans coming in to their territory?”

“They realize we have medicine and skills beyond their capabilities. We vaccinate children, treat injuries and teach the people how to treat common health problems so the local government tolerates our presence.”

“Reassuring.”

“A couple more hours and we should be there.” David’s eyes grew distant and he stood. “Anyway, I’ve talked your ear off enough. Get some sleep.”

She got a strong sense David wasn’t telling her everything. A somber edginess twisted inside Alex’s gut and she trained her gaze to Regina’s sleeping form.

REGINA FELT THE bus shudder and bump across the rocky, uneven terrain. Boredom coupled with heat and humidity had put most of them into a languorous slumber. The wheels slowed and the driver made a lumbering right turn onto a narrow dirt road. A cloud of dust billowed around the bus and stones ricocheted from underneath the tires clattering off the under carriage startling many of the occupants.

The bus rolled to a stop and the doors opened. The travel-weary passengers yawned, stretched, and pulled themselves to their feet.

Regina stood and winced at the stiffness she felt in her joints from sitting for too many hours. Beside her Alex stretched and shook her head before she climbed out of her seat. Regina found Alex looking down at her with an expression of quiet affection.

“You okay?”

“Just stiff.”

Regina focused her attention out the window to where everyone was starting to gather. Splinter groups emerged between the more rowdy and exuberant crew and the more serious medical mission goers for whom this was a calling.

A worn footpath wound through patches of burnt grass to a small cottage. It stood off to the left a dozen or so yards away from where the bus was parked. Splotches of cold gray stone lay beneath a layer of robin’s egg blue paint exposing cracked and crumbling concrete blocks. Opposite the decrepit water-stained building and on the other side of a wide creek was a single-story structure with an arched entryway, a simple cross rising from its peak. In the distance sat a newer looking two-story concrete building.

“Ready?” Alex asked as she slung her backpack over her shoulders.

“As I’ll ever be,” Regina responded wondering what lay hidden behind the endless field of sugarcane.

“This brings new meaning to being out in the middle of nowhere,” Alex said as she climbed down the steps. The unpaved dirt road crunched underneath her hiking boots. One of the women pulled out a small camera and held it out, recording the scenery.

“Why are we getting off the bus here?” Emma asked, irritation unmistakable in her voice.

“There’s only a foot bridge to cross the water,” David pointed to a battered wooden structure built into the banks. It spanned the distance across the fast running stream.

Alex and Regina exchanged looks as the group digested the information. “It’s more isolated than I expected,” Regina said and felt Alex’s reassuring hand on her shoulder in response.

“Be careful by those palm trees. They look like they could come down if you look at them wrong.”

Regina picked her way through the garbage and dead wood strewn in wide arcs along the upper edges of the bank. Beyond the church, several men approached, stopping at the corner of the building and remained there, talking and gesturing amongst themselves. After a short while, the men faced her group, their expressions suspicious and wary the way people appear when they seldom see outsiders and have no reason to trust them.

“I wonder how long ago the creek flooded its banks?” Regina asked as she peered down at the dark green water as it churned and foamed around the wreckage of fallen trees and splintered wood.

Her gaze carried farther down the waterway to a weather beaten wooden two-story dwelling perched on the edge of the creek. A dilapidated porch buttressed with lashed together two by fours protruded above the cascading water below. Next to the house a storm-damaged tree leaned low across the creek, its roots exposed from erosion.

“Somebody actually lives there?” Regina asked.

“It’s got a roof and four walls,” David said.

“Jesus, the place looks like it should be condemned,” Alex said.

A woman dressed in a light blue and cream-colored religious habit stepped out onto the porch and hung a sheet across the rail. A look of confusion crossed her face. It transformed into one of excitement and delight. The woman waved her arms and called out David's name.

David stepped beside Regina and waved back. "Time to meet Sister Juanita."

The nun disappeared back inside the rickety structure and reappeared around the side of it a minute later. She strode across the uneven earth and crossed the bridge with quick, confident strides. The men seeing her cross the bridge followed behind at a distance.

She was a head shorter than David. Wisps of grey hair escaped from her wimple and her dark eyes snapped with energy. With both hands she pulled his head down and planted an affectionate kiss on each cheek. "Thank God, you're back, my child."

David said, "Regina, Alex, this is Sister Juanita."

"Nice to meet you Sister," Regina held her hand out and felt the strong fingers embrace hers.

"Hello, Regina." She patted her shoulder and smiled at her.

"I expected there to be more people around," Regina said.

"You're on the north outer edge of the plantation. The villages are scattered throughout the sugar cane fields."

Regina watched as Sister Juanita studied Alex. Sunlight glinted off the silver cross hanging on the end of a chain. "Hello, Sister," Alex extended her hand and the nun returned the gesture. "You're a doctor?"

"We both are," Alex replied.

"Good, good. There is much to be done and unfortunately not enough time to do it in."

"We'll do what we can to help," Alex said and released the older woman's hand. Sister Juanita put a hand on David's arm.

"These men will help you unload the buses. They can carry what you have on to the dormitory."

She waved one of them over to her. His round face looked worn and weary like a retired boxer but his eyes brightened as he approached. She spoke in Creole and gestured at the buses. He nodded several times as she talked and when she was done he motioned for the other men to follow him. "You remember, Rodrigo. He'll stay until the men are done unloading everything. Tell him where you want all the supplies stored for the time being."

A dozen feet away Claire was peering inside the decrepit concrete building. Regina joined her.

When she stepped across the threshold Claire recoiled. "Oh my God, what smells?"

"Oh," Regina wrinkled her nose and stepped back as the putrid stench filled her nostrils. She gagged and a fit of coughing consumed her as she spun away. "What's this building used for?"

"It's the government's milk dispensing center for the children."

"You're joking," Claire said.

"They're supposed to come once a month and leave a ration in there for the village," Sister Juanita explained.

Alex handed Regina a bottle of water from her pack. "Drink some."

"Thanks," she said, twisting the top off the bottle. "She's right. It's rotten milk."

Alex studied the structure and stepped around, searching the area surrounding them.

Regina started to say something and stopped as she saw the muscles in Alex's jaw clench and anger flash in her eyes. She touched her arm. "What are you looking for?"

"There's no electricity, no refrigeration. Of course it spoils in this heat," she said to Sister Juanita. "What's the point in delivering it?"



“The government gets to include the fact they provide milk to the children in their report to the United Nations and World Health Organization and they get to keep their funding for their child protection program.”

“They’d be better off delivering powdered milk,” Alex said.

“Powdered milk requires clean water to mix it with,” Sister Juanita replied.

ALEX HELD ONTO the ropes on either side of the footbridge and focused on avoiding the rusted nails protruding through loose wooden planks. In several spots the boards squeaked and groaned in protest as she hiked to the other side. After she stepped onto the higher ground Alex extended her hand back to help Regina.

“The bridge needs some serious reinforcing. It looks like it’s taken a beating.”

“It’s rickety in a couple of places,” Regina said.

“You’re being generous,” Alex replied.

“Sister Juanita trotted across like it was nothing.”

“Heavenly guidance,” Alex supplied.

“Careful, she might hear you.”

“Are you suggesting she has special hearing powers?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Just checking,” Alex said in a teasing tone.

David reached where the two women were standing and set his bags down. “What do you think?” he asked.

“I don’t know what I expected,” Alex said. Several chickens pecked and scratched in the dirt at the base of one of the palm trees. One let out a raucous screech, flapped its wings furiously and puffed out its feathers, displeased with the intrusion into its territory. “I’m still stuck on the fact the government delivers milk here yet there’s no refrigeration.”

“I’m sure some bean counter ran the cost benefit analysis and reported it would be too expensive an undertaking to build the infrastructure needed to support electricity being fed to this plantation.”

“In other words it will cut into someone’s profits,” Regina added.

David said, “Rule number one. All governments are corrupt. When in doubt or faced with some bureaucratic idiocy, refer back to rule number one.”

“You’re getting jaded in your old age,” Alex said.

“You have no idea...” He said and pointed at a thicket of green stalks with long sinewy leaves. “There are ten thousand hectares of sugar cane planted in this valley.”

Regina felt the leaves. She tilted her head back to look at the tops of the plants. “They’re huge.”

“They can grow to twelve feet depending on the variety.”

“I don’t hear any machinery.”

“You won’t. It’s harvested by hand.”

A gentle breeze rustled the tops of the sugarcane. Alex paced to a wide gap in the stalks and studied the dirt path. “Where does this lead?”

“There’s a small garden Sister Juanita keeps off to the right of the main path. Beyond the garden it’s an hour hike before you come to the first batey.”

Alex listened to the rustling of the cane stalks as a warm breeze intensified and continued. It brought with it an increase in the humidity and the air felt heavy and thick around her.

Her senses strained and Alex recognized an ominous feeling inside her gut. A disturbance nudging at the edges of her psyche. As fast as she noticed the sensation, it faded away. She shook the feeling of dread off, attributing it to the long day of travel and lack of sleep.

“What’s the plan?” she almost plowed into Regina who now was standing in front of her with an expression of concern.

“What caught your attention?” Regina asked, putting a hand on Alex’s arm.

“I don’t know. It was more a sense I had...just tired, I guess,” Alex replied and chalked the feeling up to raw nerves.

## Chapter Four

“EVERYONE, GATHER AROUND,” David announced, his voice carrying above the excited buzz of the health care workers standing in the compound. “Take twenty minutes to relax and unwind. We’re going to organize our supplies. We’ll be staying in the dormitory behind you. For those of you who’ve been here before bear with me. We’ve got mosquito nets to hand out. Each of you takes one. Spray your skin and spray your clothes every day. Do not sleep without the nets. Don’t drink anything other than the water you have in bottles. Don’t walk around barefoot and don’t swim in any of the waterways. Cholera, typhoid and malaria are the big three diseases to worry about. Any questions so far?” David settled his hands on his hips and glanced around. Most of the group shook their heads.

“What if we forgot bug spray?”

“Find someone to share with.”

“Last time we were here was eighteen months ago. We finished building a clinic next to the school. It’s an hour walk from here. The men work in the fields from sunup to sundown. They’re not coming to us, we’re going to them. We’ll work in teams and no one goes anywhere alone. Grab your gear and find a room to bunk in.”

The three men had already unloaded a pile of boxes from the bus and set them on the ground. David used a Swiss knife to puncture one of the boxes, tore open the top and started handing out mosquito nets. “Here, everyone take one.”

He handed Alex two nets, each compressed in a bag.

“Thanks,” she said, tucking them under an arm.

David stepped back a few feet as a line formed and everyone reached in to take a bag.

Alex folded her arms and stood beside him. “Claire said she’s been on a few of these missions with you.”

“We met in Guatemala a few years back.”

“I thought so,” Alex said, casting a sidelong glance at him.

“We like doing this kind of work.”

“Looked more like play than work on the bus,” Alex locked eyes with David and arched an eyebrow.

“W...what?”

“Don’t act all innocent and serious about it.” Alex watched a violent blush color her friend’s neck.

“I don’t know what got into her.”

“Unadulterated blind lust.” And his blush got deeper. “You never mentioned anything about Claire when you visited me this past winter.”

“We...it wasn’t a very popular decision I made to come visit you.”

Her eyes popped open wide. “Shit, David. I never...ah crap. Now I understand Claire’s reaction to me at the airport.”

“Why’d she say something to you?”

“Just a territorial type of vibe I got from her when we met for the first time.”

“She’s not like this at all. It’s not your fault. You had me down as your emergency contact person in your personnel file. It was probably some HR paperwork you filled out years ago and never got around to changing. I would have come anyway.”

“I never had any reason to change it before now.” Alex looked away and caught sight of Regina standing a few feet away talking to one of the men who had ridden in the other bus. He said something and Regina laughed. “Are you and Claire serious?” She focused her attention back to David and watched his eyebrows furrow.

“It could be. I know she’d like to have kids at some point. I’m not sure I want to. I like doing this too much to quit.”

“Who says you’d have to? God knows this will always be here.” Alex watched the crowd of people, all medical professionals, gathering their gear and milling about the courtyard, clustering into groups.

“I suppose.” He shot her a curious look. “What about you and Regina?”

“What do you mean?”

David made a funny face and nudged Alex in the shoulder. “You two seem pretty solid.”

Alex nodded. “It’s been...good. We’ve been through a lot in a short time.”

“I think you got the ‘in sickness and in health’ part of the vows down.”

“Yeah, I guess we kind of do,” she said with a faraway expression in her eyes.

“So you think you’re going to make this official?”

Alex glared at him. “What is this, twenty questions?”

“Hey take it easy. I just...was wondering.”

“It’s not something we’ve talked about.”

“Hey.” Claire walked across to David and threaded an arm around his waist holding him close. “You two finished reminiscing?”

Alex forced a smile sensing Claire’s obvious jealousy of David’s friendship with her.

“Catching up.”

“You should go rescue Regina. I think the guy she’s talking to has designs on sharing more than just bug spray with her,” Claire said with a nod past Alex’s shoulder.

“What?” Alex swiveled around and spotted the blonde haired man with the ruddy complexion touch Regina’s arm and step into Regina’s personal space.

“Go get her, Tiger,” David teased.

REGINA STEPPED BACK and scanned the compound and spotted Alex talking with David. “It’s been nice talking with you Tony.”

“Hey, maybe we can be partners when we go out tomorrow. I can show you the ropes since this is your first time.”

“I’m all set. Thanks.”

“They’ll do some kind of get together tonight. Maybe I’ll see you there.”

“I might just turn in early. It’s been a long day.” Out of the corner of her eye she saw Alex approaching and watched a quirky smile touch the corners of her mouth.

“Here’s your mosquito net.” Alex held out the bag to Regina.

“Thanks,” Regina said.

“Alex, this is Tony. He’s from Cornell Medical Center.”

“Nice to meet you,” Alex said, instead of telling him to get lost like she wanted to.

“Hi,” Tony said and returned his attention to Regina. “Come find me later. We can talk some more.”

“You want to head to the dorm?” Alex asked ignoring Tony.

“Yes. I’d love to just sit for a few minutes before we have to jump into things.”

“Was he giving you a hard time?” Alex asked.

“He’s persistent. I think he’s lonely and looking to have someone to spend time with.”

Alex snorted. “Right.”

“Why do you say it like you don’t believe it?”

“Cause Claire said he was acting like he wanted to share more than just bug spray with you.”

“Oh for Pete’s sake. We just met ten minutes ago.” Regina looked at Alex’s eyes sparkling with amusement. “Why are you laughing?”

“Because he’s a guy and you’re a very attractive woman.”

“I must be clueless.”

“No, you always assume people have good intentions. You’re not as suspicious of people’s motives as I am.”

“Why?”

“Different experiences growing up I suppose.”

Regina stopped as they approached the church and Alex let her arm slip from Regina’s shoulder. “Look at how high the water rose here,” Regina said as she trailed her fingers across the dark water stain. “It was knee high to me when the water crested,” she said looking back at the creek.

She hesitated at the entryway of the church and let her eyes adjust to the darkness of the interior. Inside, half a dozen rows of ancient looking wooden pews were aligned in front of a dais. A small wooden table stood atop it and a simple wooden crucifix hung behind it on the wall. She was aware of Alex’s presence close behind her. She stopped in a corner and set her bags down.

“Did anyone notice there’s no door on any of these buildings?” Emma asked as she dumped her bags against a wall.

David stuck his head in the doorway. “Hey, if you guys want a room on the first floor I’d move it. It’ll be cooler than upstairs. By the way, there’s an outhouse on the other side of the hill if anyone needs to use it.”

Ian squeezed past him and snorted. “Way to put some diplomatic spin on it. It’s a three-sided shelter of scrap aluminum with an old tire sitting on top of a hole in the ground. Hope everyone has strong legs and remembered to bring toilet paper.”

“Eww. Gross.” Emma danced on her toes and shuddered.

Alex glanced back at Regina and rolled her eyes. “Come on. Let’s go find a room.”

THE SPACE WAS eight by eight feet and had less in the way of accommodations than a jail cell in a state penitentiary. Walls were battleship gray and discolored from water damage. A window looked out across the barren courtyard. Shoved into a corner was a metal cot with a thin mattress thrown on top of it. Alex studied the thin pad. Suspicious stains and a faint musty smell made her skin crawl.

“I don’t trust sleeping on this.”

“The mattress or the frame?” Regina asked and took a closer look. “Never mind.”

“Both.”

“Ugh.” Regina let her backpack slide from her shoulders and lowered it to the ground.

“Looks like we’re sleeping on the concrete floor.”

Alex did the same and lowered her body to the floor and tilted her head back against the wall. She closed her eyes and let some of the tension ebb from her body.

Regina settled down next to Alex, nestled her head against her shoulder and wrapped an arm around her waist.

“This is bad.” Alex shifted and slid an arm across her shoulder pulling her close.

“Why?”

“If we stay like this we’re going to fall asleep.”

“Just give us five minutes,” Regina pleaded.

“Five minutes,” Alex echoed as she watched Regina’s eyes close. It was enough time for Regina’s breathing to relax into a rhythmic pattern. Alex let her settle against her long enough to watch the shadows lengthen and move across the floor. A short time later she extricated herself from Regina’s embrace, pulled her backpack closer and dug out a small camp pillow for her to rest her head on.

Alex stood and peered out the window. A pile of mattresses was visible from where she was standing and she decided everyone else shared the same reservations as she did. She removed the pad, wrinkled her nose at the dank odor and carried it outside to add to the growing mound.

“They either smell or have bugs,” Ian greeted her as Alex tossed the mattress out onto the pile.

“If they have bugs they should be bagged and moved out of here.”

“Right. Your mind is still back in the industrialized world.”

Alex shot him an irritated look. “What will they do with them?”

“Word’s obviously out we’ve arrived.” He nodded in the direction of the church where several nurses tended to a growing line of women and children. “They’ll take the mattresses back to the villages with them. If not they’ll get tossed onto a garbage pile somewhere.”

Alex looked at the line of bedraggled children. Many were barefoot and their clothes were little more than tattered bits of cloth. Some were naked.

Across the compound a lanky kid who didn't look old enough to be driving yet, stepped backwards recording the scene with a digital camera. He was dressed in faded jeans, wearing black Puma sneakers and red wavy hair stuck out from underneath a camouflage hunting cap.

"Does he have to film this?" Alex asked.

"It helps to bring the donations in. With all the publicity charities have gotten for skimming off the top, people like to see where their money is going. Danny's our resident geek. He's got a state of the art solar charger and battery to run his laptop. He'll establish a satellite link later and upload the video to the website and YouTube to chronicle each day of the trip."

A woman left her spot in the back of the line and started moving toward Alex. As she approached, Alex realized she was carrying a toddler in her arms. The woman stopped in front of Alex, and handed the squalling child to her.

Alex fumbled to gather the distressed youngster in her arms. "Can do you have a stethoscope with you? Mine's in my pack."

"No, I don't. According to David they're not even supposed to be here." He spat onto the ground and folded his arms across his chest exposing a tattoo on his upper arm of an eagle standing atop an image of the earth with Semper Fi scrawled beneath it. "We don't even have all the supplies organized yet. It's going to be a goddamn mess trying to prepare everything now."

Alex motioned for the woman to follow her and carried the child to where the nurses were gathered. "Anyone have a stethoscope I can borrow?"

"Here, take this one." One of the ladies pushed the instrument into her hands.

Alex situated the earpieces with one hand and listened first to the child's heart and lungs. She looked around for a place to lie the kid down and spotted a hard plastic storage trunk. After sitting down she moved to the child's abdomen and listened to each quadrant. She pulled the earpieces out and let the instrument hang from her neck. Holding the child semi-reclined in her arms with its legs draped across her lap she examined the abdomen. Her probing elicited a wince of pain and more high-pitched crying from the child as she pressed around the left lower quadrant.

Behind her she heard a familiar voice and felt Regina's hand on her shoulder. "You shouldn't have let me fall asleep," Regina said.

"It was just a few minutes." Alex glanced at her. "Besides, I wanted to take the mattress out of the room."

"He looks dehydrated," Regina said, leaning down to take a closer look at the child.

"I don't hear bowel sounds in any of the four quadrants. I think he's got a bowel obstruction." Their eyes locked in a tense silent exchange. Alex said, "The kid needs an NG tube. See if you can find David or someone else who knows how to speak Creole."

Regina patted her shoulder and left. Alex held the child in her arms and ran through her limited options. A knot of helplessness formed in her chest while she waited.

A few minutes passed and Regina returned with Sister Juanita in tow. She crouched down beside Alex. "I'm going to check the bags Tina gave me. Maybe they grabbed one and threw it in."

"Thanks."

"I'll see what I can find," Regina said and took off running back to the dorm.

"You need me to translate?" asked Sister Juanita.

"Yes. Ask her when the child ate last."

Sister Juanita spoke to the mother and Alex could see the look of worry in her eyes.

"She said the child hasn't eaten in three days."

“Does the pain come and go or is it constant?”

Sister Juanita spoke to the woman again. “It started out coming and going but now it’s there all the time.”

“Has he vomited?” Alex asked.

“Yes and he hasn’t gone to the bathroom.”

“How does she get him to a hospital?”

Sister Juanita frowned and said, “It’s serious?”

“His pain is constant, he’s guarding his abdomen, it’s tender and his belly is hard. The only way to know what’s going on is to look inside. At the least, he needs an NG tube inserted and I don’t know if we have one here.”

“The closest hospital is in Santo Domingo.”

“How does she get there?” Alex felt a weight settle on her shoulders as she watched the expression in Sister Juanita’s face change to one of sadness.

“She doesn’t.”

Alex focused on the bus on the other side of the creek. “What about the bus? Can the bus driver bring them to the hospital?”

“It’s not our decision to make,” Sister Juanita said and spoke to the young mother at length.

Alex repositioned the boy and stood. “What did you say to her?”

“I asked her if she had any family who could help get her to a hospital. She doesn’t.” Sister Juanita held her arms out. “Let me take him. Even if she could get to a hospital she has no money to pay the doctors and would wait days to be seen. She has no way to get back here and would end up homeless on the streets or worse.”

Alex spent a moment studying the ground beneath her boots. She heard the sound of running footsteps and looked across the compound to see Regina trotting back with a grim expression on her face. “No luck?” Her eyes tracked beyond Regina and she clenched her jaw as Danny made his way to where they were standing, his camera focused on them.

“Not in our stuff. I talked to Claire and a couple of nurses on the way. I asked them if they could look for one while they organize everything. They said they would.”

“Thanks.” Alex said and spoke to Sister Juanita. “Tell the mom not to leave. They haven’t had a chance to sort through all the supplies yet.”

“She has nowhere to be. Can you give her some water?”

“I...look—” Alex glared at Danny. “Do you have to be right in our faces with the camera?”

“Nope, I can still get a good shot from all the way...back...here,” he said as he took three big steps back.

Alex looked around, exasperated, and spotted several bottles where the nurses were working. “Hold on.”

She crouched down beside one of the nurses a few feet away and spoke to her. A moment later she carried one of the bottles tucked into the palm of her hand. “We’re not supposed to give this out to anyone. Don’t give it to her here. Take her where the others don’t see what you’re doing and tell her not to say anything because there’s not enough for everyone here.”

Sister Juanita stepped closer to Alex and slipped the bottle from her hand, hiding it in the folds of her habit. “Thank you,” she said with a smile.

“I wish there was more we could do.” She watched Sister Juanita relay her words to the woman, saw the look of anguish as she gathered her son to her.

“What’s wrong with the kid?” Danny asked.

“He’s got an intestinal blockage,” Alex said, giving him a cursory glance.

IT WAS A long, hot, dusty afternoon and they spent the better part of it triaging the long line of women and children. Most were minor problems and were uncomplicated to deal with. When the sun started to slip lower in the sky and the moon was visible above the horizon they had to stop because they were losing the daylight.

“What are they going to do?” Regina asked as she stood next to David and rubbed antiseptic on her hands while she watched the mothers and their children standing beneath some of the trees.

“They’ll sleep here tonight.”

“Why did so many people come here when we’re going to the clinic tomorrow?”

“The last time we were here we ran out of medication and supplies. I guess people remember and no one wants to be the person who gets denied care.”

“Oh, wow. I hadn’t even thought running out of supplies was a possibility.” Regina watched as one by one the women and children sat down on the ground to wait.

“Regina.” Alex’s voice sounded to her left.

“Yeah?” she answered and accepted a bottle of water. “Thanks.”

“Time to stop and get something to eat.” Alex looked at the huddled shadows in the fading light. “I wonder where the kid is.”

“Do you want to go look for him?” Regina asked.

“Not sure what I can realistically do for him. He needs an NG tube and an IV at the least.”

“What was wrong with the kid?” David asked, looking at Alex as he finished packing a box of supplies away.

“A bowel obstruction.”

“Claire said they’re about half done organizing everything. If I find one I’ll let you know.” David laid a hand on Alex’s shoulder. “Sometimes the hardest thing out here is understanding and accepting the limits of our work. I’ve seen kids with hydrocephalus and there’s nothing we can do because we don’t have a neurosurgeon who’ll come to place a shunt let alone a sterile theatre to work in.” He lifted the box and started off to the dorm. “There are boxes of MRE’s in the dorm, the first room on right when you get inside. Take what you need for the next three days.”

LOST IN THOUGHT, Alex sat with her back resting against the cinder block wall. The light from their flashlight cast an arc of white light enough for them to see what they were eating. The coolness from the concrete floor seeped through her cargo pants in stark contrast to the hot sticky night air. Outside their room, indistinct voices echoed through the darkened corridor and stairwells. She didn’t relish the thought of sleeping on this hard, unforgiving floor with only a thin pad and sleeping bag as a cushion and winced at how her body would feel in the morning.

She poked at the last hunk of meat masquerading as chicken in the MRE pouch. With a sigh she finished the last few bites and took a long drink from her water bottle to rinse the taste out of her mouth.

“I think we’re going to lose weight if this is what we have to eat the whole time we’re here.” Regina’s voice broke into her thoughts.



“There are some bags of jerky packed at the bottom of my backpack.”

“Oh no. I don’t want to break into it yet. We should save it for when we’re truly desperate.”

Regina peered across at Alex. “Hey, it was supposed to be a joke.”

“Sorry.”

“What are you thinking?”

Alex gave Regina a sidelong glance. “If we were back home we would have had a CT scan done by now and the kid would be on his way to the OR.”

“Maybe. You don’t know for sure.” Regina moved herself closer and settled next to Alex and ticked off a list on her fingers. “It could be mechanical, bacterial, decreased potassium levels, a foreign body. What did I leave out?”

“A hernia or a tumor,” Alex supplied.

“Unless you look inside there’s no way to know for sure.”

Alex pulled her knees close and wrapped her arms around them. “I just wonder if I missed something.”

Regina clasped her hand around Alex’s arm. “Don’t second guess yourself. You did exactly what you would have back home without all the glitzy tests. We’re so used to having all this technology at our fingertips. We take it for granted. I know I do.”

Alex crumpled the packaging from their dinners and tucked them into a plastic bag. She tied a knot and slid it into an outside pocket of her backpack. Dusting her hands off she rose to her feet and retrieved the flashlight. “Walk to the church with me?”

“What? It’s...ok—why?”

“I’m guessing the church is where Sister brought the mom to stay.”

“But what are you going to do?”

“Check on the kid.” Alex slung her backpack across her shoulders. She caught Regina’s questioning look. “Not leaving our stuff here.”

“You don’t have to explain it to me. Let’s go.”

Alex led the way through the darkened corridor passing by several rooms where she heard the sounds of snoring and deep breathing. At the doorway leading out to the compound, she flicked off the flashlight and said, “We shouldn’t waste the batteries. There’s enough light for us to see where we’re going.”

They stood for a minute just outside the door and allowed their eyes to adjust to the black night. Silence surrounded them and the darkness swallowed everything like a yawning chasm.

“This is creepy out here without any light or electricity,” Regina said and moved closer to Alex.

“It reminds me of when we had the blackout a few years back and the hospital had to run on emergency power for hours.” Alex regarded Regina’s quiet expression. “You okay?”

“There’s nothing.” Regina cocked her head. “Just dark and deafening silence.”

Alex reached out clasping Regina’s hand in hers. “Listen.” They stood shoulder-to-shoulder, eyes meeting in the moonlight.

The faint sounds came to her, vague at first, but grew clearer as her senses extended outwards and gathered the noise of crickets chirping and water hurrying through the creek to some unknown destination.

“I hear it, now.”

“Let’s go.” Their boots crunching on the hard-packed earth sounded loud and out of place when they resumed hiking toward the church. As they drew closer a faint flickering light emanated from the arched doorway.

Inside, close to the dais, Alex saw the mother, a look of exhaustion etched on her features, aged beyond her years from poor nutrition and hardship. All of it beyond their imagination. The woman regarded them with a wary expression when she heard their footsteps.

"I want to check how he's doing," Alex said as she set her backpack down next to one of the benches. The boy was curled in a fetal position his head cradled in his mother's lap. She settled onto one knee and felt the child's pulse. "I forget she doesn't understand me."

"You're here," Regina said resting a hand on Alex's shoulder as she smiled trying to reassure the mom.

Alex took out her stethoscope and listened to the workings of his inner body. She sighed and sat back on her heels. "Nothing's changed."

"No worse, but no better."

Running footsteps alerted them and Alex came to her feet with Regina beside her.

"I was looking for you two," Claire said as she burst through the open doorway her headlamp swinging from her neck. "I found three NG tubes. God bless whoever thought to donate them. We don't have any suction."

"We'll connect it to a bag and use gravity. It's not my first choice given this kid's situation but it's what we've got to work with."

"Can you tell her we need to insert this through his nose down into his stomach?"

"I'll try," Claire said.

Between the three of them and a medical translation book they were able to give the mom a rudimentary description of the procedure.

"You're going to have to hold him. Regina see if you can get him to swallow some water while I do this," Alex said.

It took two attempts and as weak as the child was he still put up a terrific fight, thrashing and twisting to get away. The mother was distraught at the end of the procedure and the boy exhausted. Alex attached the syringe and secured it to the end. "Push some air in so I can make sure we've got it in the right spot," she said as she pulled out her stethoscope and bent down to listen to the boy's stomach.

"Sounds good," Alex said.

"We can use this as a bag."

Alex took the gallon sized plastic bag from Claire and secured it to the end of the tube with cloth tape. "Now we wait. It should relieve some of the pressure. His body will have to do the rest."

"Nice work," Claire said with a smile.

"We'll stay with him," Alex said. "Need to make sure he doesn't pull it out."

"All right. See you two in the morning. Good luck."

Alex watched Claire walk toward the back of the building and disappear into the inky blackness outside. "I'll watch him. Get some sleep and I'll wake you in few hours."

"You sure?" Regina asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Alex laid a hand on Regina's shoulder and squeezed it. "Go ahead."

## Chapter Five

HE CREPT THROUGH the network of unpaved alleys and backstreets staying hidden among the murky shadows. Sweat trickled down his neck as he swatted at a mosquito flying close to his ear. Overhead the moon had long passed its zenith in the sky. He still had time to make it back to the shack he shared with three other men before anyone else stirred. The guards were spending the night in a shelter not much better than what he lived in. He knew they were busy drinking and playing cards. It's what they did most nights to pass the time and kill the boredom.

His hand strayed to the canvas satchel he was carrying, tied to his shoulders with lengths of braided plant fibers to form a thin rope. He felt the weight of the contents in the palm of his hand and reassured himself he hadn't lost any of his cargo. He was doing what needed to be done, he told himself.

A noise broke through the silence and he froze in his tracks. His heartbeat pounded in his chest and he willed himself to stay still, straining to hear the noise again and pinpoint where it was coming from. It seemed like minutes passed and he was just about to continue on when faint the sound started again—a cough and a whimper off to his right.

His instincts told him to mind his own business but another overriding impulse held him there. He slipped across the alley and crouched in front of the tarp hanging from the wooden frame. After listening for a few seconds, he lifted the weathered canvas and ducked inside the entrance. Shafts of moonlight filtered in through the cracks in the roof above, enough so he could make out the huddled form lying in the corner of the hut. He crept closer and put his finger to his lips when the child's eyes popped open wide and saw fear clearly etched in her features.

*"Mamá, quiero mamá,"* she cried and succumbed to another coughing spell. It wracked her feeble body. He lifted her and patted her on the back until it subsided and left her breathless.

"Settle down, little one. I'm not here to hurt you," he told her in Spanish.

He laid a callused palm on her forehead feeling her hot and fevered skin against his. He averted his face away as another bout of raspy coughing tore through her body leaving her weak in his arms. He covered her naked body with the sheet and blanket piled next to her and repositioned her as best he could.

"Be quiet and go to sleep. I'll bring someone to take care of you," he said as he slipped back out of the hovel hoping he could make good on what he told her. Muttering oaths under his breath in three different languages, he redirected his path towards the creek at the north end of the plantation.

He'd lived most of his life here in the batey. His parents had come to the Dominican Republic from Haiti when he was just a boy. They heard rumors there was work on the plantations. He still remembered being herded onto the back of a white pickup truck with a rusted tailgate and hearing his mother screaming as the soldiers threw their meager belongings into the street so they could pack more people onto the flatbed. It wasn't the first or the last time he saw his parents beaten.

Survival as a boy meant staying out of sight and as a man meant working when they told him to work. He made a meager existence building coffins for those who died. On occasion he received a token gift from the family if they had anything of value they could spare. At least he knew he would be taken care of when he was too old or sick to work in the fields.

SISTER JUANITA SAT on an old wooden school chair. Its joints squeaked when she shifted her weight to find a more comfortable position. A precisely made twin bed and a worn dresser with the top drawer misaligned from the ever-present humidity were the only other pieces of furniture in the room. A mosquito net hung from a hook in the ceiling and billowed as a soft breeze blew in from the window bringing the briny scent of the ocean with it on gentle currents.

It was a peaceful time for her when she could quiet her mind for a few minutes before facing the grim reality of her day. Her fingers worked the string of her smooth, wooden rosary beads stopping at each one to offer another prayer.

A frantic banging on the door downstairs interrupted her invocation. She jumped to her feet with heart pounding in her chest and the world swam around as her vision tunneled taking a moment to clear. At this hour of the morning it could mean one thing—someone was in trouble and they needed help.

“Coming,” she called in a hoarse voice as she tucked the rosary around the sash of her habit and hurried down the creaky stairs, clutching the railing.

“Sister!” a man’s voice called through the door. “Please hurry.”

“Who is it?” she asked, her hand on the chain.

“It’s Charles,” he answered.

She opened the door a crack and peered out looking at the moonlit silhouette of the man standing outside. “What is it?”

“One of the children is sick.”

“Where did you find the child?”

“In one of the huts not far from the school.”

“Did anyone see you come this way?” she asked, straining to look past him into the darkness.

“I was careful.” He shivered as he spoke.

Sister Juanita pulled the chain across and cracked open the door. “Quickly now, the Colonel has eyes everywhere.”

He slipped through the threshold and stood just inside the door, his hands clasped together in front of him.

“What were you doing out at this hour, Charles?” she asked as she studied his face searching for the truth in his eyes through the dim light. “Charles, I need to know or I can’t help you.”

His eyes met hers and he spoke in a soft voice. “It’s Friday. The supply truck comes early for the weekend delivery at the base.”

“You took food,” she said with a bone deep weary sigh. “Nothing good will come of this.”

“Not much Sister, just some for the folks who can’t fend for themselves.”

“Why didn’t you come to me? I could have found something to give you. You know he knows when anything of his goes missing.”

“What you take from the garden is for the children. Everyone knows it’s off limits.”

“Go rest yourself. I have to check on something. We’ll figure out what to do about the child.”

The yoke of her responsibility was heavy on her heart as she stepped out of the dwelling and closed the door behind her. Looking to the east, the line of the horizon was just becoming visible from the light of the rising sun. “And what would you have me do to make this right? How much will you give me to shoulder today?” Sister Juanita looked at the sky and shook her head. “No more than my tired soul will handle, you would tell me.” She inhaled a deep breath, gathering

her strength for what she knew was going to be a difficult day, and strode toward the dormitory. “Some days you expect too much of me, Lord.”

THROUGH THE WINDOW darkness faded in the twilight sky as dawn approached. Alex sat with her back against the bench Regina was sleeping on. Both the mother and boy were sleeping. The flickering glow of two candles on the dais cast dancing shadows on the wall.

Alex couldn't remember the last time she sat in a church. Its stark simplicity contrasted with the large, ornate and prestigious works of architecture back in the States.

Something as mundane as sitting in the church watching the mother and child sleep triggered a memory reminding her of just where she'd come from in life. An old recollection from her childhood rose in her like smoke rising from hot embers of a dying fire.

Unbidden it came. The sound of a glass bottle shattering and angry slurred words shouted by her father echoed in her memory. His bottle was empty and her mother had made a simple decision to put food on the table instead of buying his weekly supply of whiskey.

After the door slammed and angry footsteps faded into the night, she'd scurried out of the bedroom she shared with her brother, John. She found her mother in the kitchen lying huddled against the cabinets weeping. Blood was seeping from a cut on the side of her face. An angry purple bruise already apparent where he'd struck her. At the age of nine, Alex knew they needed to leave. He would return as he always did and this time his wrath would be orders of magnitude worse.

She wet a clean washrag and pressed it to the side of her mother's face.

“Mom, we have to leave. Please, Mom, before he comes back.”

It seemed like forever before her mother managed to speak in a voice mired in fatigue and defeat, “Go. Get your brother.”

Alex gathered her brother and stuffed a duffel bag with some of their clothes. She led her dazed and shocked mother by the hand. John, dressed in pajamas and sneakers, tagged along behind holding his teddy bear. They hurried out of the house and down the road past the church on the corner where her mother brought them to Mass on Sundays. They kept walking until the church was no longer in sight and a policeman finally stopped and picked them up.

Alex and her brother were placed in foster care. It was how the system worked. An abused woman with no job and two kids to take care of was sent to a shelter and a social worker took Alex and her brother.

The experience shattered her belief in a whole host of systems, not the least of which was the safety and security of family and home despite it being dysfunctional. At the time, it was all she knew.

She wondered why she was remembering it now, a memory more than two decades old. The woman lying a few feet away from her, with her vulnerable eyes and frail body lost and alone in this harsh uncaring world unable to take care of her family had brought the painful images into her mind.

A hand on her shoulder broke her thoughts. “Did you sleep at all?” Regina asked.

“On and off.” She admitted and lifted her chin towards the boy. “He only tried to get it out once right after we put it in. It's still draining.”

“You must be exhausted.” Regina swung her legs off the bench with a groan. “What I wouldn't give for a shower and a cup of coffee right now.”

Alex offered her a bottle of water and a package of baby wipes with a wry grin. “The finest amenities our four star accommodation has to offer. There’s a little alcove off to the right you can use,” she said, indicating the one she used earlier to wash and change into a clean pair of scrubs.

“Thanks,” Regina said twisting the cap from the bottle and taking a swig of water in her mouth. “What time do you think it is?”

Alex tilted her neck back to look at one of the windows. “The sky is getting lighter. I’d guess it’s getting close to six o’clock.”

Craving the physical contact, Alex slipped her arm around Regina’s waist and rested her head against her side, still feeling raw from the unwanted emotions hammering away inside her.

“You okay?” Regina asked brushing some of Alex’s unruly hair back behind her ear. Her fingers traced a pattern along the slope of the muscles in her neck.

“Just a lot to take in. How about you?” Alex tipped her head and regarded Regina with a slight smile in the dim light.

Regina looked away and let out a shaky breath. “Sorry.” She wiped at her eyes in irritation.

“What’s wrong?” Alex shifted to face her.

“This time of the morning...it...I remember watching you in the hospital.”

Alex’s eyes widened at the stricken expression on Regina’s face and she rose onto her knees. “Hey.” She took Regina’s hands and rubbed them between hers.

“You almost didn’t make it.” Regina looked down at her boots and shook her head.

Alex rested a hand on Regina’s thigh, wrapped her other around the back of her neck massaging the muscles and pulled her close so their foreheads were touching. Brief incoherent flashes of memories jolted her. “I didn’t die, Regina. I’m still here,” she said, reading the anguished look on Regina’s face.

“You don’t know how close you came to not being here,” Regina replied meeting her gaze, voicing a long held truth.

“I do know. I could see it in your eyes when I finally woke.”

The sound of footsteps approaching from the rear of the church made them both look back. “Shit,” Alex muttered and stood, caught in the sharp gaze of Sister Juanita, who was studying her with unnerving calculation.

“I DIDN’T EXPECT anyone else to be here,” Sister Juanita said as she approached the altar. She bent down on one knee and crossed herself. She looked down at the boy who was still sleeping on a bed of old tattered blankets. The mother stirred and lifted her head, looking at the three of them with a startled expression on her face. Her eyes drifted to the child and back to the nun.

Sister Juanita spoke to the mother. Her attention was drawn to Alex. The doctor, she decided, was an attractive woman, tall with an athletic build and a commanding presence. Her hands were strong and she wore no rings on any of her fingers. She’d witnessed the gentle confidence with which she handled the boy in her care yesterday and was intrigued by her.

“You were able to do something for him?” Her eyes shifted to Regina. She watched the fair-haired, younger woman compose herself and wondered just what she had intruded upon.

“We put an NG tube in,” Alex explained. “It’ll relieve the pressure in his stomach. Beyond...” her voice trailed off and she shrugged. “Our options are pretty limited.”

“What’s the next step?” Sister Juanita asked.

“If we can’t get him to a hospital, which doesn’t seem possible, we let his bowel rest for a few days and hope whatever is going on resolves itself.”

Sister Juanita crouched down beside the boy and placed her thumb on his forehead her lips moving in a silent prayer.

Her eyes drifted back to Alex and found herself captured by two fiery and intense blue eyes. Sister Juanita drew herself to her full height and lifted her chin. “Thank you for taking care of him.”

Alex gave a slight, almost imperceptible nod. “You’re welcome.”

“I have a request.” Sister Juanita touched Regina’s arm. “David says you two can decide if you’re comfortable doing it.”

“What is it?” Regina asked.

“There’s a child who is sick and has taken a sudden turn for the worse. Would you be willing to come and examine the youngster?”

“Who’s going to look after...” Regina glanced down at the boy and his mother. “I don’t even know their names.

“Naomi and Roberto,” Sister Juanita said. “I already spoke to David. He’s making arrangements to have them brought to the clinic. About this new child—”

“Tell him yes. We’ll come,” Regina said.

Sister Juanita studied them and said, “Good.”

“Is it a boy or a girl?”

“I’ll introduce you to the gentleman who found the child. Meet me in the courtyard.” Sister Juanita genuflected and crossed herself before leaving the church.

“I’ll guess we’ll be needing these.” Alex lifted Regina’s backpack and held it so she could slip her arms into the straps. She shrugged into the straps of her backpack and bounced on her toes a couple of times to settle the weight where she wanted it on her hips before she cinched the waist belt.

Alex moved toward the rear of the church, glancing back as she felt Regina tug on her. She reached behind her and entwined her fingers with Regina’s.

“Yes?”

“You okay with this?”

“Didn’t have time to think about it,” Alex replied. She felt irritable and strung out and attributed it to the lack of sleep and caffeine.

Regina pulled her to a stop. “I’m sorry. I just reacted. Hopefully, I didn’t get us into a mess.”

“Probably not. Don’t apologize for doing what we’re here to do.”

Alex looked down at Regina, put a hand on her cheek and felt the softness of her skin. “This place just has me out of sorts.”

“Why? What’s going on? I mean...it’s bad, a mess. But we knew coming in it would be.”

“FUBAR,” Alex muttered.

“What?”

“Fucked up beyond all repair.”

“It’s why we’re here, so maybe it won’t be. Right?”

“Yeah.”

In this moment of quiet solitude and contemplation before they rejoined the group, Alex studied the curve of Regina’s jaw, her eyes and her hair. She tossed all caution to the wind

leaned in and kissed her solidly. It was long enough for both of them to press into each other and seek the shelter of each other's arms.

Alex released Regina and stepped back. "We should go."

"Before she comes looking for us," Regina laughed. They stepped through the doorway letting go of each other as they stepped from the church.

Halfway across the compound loud voices came to them. Claire was facing off with David. "I thought we were all setting off together?"

"It's only for a couple of hours. We'll meet them later."

"I don't like it."

"They're not going alone. They'll meet Sister Rose halfway and walk with her and the children to the village."

"What's the matter?" Alex asked as she approached them watching the angry expression on Claire's face as she glared at David.

"They're concerned about you going to see this kid," David said.

"Regina and I will go together."

"Charles will go with you. I trust him."

"Who's Charles?" Regina asked.

"This is Charles," Sister Juanita said when she joined the group. The man standing beside her had a stoic expression on his face. His light brown eyes darted among them.

David turned to Claire and said, "He was with us the last time I was here and made sure we were well taken care of."

"You will come then?" Charles asked.

"Yes," Regina said. "The child, is it a boy or a girl?"

"Girl."

"How old?"

He frowned and was silent a moment. "Eight, maybe nine years."

"Can you tell us anything else? Fever, vomiting?"

"No. You must come and see yourself."

"Hold on." David clasped Alex's arm. "We'll finish sorting out the rest of the supplies and meet you in a few hours at the school. It's an hour walk on level ground so it's not too challenging. Claire's a worrier. You'll both be fine."

"It sounds like a reasonable plan."

"Charles, when you see Sister Rose, ask her to borrow Enzo and one of the wagons. Find them some shelter if the weather turns."

"No worries. I've got a safe spot. It will stay dry if it rains."

"THIS IS IRRESPONSIBLE," Claire admonished as she paced alongside David.

"What are you talking about?"

"What am I talking about? We're not even in the country twenty-four hours, you barely had a chance to brief the team, and you send two newbies out to check on a sick kid."

"I didn't send them anywhere. Charles was the one who came asking for help. They volunteered when Sister Juanita asked them. Besides they're both grownups and can make decisions for themselves."



Claire let out a caustic laugh. “Wow, what a convenient way of absolving yourself from taking responsibility for their safety.”

David whirled around. “You know damn well I wouldn’t ask anybody to do something I wasn’t willing to do myself, let alone Regina or Alex.”

“Of course, not your Alex,” Claire snapped her eyes sparking with anger.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” He sputtered, his face red with anger. “She’s a friend.”

“You still hold a torch for her!”

“I can’t believe this. You’re jealous.”

“You drop everything for her and take off for an entire week. We’re lucky to string three days off together.”

“She almost died,” David protested. He stopped and backed away shaking his head. “No—I can’t, I won’t do this with you. I have a mission to run.”

“Fine, go bury yourself in your damn mission.” Claire’s eyes moved past David and she groaned as Ian approached them. “Great. He has fucking impeccable timing.”

“The bar’s open folks.” He held a bottle of scotch and three Dixie cups. “Care to join me?”

“Jesus. Don’t you think it’s a little early for a drink?” Claire asked.

“Nah. It’s five o’clock somewhere in the world.” He poured a little of the amber liquid into a cup and offered it to David. “You look like you could use a drink, mate.”

“Later.” He waved the cup away. “When we get settled I’ll take you up on the offer.”

“So what’s the lover’s spat about?”

“None of your goddamn business,” Claire snapped and stormed away from the two of them.

“Too bad.” He tossed the liquid back and wiped his mouth. “Now I feel better. What’s got her all twisted?”

David shook his head, aware of Ian’s alert eyes studying him. “She’s pissed cause I let Alex and Regina go off with Charles.”

“I thought you trusted him?”

“I do.”

“So what’s the problem?”

David set his hands on his hips and scowled. “It’s complicated.”

“Isn’t it always with women? Tell her to stop worrying. It’s daylight and they’ll be walking back with a hoard of kids once they get to the garden.”

David took a moment to consider his options. “Listen, don’t go far,” he said to Ian. “I’ll need your help in a bit.”

“Wasn’t planning on it, mate.”

“Good.” David spotted Sister Juanita when she rounded the corner of the church and called to her.

She stopped so he could join her. “Yes, David?”

“I need a favor.”

“If I can. What is it?”

“We organized the supplies last night. Ian knows what medicines we have. I want him to take the antibiotics, the NSAIDS and the narcotics out of the crates and redistribute them to the doctors. What can’t be carried I want out of the dormitory and hidden in the brush.”

“All of it?” Sister Juanita asked.

“You know what I’m afraid of.” David said.

“Why didn’t you just tell him yourself?”

“I don’t have time to deal with his questions.”

“Ian wouldn’t give you a hassle.”

“As soon as Charles gets back here have them take the east trail to the school.”

“Alright,” she said. “It’s a longer route.”

“I know, but it’s narrow and a truck can’t get through it,” he said, her eyes staying on his as they talked.

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

“What should I do?” David asked in exasperation and ran a hand through his hair as he looked around at the desolate compound. “I can’t let the Colonel do what he did last time.”

“I wish there was a safer way.”

“We’re here to help the people. I can’t if he steals all our medical supplies,” David said.

“I know. Maybe it was a good thing so many people came yesterday.” She stepped closer, casting a wary glance around her before she spoke. “Were you able to finalize everything with the attorney before you came?”

“Of course. Everything went just like the attorney said it would.”

“You brought the originals and kept a copy for yourself?”

“Yes, I have them.”

“I’m afraid for her, David. There is no future for her here.”

“What do you intend to do now?”

“I don’t know, yet. I suppose I’ll do whatever the circumstances demand.”

AFTER SISTER JUANITA left, David scanned the compound for Claire. He couldn’t start the trip off like this, not when he had to work with both Claire and Alex for the next ten days. He spotted her strolling along the bank of the creek by the bridge and jogged after her.

“Claire wait! Where are you going? Will you please talk to me?”

Claire marched across the footbridge and stood on the other side looking at the mountains in the distance. She let out an aggravated sigh and cast a withering glance back at David.

“I don’t want to fight with you. I need your help to make the next ten days run as smooth as they can.”

“I told you the last time we were here to stay out of the local politics and you didn’t listen. Are you going to listen to me this time?” Claire crossed her arms in front of her as David approached.

“We have to get involved. How else do we make things better? We can’t just come, vaccinate people and leave. We have to make this place better for them to live in. They have no running water, no electricity. The children are lucky to eat one meal a day. These people are living back in the stone ages. We have to give them knowledge and tools so something changes for the better.”

“You saw what happened when you tried before. The government goons came and took what was supposed to be for the people in the village.”

“It’s why we teach them skills they can use to cook more safely, where to put the latrines so they’re not contaminating what little fresh water they collect. They can’t take those skills away.”

“Maybe not, but they’ll take whatever else they damn well want.”

“Not this time.”

“Yeah and what’s going to be different this time around?”

David took a step closer and held her gaze for a few seconds. "I love you."

"Don't say those words when I'm still mad at you."

"Don't be. You have nothing to be jealous of."

Her eyes narrowed and her jaw clenched as the sound of a motor reached her ears and grew louder. "Jesus! Can't the bastard even give us five damn minutes before he comes looking for us? I hate this part of it. It's dirty and wrong on so many levels it makes my stomach hurt."

"There's not much we can do about it, except play their game."

They watched as a faded green jeep came into view from the west side of the plantation. Mud was splattered on the vehicle's body and a double arched smear of mud and water was evident on the windshield.

It stopped in front of the faded blue government milk depository.

"Looks like the official welcome party has arrived," David said.

A tall, barrel-chested man extracted himself from the passenger side of the jeep. He was wearing green camouflage fatigues with the sleeves rolled to his biceps. A black beret was perched at an angle on his head. Another soldier appeared from the driver side of the vehicle with a rifle slung over his right shoulder, the barrel pointing downward.

"Some welcoming party," Claire said.

"Just be cool."

"You know he's here to cherry pick our supplies."

"Play along and everything will work out. Schmooze with the guy and keep him distracted for a few more minutes. Ian and Sean need to get out and away with some of the more important supplies."

"What did you do?" Claire whirled around her eyes wild with panic.

"I'm diversifying our risk. They're moving some of the supplies out of the dorm."

"You're doing it right under his nose? You're playing a dangerous game. It's out of your league."

"Just follow my lead," he assured her.

Claire groaned and covered her face. "Sweetheart, I've followed your lead and it's why I don't slow dance with you."

"Hello Colonel," David greeted him as the man strode across the bridge followed a few steps behind by his subordinate.

The Colonel spread his arms and surveyed the land. "Here I am making my rounds today and what do I find but the good doctors from America have come to visit my humble plantation." His eyes tracked straight to David when he said, "What a nice surprise."

"Right," Claire snorted. "The guy from customs probably tipped you off as soon as we passed through the airport."

"How would you propose I might be contacted by customs? We are, after all, limited by the same lack of resources as the plantation."

"Yet you drive a jeep..." Claire tapped a finger to her lips, "which requires gas and oil to run. Must be expensive if you're trucking fuel in from a port to a central location with pumping abilities. If you can afford fuel, I'm sure you can afford something mundane like a satellite phone to communicate with."

The words struck a chord and the Colonel glared at her with cold, flat eyes. "You, woman, have a vivid imagination."

"Let's just cut the crap. We all know why you're here."

He focused his steely gaze on David. “She is how you say...feisty. Her talent is better served for other purposes.”

Claire opened her mouth to protest but David hooked her arm. “Excuse us,” and whirled her around taking them a few steps away from the glowering stares of the two men. “You’re poking a hornet’s nest. I said distract, not piss off.”

“Well, I’m pissed off and he’s such an arrogant bastard.”

“You need to get control of your emotions or we’re going to get our asses handed to us before we even get started. We don’t have much leverage to work with here.”

David tried to hold onto Claire but she pushed away from him.

“We’re all tired from the bus ride,” David explained as he moved toward the Colonel. “The Ministry of Health should be here soon to shuttle everyone to the villages.”

The Colonel smiled but there was no humor in his eyes. “It seems they are late or perhaps not coming at all.”

“What do you mean not coming?” asked David and behind him he heard Claire cursing under her breath.

The Colonel shrugged. “I will provide you with a ride and we can discuss what supplies I require from you.”

## Chapter Six

THE DIRT PATH, littered with the discarded long tapered leaves of harvested sugarcane plants, widened as Alex and Regina hiked along with Charles a few steps to their left. The only sound was the rasp of their boots across the parched ground. Two enormous railway cars filled to overflowing with harvested sugarcane sat on train tracks running parallel to the trail. The sun was approaching its zenith in the sky and the air was growing hotter and more humid with each passing hour. Sweat rolled down the back of Regina’s neck.

Regina spotted a row of workers cutting the cane by hand. The methodical sound became clearer and more distinct as they approached. Swish. Chop. Swish. Chop.

With sweat stained shirts clinging to their torsos, the cane cutters worked in a synchronized rhythm and one sang a tune in a language she didn’t understand while the others hummed along. First, they gathered a bunch of cane stalks with one hand and tugged them to the side to expose the bottom of the plant. Brandishing machetes, with muscular sinewy arms, they severed the stalks close to the ground. They tossed the stalks aside and moved to the next cluster of cane. One of the men stopped his work to observe Alex and Regina as they passed by, watching for a long uncomfortable moment before he went back to cutting down the cane.

“Where do they take the sugarcane?” Regina asked Charles as she looked at the rust-colored railway tracks running along the ground for as far as her eye could see.

He was silent for a moment. He took his time answering as he found the words in English. “The tracks lead to a factory where they refine the cane into sugar.”

“Is it far?”

“’Tis on the other side of the plantation. Many hectares away.”

“How many villages are here on the plantation?” Regina glanced at Alex who strode between them, listening to the stilted conversation.

Again, Charles fell silent and Regina studied him as he tramped along. He was tall, with handsome, rugged features. His shoulders and arms were corded with lean muscles from what she suspected was years of cutting and carrying sugarcane. He wore a faded blue denim shirt with the sleeves cut-off below the shoulders. His faded denim pants hung above his ankles. Just when Regina thought he wasn’t going to answer, he looked straight into her eyes. “You ask many questions.”

Regina saw the amused smile on Alex’s lips and caught the wink when their gazes locked.

“Looks like something’s brewing out there,” Alex pointed at the ominous blue gray thunderheads forming on the horizon.

Charles grumbled his assent. “We’ll have storms later.”

Regina wondered for the first time just where Charles was planning on having them stay now since a chance of a storm seemed probable. She suspected wherever it was didn’t include anything as comfortable or safe as the bed she and Alex shared at home. She suffered a brief pang of worry at their situation and questioned the sanity of her decision to have her and Alex leave the group to travel to the village alone.

The three of them hiked for a time along the undulating terrain until they arrived at a crossroads. Charles directed Alex and Regina from the main route to a small footpath veering off to the right. They paused on the crest of the hill. Spread out below them was a large field planted with rows of vegetables at various stages of maturity. Far off on the hillside, a stream ran through a rocky outcropping into a small pond. A dam blocked the water from running free through an enormous channel dug into the earth. When released, the water flowed down into the field to hand hewn irrigation ditches running between the rows. A group of children were bent over in several of the rows digging and pulling tubers out of the ground. Regina removed a water bottle from the side of her pack and handed it to Alex.

“You’re not drinking enough,” Regina said. Charles was studying them both from a few feet away.

Regina felt the brush of her fingers on her hand as Alex lifted the bottle from her grasp. “Thanks.”

She worried about Alex, knowing she had pushed herself to get back to work sooner than what she should have after her injury. It was Alex’s way of dealing with the aftermath of the trauma, keeping busy so her mind was occupied. Regina felt a wash of strong emotion roll through her as the horrible memories unexpectedly swamped her again. She worked hard to control her ragged breathing and the sudden urge to cry.

“What’s wrong?”

Regina’s eyes swam with tears as she surveyed the bowl-shaped valley ahead of them. She kept her gaze focused on the children who one by one stopped what they were doing to stare at them. “I’ll tell you later. We’ve got company.” She offered Alex a quick re-assuring smile hoping her expression wasn’t giving her away.

“HELLO, CHARLES!” Sister Rose called out as she climbed the embankment. She was dressed in a similar habit as Sister Juanita’s.

A child toddled alongside her clutching the folds of her skirt. On her other side trotted a young foal with black tipped ears and thick brown fur. Its ears twitched and moved in opposite directions and the animal let out a raspy EE-Aw.

"I'm taking them to examine a child in the village," Charles explained. "I'll walk you back with the children."

"Thank you, Charles." She stopped and surveyed Alex and Regina her eyes flicking over them with wary interest. "Good morning, ladies. I'm Sister Rose," she said, holding out her hand.

"I'm Regina, this is Alex," Regina said as she swiped her windblown hair from her eyes."

"Nice to meet you."

She watched Regina's eyes brighten as a genuine smile touched her lips and she knelt down in front of the boy and held out her hand. "Hi."

"Are you doctors or nurses?"

"Doctors," Regina said and returned her attention to the boy. "What's your name?"

He hid his face in Sister Rose's skirt. Sister Rose tapped the boy on his shoulder to get his attention and signed to him. He shook his head and pointed to Sister Rose. "His name is Javier. If you sign this to him it means 'watch me.'" Sister Rose signed the words to Regina. "Now you can show him what you want him to do."

She peeked at Regina's companion who was standing off to the side watching the activity out in the field. She was tall and fit in a light blue scrub top tucked into cargo pants and her dark, shoulder length hair ruffled in the tropical breeze. Pale blue eyes moved back to study Regina and the corners of her mouth twitched into a smile as she watched her interact with the boy.

Without warning, the donkey stepped closer and butted Alex in the thigh with its head forcing her back a step. "Hey, what's with the head butt, buddy?"

"Enzo, stop it," Sister Rose admonished and gave a sharp tug on his tether. "He's looking for something to eat."

"Sorry, I don't have anything to give you, Enzo." Alex rubbed his fuzzy head and ran her fingers through his short-cropped mane. "Try her," she said pointing at Regina. "She always has snacks."

"Me?" Regina jabbed a finger at her chest.

Sister Rose watched with interest. "We don't get many visitors coming out to the fields."

"Is it safe to fill our bottles from the stream?" Alex held two water bottles.

"The water at the top of the hill comes from an underground spring. I drink it with no problem but I'm used to it." Sister Rose pointed her in the direction of the pond. "Do your bottles have filters?"

"They do," Alex said.

"You should be fine," Sister Rose said.

"Be right back," Alex said to Regina and trotted off down past where the children were working.

"How many children do you take care of?" Regina asked.

"It depends on the day. A school was built last year. All the children attend for part of the day. We can only keep them in school >until they are eleven or twelve."

"What happens once they're older?" Regina asked.

"When the boys are strong enough they go out into the fields to start cutting cane and the girls help out in the village until they're old enough to find a husband to support them." Sister Rose said watching the pensive expression on Regina's face.

“What about your friend here?” Regina asked as she knelt and signed ‘watch me’ to Javier. During the next few minutes she engaged the shy youngster in a game of peek-a-boo.

“Javier? He’s smart as a whip and is always imitating the big kids.”

“How old is he?”

“Three. Here come some of the oldest children now,” Sister Rose said when she heard the chatter of young voices coming from behind her.

The tallest was a girl with coal black hair pulled back in a thick braid. She carried a canvas sack bulging with roots and vegetables. The sleeves of her worn shirt fell just below her elbows and the legs of her pants were frayed at the ends. She lowered the sack next to Sister Rose and her dark brown eyes studied Regina.

“Did you get what we needed?”

“Yes, Sister. Who are they?” she asked in Spanish. Javier hopped up and down in front of Alicia with his arms raised. She bent down and gathered him into her arms.

“Alicia, they’re doctors. They’re here to check and make sure all of you are healthy.”

The other children hiked back from the fields carrying sacks filled with the crops they had harvested. One by one they gathered around Sister Rose watching the newcomers.

Enzo brayed as another donkey trotted up the hill and stopped alongside him. The brindled colored animal rubbed its head against him in an affectionate greeting.

“His mother?” Regina asked extending her hand to the muzzle of the wooly creature. It sniffed her outstretched palm before stepping back.

“Yes, it is. Come everyone, we’re heading back.”

“ALEX!” REGINA CALLED. Alex looked from her crouched position at the spring and acknowledged her with a wave of her arm.

“We’re heading out.” Regina glanced at Charles who stood off to the side staring off into the distance. The children laughed and jostled each other as they moved along. Regina waited while Alex strode back to her, the water bottles dangling from her hands.

“Here.” She handed one to Regina and fell into step alongside her.

“Looks like you had quite a flood back by the church,” Regina said as she strolled alongside Sister Rose. Alicia paced a few feet away and Regina caught several of her furtive glances.

“We did. Last fall there was a week where the rain stayed to our north in the mountains. The creek was running a little higher than it usually does. One of the soldiers saw debris gathering and churning in the water upstream from here and alerted us. We knew we needed to get out.”

“How terrifying,” Regina said.

“It was. The water pushed everything in its path ahead of it. All of the garbage in its way got caught in the deluge. We had just enough time to gather the children and run the way you and your friend hiked to the fields. We kept to high ground and made our way to the villages to the south.”

“The water made it this far?”

“We’re in a valley and the water has nowhere to go but over its banks.”

“How awful.”

“It was. We lost everything. Clothing, shoes, tools...all of it gone.”

“What did you do?”

“The people here...” her hazel eyes swam with tears and her voice went thick with emotion. “What can you do but pick up the pieces and start again?”

“You’re from the church. Didn’t they help?”

A wry smile crossed Sister Rose’s lips. “They sent an envoy to look at what was left.”

Alicia broke her silence and spoke as she ambled alongside Sister Rose. “He was more concerned the sugarcane was still being harvested.”

“Alicia, this is not for you to judge,” Sister Rose chastised her.

“It’s the truth, Sister.”

“Even if it is the truth, it’s not for you to speak about and certainly not with our guests. Go help the younger children.”

Anger flashed in Alicia’s eyes but she remained quiet. She set Javier back on the ground next to Sister Rose and stalked away.

Sister Rose signed to Javier. When his tears didn’t stop she picked him up. “Is it the truth?” Regina asked.

“She has a child’s view of the world and doesn’t understand the politics involved.”

“I think she has a unique perspective given the poverty she’s living in.”

“Perhaps,” Sister Rose said and continued with a worry-filled voice, “but she’s young and brash enough not to know her words can cause her plenty of trouble if the wrong person hears them.”

“Why would the church be more concerned about the plantation?” She could swear she saw Sister Rose flinch at the question.

“This is a small orphanage. We have no infrastructure to speak of so it’s difficult for us to attract large Western medical missions.”

“What does infrastructure have to do with the diocese helping you and the children after a flood?”

“Money.”

“You mean the diocese wants donations in return for its support?”

“Everything costs money and yes as distasteful as it might be one hand washes the other.”

Regina watched as Alex strolled along the beaten path with several of the children tagging along behind her. One of the boys pulled a tattered baseball out of his trouser pocket and held it out to her with a hopeful expression on his face. She toyed with the ball in her hand before launching it high into the air. A game of catch ensued as the children all clamored for a turn to chase after the ball and throw it back to Alex. Even Javier scrambled out of Sister Rose’s arms to join the fray.

Regina couldn’t help but smile at the spontaneous eruption of joyful play around them. Even Charles with his stern countenance allowed a brief smile to cross his face.

The game went on for several rounds until Sister Rose raised her voice. “Children, enough. It is time to walk back.”

Alex jumped to snare an errant pass thrown back to her. The weight of her backpack caused her to stumble but she regained her balance. With a mischievous grin she lobbed the ball across to Regina.

“Oh, hey!” Regina bobbed it before gaining control and tossed it back to Alex.

“You and the doctor are good friends,” Sister Rose commented.

“Yes, we are.” Regina met the nun’s steady gaze. She sensed something behind Sister Rose’s inquisitive expression and re-directed the conversation elsewhere. “How long have you been here?”



“A couple of years.”

“How long do you plan to stay?”

“The church decides how long I stay at any one place.”

“Oh, I didn’t know.”

“There are usually more than two of us, but Sister Francis took ill and had to be taken to the hospital in Santo Domingo. Her replacement should be here in two weeks.”

“How long has the orphanage been here?”

“As long as the plantation has I suppose,” Sister Rose replied as she strolled along with her hands folded behind her. “There are always babies.”

“Oh,” Regina said as she considered this.

“Life is not easy for the women here. The government subsidizes the sugarcane companies. They won’t hire the women so they can’t find work. Sometimes being a prostitute is their only choice,” Sister Rose said as she studied Regina’s expression. “Do I shock you?”

“No. I...I never thought...had reason to think about it before,” Regina confessed. “They’re forced into it because they have no choice.”

“People do what they can to survive.”

“I imagine they do.”

Javier let go of Sister Rose’s dress and meandered off toward a pile of debris on the side of the path. The nun stopped and watched as he toddled toward it. “Let him go,” Sister Rose put an arm out and stopped Alicia who was about to go after him. “He’ll come back to us in a minute.”

Regina watched with trepidation as the boy crawled onto the top of the mound and started picking through the contents of it.

Alex stepped beside Regina. “What is he looking for?”

“You’ll see,” Sister Rose replied.

Javier lifted his hand and studied the object he held in his fist. With a triumphant expression, he climbed back down the pile. He returned to Sister Rose and held his hand out to her. A scrap piece of tin glinted in the sunlight.

Sister Rose accepted the small piece of scrap metal from the boy and handed it to Alicia. “The older children know if they collect enough scrap metal they can trade it for food. Javier is imitating what he’s seen them do.”

“I don’t understand,” Regina said.

“The government sends trucks through to salvage scrap metal once in awhile. They’ll pay a few cents to the pound,” Sister Rose explained.

“Sifting through a garbage pile is no place for an adult, let alone a child,” Alex said from a few feet away.

“This life is hard and seldom fair,” Sister Rose said. She started to hum a melody and proceeded to sing.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost but now am found  
Was blind, but now I see...

Several of the older children joined her and their harmonious voices filled the air as they sang all six stanzas of the song. Regina could see nothing but sugarcane now, prison bars surrounding

them on all sides, their tops rustling in the wind like someone was shaking them in a desperate bid to escape.

They continued to walk and a short while later the path widened and a cluster of small, disheveled cottages and shacks came into view further down the unpaved road. Regina felt transported back in time and had a suspicion what they were going to see was a lot worse than she imagined.

Charles, who hiked well ahead of the children, stopped now and motioned for Alex and Regina to follow him.

Regina said, "You have a beautiful voice."

"Thank you. Singing soothes the younger children while we walk.

Go with him," Sister Rose said. "Be careful if you see soldiers."

"Soldiers?" Regina felt a trickle of alarm in her guts.

"They patrol the plantations to make sure the government's assets are protected."

"Bu—what do we do if run into them?" Regina asked. Alex stopped and was standing a few feet away listening.

"If they ask you anything claim ignorance and say you got separated from your group."

Regina adjusted the straps on her backpack and resettled the weight higher on her hips.

"Great, just great," she muttered to herself.

## Chapter Seven

CHARLES LED THEM through a maze of narrow dirt streets. They wound between ramshackle huts passing for meager shelter against the elements. Alex wondered how they withstood the onslaught of tropical storms and hurricanes, decided they didn't and stopped thinking about it. She lost count of the structures crammed in one against the next. It was an odd assortment of buildings—tents, shacks with tent flaps for openings and crude one-story concrete dwellings with tin roofs slapped on top. The obvious gaps in the walls and roofs offered poor shelter from the bad weather. They crossed a courtyard where a wooden edifice lay collapsed in a heap as if the walls had given way like a house of cards.

Alex watched Regina wrinkle her nose at the acrid stench of rotting garbage, human waste and ocean air permeated everything around them.

"Too many people living too close together," Alex muttered as she paced next to her. Garbage lay strewn along the sides of pathways. A few people peered out from the dim interiors as the trio passed by.

Alex could hear the sounds of muted activity from inside the walls. A baby cried. From a distance a dog barked and the methodical, ever present chopping sound of machetes cutting sugarcane filled the air.

As they approached another row of buildings, a woman emerged from the doorway and threw a bucket of brown slurry out onto the dirt. A fetid stench of human waste filled the air

along with a high-pitched buzzing of flies immediately drawn to it. She uttered something in what Alex suspected was Creole to Charles and his pace quickened.

Regina stepped around the wet stain on the earth and slipped on something wet and slimy. “Oh!” She would have lost her balance and fallen had Alex not been there to grab her by the straps of her backpack and set her back on her feet.

“Easy, I’ve got you,” Alex said.

“Thanks.”

Charles rounded another corner and came to an abrupt stop in front of a broken down wooden shack. “In here.” He pointed at the tarp hanging across the entrance.

“Here?” Alex pointed having difficulty imagining anyone lived inside the broken down hovel.

“Wait,” Regina said. “Where do we go after we’re done?”

“Stay here. I’ll come back for you later. Go.” His eyes anxious he motioned them inside with his hand.

FAR AWAY, A rumble of thunder filled the air, as Alex stood beside Regina watching a conflict of emotions flicker across Regina’s face. She heard the rustling of the sugarcane fronds and felt the breeze strengthen ahead of the impending storm.

“What’re you thinking?”

“Something my mother said the day before we left,” Regina said as she reached to pull back the tarp.

Alex put a hand on her shoulder. “What did she say?”

“I was running away from my obligations.”

“Obligations?” An incredulous expression crossed her features.

“She said I should be settling down and dating someone, not running around in some third world country.”

“I’m sorry,” Alex said.

“For what?”

“Getting this wild idea to come on this trip and dragging you with me.”

“Now hold on a minute. Just because my mother has a problem with it doesn’t mean I do. You didn’t drag me anywhere. We decided to do this together. Remember?”

“Of course, I do,” Alex said. She caught her breath as Regina caressed her cheek and their eyes met.

“You said yourself you wanted to do a medical mission but there always seemed to be something holding you back.”

“It never seemed to be the right time to go.”

“Didn’t you tell me coming face to face with your mortality stripped away all the trivial reasons not to chase after what you wanted?”

“I did. I just didn’t think about what it meant for you—for us.”

“Stop it.” Alex felt the palm of Regina’s hand pressed against her chest and was captured by the intensity in her eyes. “What happened to you changed so many things for us. I’m not even sure we both understand to what extent.”

Alex leaned into the touch and closed her eyes. “It’s been a rough time for both of us, I know.”

“It has,” Regina agreed. “And for the record what my mother said really pissed me off.”

Alex lifted Regina’s palm and pressed her lips to it. “I’m glad you’re here with me.”

“I am too.”

Alex started to lean in to kiss her but she heard something over the rustling of the leaves and her heart rate accelerated. Male voices and the crunching of boots on the ground.

“Go—inside.” Alex pulled back the tarp ducking under after Regina.

“Hello?”

Alex slid in beside her and cursed herself for not having a headlamp accessible on her pack as the tarp slid back across the entrance blocking out the sun. Seconds passed and she blinked her eyes to adjust to the dimness. Cracks in the wooden walls let in the fading afternoon sunlight, the rays illuminating the myriad of dust particles floating in the air.

She could make out the inside was an approximate six feet square and made of scrap pieces of wood secured to branches and sticks that were jammed into the ground. Above, she saw a combination of scrap metal, wood and banana leaves covering the branches to make the beams of the roof. Outside the sound of the men’s voices and the noise of their boots tromping on the ground drew closer and passed the hut. The noise faded in the distance.

They were both crouched just inside the entrance neither one daring to move. In one of the corners a pile of dirty linens lie in a tumbled mess. The floor felt hard and Alex ran her fingers along the grainy surface. Dirt.

“Hello?” Regina said again.

Alex heard a sound—a faint cough and wheeze and a stirring from beneath the covers. Alex shrugged off her pack as Regina did the same. Crouching down she lifted a comforter back and peeled back two sheets. What she saw took her breath away and she had to clamp down on her emotions not to react.

Alex felt Regina at her back and the weight of her hand on her shoulder as her partner knelt beside her.

“My God,” Regina exhaled. “She’s skin and bones, Alex.”

Lethargic eyes blinked open and slid shut.

Alex unzipped her pack and handed Regina a pair of gloves. “Hang on, we need some light.” She stepped away and pulled the tarp back and wedged a corner in between a gap in the wood.

“I can’t believe she’s all alone in here,” Regina said as she slipped her hands into the gloves. She reached out to touch the child’s shoulder with the back of her hand. “Sweetheart, let’s see what we can find out about you.” Regina stopped and hung her head. “She doesn’t understand a damn word I’m saying.”

“Probably not.” Alex reached into her bag, pulled on a pair of gloves and crouched down beside her. She swiveled around on her knees looking for any sign someone else lived here. There was nothing.

Regina said, “Help me get her off the floor.”

“Scoot over,” Alex settled onto her knees and slipped her arms under the frail body amazed at how light she was as she lifted the child and set her on top of the comforter.

“She’s dehydrated, malnourished and...” they both whirled around when they heard a noise outside and a body blocked the light in the entrance.

“Alicia? What are you doing here?” Regina asked.

The girl hesitated at the doorway and stepped inside. “I heard Charles tell Sister Rose where he left you.”

“Does she know you’re here?”

Alicia shook her head. “She wouldn’t have let me come.”

“Charles took off in a hurry,” Regina said.

“Soldiers. Sometimes they take the men away who come from Haiti.”

“Why?”

“They like to be mean to people who have no papers.” She crept closer and pointed to what Regina held in her hand. “What are you holding?”

“It’s a thermometer. Look. I can place it in her ear and it tells me the temperature inside her body.” The device beeped and Regina read the display. “One hundred point five.”

“How does it work? Is it magic?”

“No, it’s...infrared,” Alex said and tilted her head to look at Regina. “Got any ideas how to explain it?”

“Nope. Your department.”

“Thanks,” Alex replied, as the corners of Regina’s mouth lift into a mischievous grin. Lightning flashed, casting an eerie glow inside the hut. Thunder rumbled seconds later.

“You can’t stay here tonight,” Alicia said. “It’s not safe.”

“Because of the soldiers?” Alex asked.

“Yes.”

Regina cast a glance at Alex as she moved the stethoscope to a different location on the girl’s chest and listened again. “She’s got decreased breath sounds in the lower lobe of both lungs.”

“Pneumonia?”

“Could be,” Regina slipped the stethoscope around her neck and looked at Alicia. “How did you learn to speak English so well?”

“Sister Juanita has been teaching me.” Alicia stepped back and peered outside. “We have to leave. They’ll be coming back this way soon.”

“Where do we go?” Alex reached into her backpack and pulled out a spare scrub top.

“I’ll take you to the school. There’s people there and the soldiers won’t come to where Sister Rose is.”

“Why?”

“Sister Rose says it’s because they’re superstitious.”

Alex raised an eyebrow and Alicia said, “They’re afraid of what they don’t understand.”

Alex peered at Regina who sat back on her heels and said, “I guess she told you.”

“I suppose she did. We should go. We’re sitting in a petri dish of germs here and this ground is going to turn into a swamp when it starts to rain.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” Regina said already packing her bag.

Alex slipped the scrub top over the girl’s head and pulled her arms through the sleeves. She dug in her pack and pulled out an extra piece of webbing and wrapped it around the child’s middle to cinch the top around her. The girl whimpered and lifted a frail arm in a futile attempt to push Alex away.

“Alicia do you know what language she speaks?”

“Most of the kids know Spanish.”

“How do you say ‘don’t be afraid,’ in Spanish?” Alex asked.

“*No tengas miedo*,” Alicia replied.

“Thanks.” Alex winked at Alicia and repeated the words in the youngster’s ear.

Alex situated her backpack on her shoulders and with some help from Regina gathered the girl into her arms. “All right Alicia, lead the way.”

IF IT WAS possible, Regina decided, the narrow path winding between the decrepit huts, some completely burnt out shells, was worse than the route they had taken into the batey. She glanced at the underbelly of the approaching clouds, darkened to an ominous black. Fear twisted in her gut. Behind them the sky was still clear blue.

Beside her Alex was carrying the half-naked child in her arms. Her expression was stoic and distant as she hiked through the debris-ridden trail.

“How’s she doing?” Regina asked, stepping closer to Alex.

“She feels like her fever’s getting worse. We need to get her inside and push some fluids into her.”

A vivid flash of lightning lit the sky and the clouds changed to dusky blue. Regina flinched and felt the air around them prickle with electricity. Huge raindrops started to fall and the wind whipped around them.

“How much farther, Alicia?” Alex shouted above the din.

“Maybe we should go back.” Regina swept her wet hair out of her face and shielded her eyes as the rain pelted at them.

“No! We can’t go back,” Alicia said and the fear Regina saw etched in her eyes made her heart lurch. She looked back in the direction Alicia was staring and saw nothing but bits of garbage blowing about on the ground. She half expected to see an apparition rising from the depths of hell.

A loud clap of thunder erupted overhead and sent Alicia running. In minutes, the water rose to ankle deep through the narrow pathways and carried anything loose along with it. When it seemed like it couldn’t rain any harder it did and Regina reached out to hold onto Alex to steady herself.

“Follow me,” Alicia grabbed Regina’s arm and pulled her forward.

Something large and gray loomed ahead through the sheets of rain and Regina hesitated not sure of where she was being pulled to. All she knew was everything around them felt threatening and dangerous as if some malevolent influence was powering nature’s wrath against them. Regina stumbled as she tripped across a threshold and landed hard on her hands and knees just inside a doorway.

“This is insane,” Regina said as she struggled to her feet feeling the sting in both her palms.

“Maybe it’s a microburst,” Alex said as she re-settled the girl on her hip and offered Regina a hand. Alex shook her head sending a spray of droplets around her. She wiped her hair back from her face.

“At least the rain is warm,” Regina said as she looked at the puddle of water gathering at their feet.

A dozen pairs of shocked eyes stared at the rain-sodden trio and their young patient. Several of the children cried out in fright and from a doorway across the room Sister Rose appeared.

“Alicia...where have you oh—”

“We need a place away from the other children to put her,” Alex said.

“Come this way.” Sister Rose motioned for them to follow.

Alex glanced at the assortment of boys and girls sitting in groups on the concrete floor staring at them. A few older girls sat in mildew stained white resin chairs towards the back of the room, whispering amongst themselves.

Curious stares followed them as they made their way through the room. Regina shrugged out of her backpack and took the girl from Alex’s arms so she could do the same. “Do you have an extra blanket so we can lie her down?” Regina asked.

“Yes. Alicia go get one from the girls. Tell them they’ll just have to share.” Sister Rose stepped closer and peered at the child in Regina’s arms and touched her hand to girl’s forehead. “She’s feverish.”

Alex dug into her backpack and pulled out an intravenous kit and gloves while Alicia retrieved a blanket from the other room. She returned a minute later and laid the blanket out on the floor. Regina knelt and settled the girl onto the cotton coverlet. A faint groan escaped her lips.

“Does anybody know her name?” Regina looked at Sister Rose as she pulled gloves onto her hands and detected an almost imperceptible flinch before she answered.

“One of the children might know,” she said.

Regina dragged her backpack closer, rummaged through it and removed one of the bags of intravenous fluid. Out of the corner of her eye she caught a brief but intense hushed verbal exchange between Alicia and Sister Rose as they stood by the doorway. She hooked the tubing to the bag and glanced at Alex with a perplexed expression.

“What’s the matter?” Alex asked.

Regina looked around the sparsely appointed area. “I need something to hang this from.”

Alex handed Regina a length of rubber tubing.

“Thanks.” Regina wrapped it around the girl’s bicep and searched for a vein. “I think this one will work,” Regina said as she felt one of the vessels.

Alex took a minute to survey the room. She pointed to a transom window with a hand crank. “We can hang it there,” she said and handed Regina a sealed alcohol swab.

Regina opened the package and wiped it on the skin. She took the pediatric needle Alex was holding and with practiced hand inserted the catheter into the vein and applied a transparent dressing to protect the intravenous site.

Alex knelt and scooped the girl into her arms and moved her closer to the window.

“Perfect,” Regina said as she hung it from the eyelet at the top of the bag. She put her back to Sister Rose so she was face to face with Alex. “Do you get the sense Sister Rose knows more than she’s letting on?”

“Somebody knows a lot more than they’re telling us. I just don’t know who or what it is yet.” They exchanged deliberate glances.

“Sister, I’ve been trying to figure something out,” Regina said as she crouched down beside the girl and pushed her tangled hair back behind her ear. “How is it a sick child was left all alone under a pile of dirty blankets?” She rose to her feet and peeled her gloves off wincing as it pulled at the abrasions on her palms.

“I’m wondering if she abandoned or was someone trying to hide her?” Alex said from behind her.

Regina found Sister Rose staring back at her with a somber expression.

## Chapter Eight

THE INTENSITY OF thunder and lightning was fading as the storm cell moved steadily to the east. A steady rain continued to fall and the air was hot and sticky with humidity. Alex could hear the voices of the children as they left the shelter of the school to walk to their homes.

Home.

The word seemed absurd given the little of what she'd seen of the plantation on the hike in today. Filled with an uneasy, restless energy, Alex crossed to the transom window, checked the IV fluid and adjusted the flow. She stared out the window at the small courtyard and sighed, fighting the sense of vulnerability and loneliness creeping into her soul.

"You okay?" Regina touched her shoulder.

"Frustrated. We've got a sick kid and we can't even run a simple blood test or get an x-ray. We need to find out something – anything about her." It was easier to default to the task at hand than consider what was really bothering her.

"We will," Regina said and pressed a reassuring hand against her flank. "Do you think David and the others got hit with the storm?"

"We're not too far south of them. I'm sure they got part of it." She lifted Regina's hands and examined her palms. "Let me clean these scratches."

"Thanks."

Alex dug in her pack and retrieved some cleaner. She sprayed it on the cuts on Regina's hands. "The last thing we need is you getting an infection out here." She pulled several band-aids from her kit and covered the abrasions. She spent a few seconds holding Regina's hand to her lips and got engrossed looking in her eyes, her physical presence solace to the despair growing inside. "All better?"

"Much. Don't even feel it stinging anymore," Regina said with a smile.

"Good," Alex said with more conviction than she felt.

Alex glanced over Regina's shoulder spotting Sister Rose as she carried two chairs into the room with her. "We've got company," she said and released Regina's hand with a wry grin.

"I hope David and the others are able to get here before dark."

"They've got a lot of stuff to pack and move."

Sister Rose cleared her throat and took a few steps closer to them. "Before you arrived, with the girl I told Charles to go back to your friends with Enzo and bring one of our carts."

"Where are Alicia and Javier?" Regina stepped away from Alex.

"She took the younger children back to their homes. Javier is with her."

"Is it safe?"

Sister Rose set the folding chairs down and opened them. "They walk four miles a day—two here and two back home. Some of the time Charles is with them, today Alicia is and tomorrow they might walk alone."

"Sometimes? They're just kids—babies some of them. Anything could happen to them."

"Bad things can happen anywhere. Please sit and rest. You both must be exhausted."

"Thanks," Regina said and pulled the chair close to the girl lying on the floor sleeping. She reached down and adjusted the scrub top around her frail body.

Alex paced restlessly until Regina caught her wrist and tugged her to a stop.

"What?"

"You've hardly slept since we got off the plane yesterday and you need to eat. You're—"

"Okay, I get it. My blood sugar's low and I'm acting like a bitch."



“You’re right but you didn’t need to say it.” Regina dug into her backpack, pulled out a package of trail mix and handed it to Alex. “I found this on a rack in the corner of the store at the airport.”

“I don’t have anything to offer you. Usually I walk back to the church after the children gather food from the garden.”

“Why didn’t you walk back today?” Regina asked.

“When he met me at the garden, Charles told me he needed to bring you to Silvi so I stayed after I brought the children back here. It’s better you’re not alone if the others don’t make it here tonight.”

“You do know her name,” Alex said meeting the nun’s gaze.

Sister Rose looked away from Alex. “I...I wasn’t sure how much to share with you.”

Alex tore open the package and offered some to Regina.

“Thanks,” Regina took a few pieces and popped them into her mouth. “I have a couple of oranges. Here take one.” She handed the fruit to Sister Rose.

“Thank you.”

Regina handed the other one to Alex. “You peel them better than I do.”

Alex munched on the trail mix and started peeling the skin from the fruit. When she was done she split the fruit and handed half back to Regina all the while aware of Sister Rose studying their interaction. “You don’t trust us.”

Sister Rose fiddled with a wedge of the orange before she bit into it. “I don’t know you. You haven’t given me a reason to mistrust or trust you.”

Alex stood and paced across the room. “I’m glad we’re clear on it.”

“Please understand things are not easy here and not everyone is cut out to deal with what goes on. What do you think is wrong with her?”

“It could be pneumonia,” Regina began. “Unfortunately, it gets more complicated because she’s dehydrated and suffering from malnutrition. So we could have a virus entering that first weakened her body’s defenses, and now a bacterial infection takes hold. Of course, in this setting...it’s all simply conjecture.”

“Enter Darwin,” Alex said as she returned to the chair and rested her hands on the back of it.

“Excuse me?” Sister Rose said.

“It all comes down to survival of the fittest,” Alex said. “We’ll get her rehydrated and see how she’s doing in a couple of hours.”

“We can try erythromycin, but again we don’t really know what we’re treating here.”

“You don’t paint a hopeful picture,” Sister Rose replied.

“It’s a truthful and realistic one,” Alex said pinning her with an icy glare.

“Is there someplace where I can get some clean water to wash her with?” Regina asked with a sigh.

“Use this,” Alex offered her water bottle.

“No. It’s for you to drink. We’re going to need more until David gets here later with the rest of the supplies.”

“There’s a pump outside behind the schoolhouse. You’ll find a small propane camp stove and a pot in the front room. You can set it on the cinder blocks outside. If you can get a fire started you can boil it there.”

“Ok. I’ll be back.”

Alex stood as Regina strode out of the room and moved to the transom window. She stayed there watching while Regina went to the pump.

She let her gaze roam back to Sister Rose who observed her from across the room, arms folded across her chest in apparent irritation with her.

“What can you tell me about her mother?” Alex asked, wondering if she wanted to know the truth.

“I’m afraid it’s rather complicated.”

“Families usually are.”

Sister Rose paced the room and stopped a few feet away from Alex. “The word family takes on a different meaning here. Many of these children are orphans.”

“Is Silvi?”

“Yes and no...her mother still lives here on the plantation.”

Alex folded her hands and leaned against the concrete wall as she glanced back out the window. Regina was still pumping water into the bucket. “So where is she?” Alex asked, feeling unnerved as more of the story unfolded.

“She is one of the unmarried women here in the bately. She has no one to support her so she sells herself to survive.”

“And Silvi happens to be one of her children,” Alex concluded, a pall settling on her.

“Yes, she is.”

“We certainly don’t get to pick what family we’re born into. Luck of the draw, I suppose.”

“Or God’s plan.” Sister Rose stepped around in front of Alex. “Do you believe in God, doctor?”

Alex considered the question as she studied Sister Rose’s expression full of challenge and antagonism. She looked away. “The older I get the less sure I am of what I believe in.”

“Do you go to church?”

“What you’re asking is do I practice a religion.”

“I asked if you believe in God.”

“I believe in a something greater than all of us. What it is, I don’t know. As far as religion—I have little use for any organized religion because when you get right down to it, it’s about power and politics. And power is often abused.” Alex held Sister Rose’s gaze until the woman looked away.

The nun knelt beside Silvi. “Is there anything else you can do for her?”

“At the moment, no. Her body needs more time to respond to the fluids.”

REGINA WENT OUTSIDE the schoolhouse carrying the propane camp stove and the metal pail to the cinder blocks stacked waist high in the corner of the courtyard. The backside of mountainous cumulonimbus clouds climbed high into the atmosphere. Sunlight reflected off of them from the west highlighting them in shades of pinks and brilliant whites. Breaks of blue sky shown through the dark storm clouds moving to the east. Thunder rumbled off in the distance and a gentle drizzle fell. It felt cool and refreshing on her skin.

She carried the pot to the pump. Regina worked the handle at first tentative and gained confidence as she felt the pressure build and found a rhythm. After a dozen or so excursions of the pump handle water started to gush from the spigot.

The school building looked desolate and unkempt. Mildew and mold discolored the outside walls where puddles of water collected after the tropical rains and was absorbed through the concrete.

The scuff of footsteps coming from behind alerted her to someone approaching. When she looked Alicia was standing with her rain soaked clothes clinging to her body.

“Did you walk all the kids back home already?”

“Only the youngest. The older ones can get home themselves.” Alicia stood a few feet away watching her with uncertain eyes.

“Why are you getting water?”

“I’m going to wash Silvi.”

“Why? Will it help her get better?”

“You might be surprised what can help when someone is sick,” Regina said with a smile.

She finished filling the pot and carried it back to the propane stove. The drizzle had stopped now and the air was thick as the sun broke through and re-heated the atmosphere below.

“Where’s Javier? Sister Rose said he was with you.” Regina opened the valve for the propane and pressed the ignition button several times before the stove lit.

“I left him with one of the girls. They have food tonight.”

“Tonight?” Regina asked trying to wrap her mind around the fact these kids were orphans and left to their own devices. “Where do you sleep at night?”

“Sometimes I stay with Sister Rose and Sister Juanita.”

“Oh.” Regina regarded Alicia – a young girl not quite a teenager caught somewhere in the tenuous middle ground between childhood and adulthood. “What about when you don’t stay with them?”

“I sleep here at the school.”

“You stay here alone?” Standing closer now, she observed the neatly mended tears where the fabric had worn in several places on her shirt. “Who taught you to sew?”

“Sister Juanita did.”

Alicia started to say something else but instead her eyes grew wide and she backpedaled a few steps before she sprinted behind the school. A Jeep rumbled through one of the wider dirt paths, spewing mud and stones around it.

“Alicia wait!” Regina called out but the girl was already fleeing away from the oncoming vehicle. Regina wondered what had made Alicia run like the devil himself pursued her.

After the mud splattered Jeep slowed to a stop, a tall dark-skinned man dressed in fatigues climbed out from behind the wheel. David exited the vehicle from the other side.

“We hitched a ride,” David explained with a smile. Regina thought it looked forced. She watched in surprise as he handed the soldier a small roll of dollar bills.

Emma and Claire climbed out of the back of the Jeep and joined Regina.

“I’m glad to see you guys. We were wondering when you would make it here,” Regina said.

Claire wiped the sweat from her face and neck with a bandana. “Come hell or high water we were getting here.”

“Where are Ian and Sean? What about all the others?”

“Shh...not so loud.” She glanced behind her at David. “Ian and Sean are coming later with Charles. The rest are hiking south to a couple of nearby villages and meeting back here tonight.”

“What’s going on? I thought the Ministry of Health was providing transportation.” Regina asked with a frown.

“How’s the kid?” Claire asked ignoring her question.

“Dehydrated and malnourished for one. I think she may have pneumonia.”

Emma stepped to the stove and looked into the pot. “What’ve you got going on?”

“Boiling water.”

Emma laughed and clapped Regina on the shoulder. “Good job. We’ll keep you around.”

Regina watched Emma dig into her backpack and retrieve a foil package of dehydrated food. She put out a hand to stop her. “It’s not for food. We need clean water to bathe Silvi with.”

“Oh—oh, right. We can get some more when you’re done.” Emma said as she stuffed the package back into her bag.

“Everything all right here?” Claire asked.

“We’re fine. Just got caught in a storm getting here with the kid.”

“Emma, why don’t you and I unload the boxes and get them into the school,” Claire said.

“Sure.”

Regina stared after them for a moment trying to make sense of the uneasy feeling stirring in her gut. She didn’t hear the footsteps behind her and jumped when a hand touched her shoulder.

“Hey.”

“Oh crap!” Regina said, “You scared the hell out of me.” As soon as the words left her mouth she regretted the sharpness of her tone.

“Sorry, I thought you heard me,” Alex said.

“No, I didn’t,” Regina answered. “Your comment about Darwin was pretty harsh.”

“Should I have given her the sugar-coated version?”

“You could have said it in a different way,” Regina replied, irritated by Alex’s matter-of-fact tone, knowing if they continued this discussion they were heading toward an argument for no other reason than they were overtired and stressed. She wanted to reach out and touch her but she didn’t. “They’re just being protective of the kids.”

Alex looked away, her gaze a thousand yard stare like she was reliving a distant memory. “I saw Alicia run past the window.”

“I think the Jeep startled her.”

“She took off into the god-forsaken maze out there.” Alex thrust her jaw out at the shanty rooftops visible as far as the eye could see.

“How’s Silvi?” She tried for common ground.

“Sleeping.” Alex tucked her hands into her pockets and rocked back on her heels avoiding Regina’s eyes. “I’ll find out what antibiotics we have on hand.”

Regina watched her walk away and tears stung her eyes. “Dammit.”

ALEX STRODE ACROSS the hard packed earth to where David was talking with the soldier. The man’s eyes flicked to her as she approached, his stare fierce and unsettling as she felt him trying to see beneath her clothes. He stood half a head shorter than she did. Beneath his rolled sleeves, corded muscles ran through his forearms. A gnarled raised scar ran the length of his left arm. His fatigues were a desert camouflage design and he wore them tucked into dusty work boots.

“Alex, this is Colonel Debois,” David said.

“Hi,” Alex nodded and offered her hand. He accepted after an awkward hesitation. She resisted the urge to look away as he pinned her with dark, hostile eyes. She gathered herself and a humorless smile touched her lips. She decided two could play at this game and lifted his hand to study his stained fingertips. “I see you roll and smoke your own cigarettes.”

“How do you know?” he asked and it was obvious she caught him off guard.

“Your fingers are stained from the tobacco leaves,” she said and indicated his other hand resting on his belt. He hesitated and held it out for her to see.

“What else can you tell about me by looking?” He tilted his head and stared at her in a challenge.

“More than you’d care to know,” Alex said with a glint in her eyes as she released his hand and sniffed. “You’re wearing pain-relieving patches. They’re laced with eucalyptus. You can smell them a mile away.” Her eyes examined his face and hands observing the telltale signs of his barrel shaped chest and the clubbing of his fingertips indicating a pulmonary or cardiovascular disease.

David coughed and cleared his throat. “The Colonel has some wood he’s going to bring by tomorrow so we can build a latrine for the school.”

“Really? They don’t have a place to…” Alex stared at the buildings behind her. “Of course they don’t. Jesus they’ll contaminate what little drinking water they do have.”

“They should be grateful they have roofs over their heads and a place to sleep at night.”

“Grateful? This is nothing more than a slum.”

The Colonel’s chin lifted and his upper lip curled into a snarl. “You surround yourself with interesting women, my American friend.”

“I think so.” David handed Alex two duffel bags.

She shouldered them and asked, “What about the others? I can carry two more.”

David shook his head. “Not now.”

The Colonel leaned into the back of the vehicle and unzipped several duffel bags and started to sort through packages of antibiotics, vitamins, and other medicines. He set several aside in a pile and opened another bag.

“There’s not as much here as last time.”

“The economy sucks. Less donations coming in than before.”

The Colonel gave him a sidelong glance and cut his eyes. “Americans are bleeding hearts. They always give. It assuages their guilt.”

“Think what you like. It’s what I can give you.”

“You sound like a politician,” the colonel said.

“Walk with me.” David took Alex’s arm.

“What the hell is going on?” Alex asked after they were out of earshot.

“It’s just what it looks like. One hand washing the other.”

Alex took a few steps backwards watching the officer rummage through more of the medications and medical supplies. “You just let him take what he wants?”

“Let it go, Alex. There’s nothing you or I can do about it. It’s how things work out here.”

David met her glare and looked away. “What we do and how it gets done is not always pretty.”

“So what you’re saying is the ends justify the means,” Alex said.

David’s face flushed red. “Don’t— I already heard enough of a lecture from Claire. I don’t need one from you. You know as well as I do things aren’t always nice and neat. Our safety is worth losing some of what we bring.”

“You can’t be serious. You’re buying our safety by letting this thug steal what people donated? You’re a fool if you believe it. He’s a psychopath and he uses brute intimidation to get what he wants and until you stand up to him he’ll just keep taking until you’ve got nothing left to give.”

“Hey...whoa.” David clamped a hand down on her shoulder and she spun to face him her eyes full of seething anger and loathing. “Your hands are shaking. This isn’t about Colonel Debois. Is it? What’s wrong?”

Alex felt her pulse racing and she was on the edge of losing her temper. Her breaths were rapid and shallow as she tried to find her center—something to give her strength and comfort.

A sharp gust of wind carried dirt and debris with it and they shielded their eyes from the stinging particles. She felt a momentary wave of vertigo and David grabbed her arms to steady her.

“You haven’t talked to Regina about the time you spent in foster care. Have you?” he asked as he steadied her.

“What the hell does my experience have to do with any of this?” Alex shrugged out of his grip. “Why would I tell her anything?” She groaned when she saw Regina round the corner of the school, spot her and walk in her direction, a look of concern coloring her expression.

“Because being here is bringing those memories, whatever they are, front and center for you,” he said.

“We had shelter, water and food. These kids have nothing.”

David stepped closer and spoke close to her ear. “You were nine. You lost your family, your sense of security. You know as well as I do events from our past don’t get resolved easily. They tend to keep complicating the present until you deal with them.”

“I’ll be alright.”

“I’ve heard this story before. You need to run at it.”

“Run at what? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Whatever is frightening you.”

“Since when did you become a damn shrink?” Alex whirled around and dropped the bags at his feet, drilling her eyes into his. “Why don’t you just back the fuck off and get out of my head?”

David held his hands out. “Okay, okay. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have pushed so hard. Go take a walk and cool off. There’s a path behind the clinic. It heads back to the church. Sean and Ian are making their way here with Charles. They’re bringing a cartload of supplies we offloaded before the Colonel arrived. I don’t want them rolling in here while he’s still sniffing around.”

“What do you want me to do?” Alex asked, grateful for a task she could focus on to distract her from her thoughts.

“Tell them to come ahead, but leave the boxes until we’re sure our friend is well on his way out of here.”

“I can do it,” Alex said in a clipped tone as Regina drew closer.

“You need to tell her. She’ll understand.”

“Dammit, David.” Alex glared at him.

“I’ll understand what?” Regina asked as she stopped next to Alex.

“Nothing. Just a difference of opinion.” Alex said.

“YOU WANT TO tell me what the hell you and Alex were arguing about? It looked like the two of you were going to come to blows,” Regina said her eyes flaring with anger.

With a sigh, David reached down and grabbed the duffel bags. “Just a disagreement about how I chose to handle the Colonel. It’s nothing.”

Regina’s eyes flicked to the soldier who was still rummaging through the bags in the back of the vehicle. “Why did you give him money?” When David looked like he was about to deny it she continued, “Don’t lie to me. I know what I saw. You handed him a roll of US dollar bills.”

“We have an agreement. He takes a cut of what we bring and he makes sure everyone stays safe while we’re here.”

“And you trust him to keep his word? People like him keep promises only as long as it suits their purposes.” Regina raised her hand stopping David’s reply. “Never mind. I don’t have time to argue with you. Do we have any erythromycin?”

“Yeah, I’ll find you some.”

“Thanks.” Regina started to go. Her instincts screaming at her to press him farther. “All you two were talking about was the Colonel? It seemed more personal.”

David stared down at the duffel bags in his hands. Regina moved closer and touched his arm. “David, you and Alex go back a long way. I know you care about her and she considers you a good friend.” Regina waited for him to look at her and she captured his gaze when he did.

“It’s not for me to tell. You’ll have to ask her.”

Whatever they talked about had to do with more than the Colonel and whatever it was had sent Alex into an emotional tailspin. She’d seen the haunted expression in her eyes. Regina wasn’t sure why but she’d a strong sense of urgency to find Alex right now.

## Chapter Nine

ALEX’S STEPS BROUGHT her to the path at the edge of the field of sugar cane. A sense of claustrophobia overwhelmed her and she felt her heart start to race again as she stood with the clinic behind her and the twelve foot high imposing plants in front of her. Bile rose and saliva filled her mouth. It took all her self-control to fight the impending revolt and not vomit.

Alex took a long breath giving her time to settle her nerves and think clearly. Behind her she heard the sound of footsteps drawing closer. She clamped down on her emotions and fought the tears threatening to spill from her eyes.

A moment later, Alex felt Regina’s hand on her elbow. She would recognize her strong, confident touch anywhere “Hey. What’s going on? Are you okay?”

“I just needed to clear my head.” Alex avoided Regina’s gaze and wiped her hand across her mouth. She knew it would undo her resolve if she looked into those concerned green eyes now. “This is no way for these children to live. I thought I could envision bad before we came here. I wasn’t even close.”

“It’s pretty ragged. I can’t say I’ve seen anything worse than this. Walk with me?” Regina asked and gripped her arm.

Alex nodded and tears filled her eyes as she forced one foot in front of the other and rambled alongside Regina until they reached a bend in the path. It widened out into a square of clear-cut ground. Two logs from the base of palm trees were lying on the ground and it was obvious from the worn bark many a worker sat and rested there for brief respites throughout the years.

“Ian and Sean are heading this way. David asked me to meet them,” Alex said as she stopped in front of Regina and stared at the footpath leading deeper into the field of sugarcane.

“We will, but right now I don’t care about anything but what’s going on with you.” Regina slipped her fingers into Alex’s hands and tried to draw her closer. “What happened back there? Are you okay?”

“The man David was talking to, Colonel DeBois. He wears pain patches. They reek of eucalyptus.” Alex tilted her head and met Regina’s worried gaze, looked away as her throat constricted. It was hard to breathe as a swell of emotion rocked her equilibrium again.

“Eucalyptus?” Regina repeated and Alex could feel the weight of her stare.

“Remember the dock at Provincetown?”

“I remember a lot of things about Provincetown,” Regina said, releasing Alex’s hand and peering into eyes refusing to meet hers.

“Some of them nice and some not. What’s really bothering you?”

“I want to go back there with you. When we get back we should go there for a few days,” Alex said trying to sound normal. “Just the two of us.”

“Of course. We’ll spend time together.”

Alex closed her eyes and could see with startling clarity the house she owned with her apartment upstairs. The walls were paneled with knotty pine wood and the ceiling was whitewashed with heavy wooden beams running across its length. A small rectangular wooden table sat next to the bay window looking out onto the gravel driveway below. A maroon leather couch that pulled out into a bed sat to the right and a color television faced it from the opposite wall.

Her favorite spot in the apartment was the deck with a sliding door entrance she had built onto the side of the house. From the deck she could hear the creaking of the docks and the boats rubbing against them as the water lifted them in time with rhythm of the waves, the cry of the seagulls and the smell of salty ocean air.

“We’ll go for walks on Race Point and watch the sun rise and we can charter a boat to go on a whale watch. I’ll take you out for dinner and we’ll watch the moon rise from the docks. I’d like to do those things with you.”

“I’d love to.” Regina slipped her arm through Alex’s and tugged her across to one of the logs.

“Tell me what upset you,” Regina coaxed.

Alex sat down next to Regina, resting her elbows on her knees and interlaced her fingers. She peered at Regina trying to read her expression and knew she was trying to figure out what was causing her distress.

Stalling, she went back to examining her hands.

Regina was silent beside her and Alex could feel her eyes on her. Inside she felt like a child and it made her angry to feel vulnerable and defenseless again after all these years. Her childhood was filled with memories and shades of emotions she would rather leave buried and unexposed. But Regina was a patient person. Alex recognized this quality in her a long time ago.

She endured her fits of frustration and brooding silences while she healed and tried to put herself back together. Steadfast and persistent were the other side of patient and Regina would wait for as long as it took for her to talk and somehow Alex knew she wouldn’t have a choice but to tell her the truth. When she did, Regina would know. God, she would know and what would she think of her?

“Alex, your hands are shaking,” Regina said and covered them were hers.

“David’s the only one who knows any of this. We did an internship together at Shriner’s Hospital for Children in Boston. We had an awful shift and went out to drink it off afterwards.”



Alex's throat went dry and her voice was hoarse with emotion. "I...I told him things you don't know and you—I should tell you—because I don't want it to be a secret I keep from you." She cast a wary glance at Regina and saw the worry and doubt in her eyes.

Alex looked away to hide the tears filling her eyes. She wrapped her arms around herself, rocking back and forth as a multitude of emotions hammered away at her. A gasp escaped her throat and she fought to regain some of her control.

"Alex, just talk to me. Whatever it is we'll deal with it."

"Being here reminded me of something I haven't allowed myself to think about in years. I can't believe it came back to me now. I guess it makes sense it did but it's something...I," she paused to take a steadying breath. "I deliberately put away a long time ago when I was a kid. It's hard to believe I was ever so young and naïve."

Alex felt Regina thread an arm around her and rub circles over her back. "When I was nine, my brother and I were sent to foster care...for a while."

"Why? What happened?"

"I told you my father was an alcoholic. He'd lose his temper and come after us with whatever he could lay his hands on. He went after my mom one night and beat her pretty badly. When he left, like he always did, for the watering hole down the street, I begged her to leave. She'd always refused to go in the past. This time she didn't. So I packed a few things and we left the house."

"I thought your mom left your father when you were thirteen."

"They were on and off for years. It took her a long time to realize if she stayed with him he'd probably kill her one day."

"You never told me this before."

"It happened a long time ago. There was no reason to talk about it."

"Until now," Regina said. "Why a foster home? What happened?"

"She didn't have a job. They sent her to a shelter for abused women and my brother and I went to foster care. They said it was only for a little while...there were lots of lies and broken promises."

"How long were you in foster care for?"

"Nine months to a year—different ones along the way. I don't remember exactly. It took a while for my mother to get back on her feet and to satisfy the courts it was safe for us to go back home with her. The family they sent us to live with first was an older couple with two kids of their own. The daughter was nice enough and looked after John and me. The old man was sick. He always smelled of cough drops and eucalyptus." Out of the corner of her eyes, Alex realized Regina was watching her. She felt Regina squeeze her hand. She could see the look of wariness in Regina's eyes and wondered what she was thinking.

"I learned people who you trust and believe in can control you. They wield power you're not prepared to deal with as a kid—sometimes not even as an adult. They can deceive and trick you into believing if you do something for them everything will be all right, but when you've done what they wanted, you realize it was just a deception. All along it was just a way to control and manipulate you...and you can't ever feel the same about yourself."

Regina pulled Alex close to her and kissed the side of her head. "Christ, Alex."

"I buried it—but not deep enough." Alex looked at the sky and wiped away the tears rolling down her cheeks. High above them a large hawk soared effortlessly, carried by the thermals, gliding in lazy circles. A haunting cry pierced the air breaking the silence around them. "Seeing these kids and how vulnerable they are..."

“You said the couple had two kids.” Regina stroked her fingers through the hair along Alex’s temple bringing her back to her story. “Who...” The rest of the sentence died on her lips when Alex looked at her with a haunted expression in her eyes.

“The brother was seventeen. He always smelled like his father. I guess ‘cause he took care of him. John was my responsibility...dammit he was just five...I thought he would leave him alone if I did what he wanted.”

An anguished cry escaped from Regina and Alex felt her hand clutch hers.

“I woke one night. I heard John crying from the other room and went in to check on him. I thought he was having a nightmare. He had them a lot after we left home.” Alex could feel her mind and her heart racing as images driven more by emotion than memory played in her mind and consumed her. She wrapped her arms around her knees and stared down at the ground refusing to meet Regina’s eyes.

Alex felt Regina move and realized she was crouching down in front of her holding both her hands. “Alex, look at me.”

She felt like she’d been running. Her chest was tight and she was short of breath. She recognized the guarded expression in Regina’s eyes and tried to stop the out of control feeling from taking control. The words tumbled out but she hardly recognized her own voice. “I remember grabbing the lamp off the night stand and bashing him with it. I hauled him out of the bed. I lost control and just kicked and hit and screamed until someone came in and pulled me off of him.”

“He wasn’t a kid. He was practically a grown man,” Regina said, anger evident in her voice. “What happened, the bastard, John...was he...all right?”

Alex stared down at her hands and clenched them into fists. “The police came and took us to a hospital. I remember waiting in this room alone but no one ever came and told me anything. I don’t know how long it took until a woman finally came and brought John back to me. All I can remember is him crying, huddled in the chair next to me and I didn’t know what to say or ask. I don’t know what really happened. I don’t know if he even remembers. Probably better if he doesn’t.”

“Jesus. You’ve carried this with you for a long time.” Regina brushed Alex’s bangs back from her face. “Look at me.”

Alex covered her mouth with her hand and shook her head. “I was so damn naïve I didn’t have a clue.”

“You were a child. What else could you do but trust the people who were supposed to take care of you. You had your trust betrayed in a horrible and ugly way.” Regina wrapped Alex in a tight embrace and held her while she wept.

“You’re the first person I’ve ever told the whole story to. David doesn’t know all of what happened. He just knows it was a crappy time in my life but I never told him what I just told you.”

“Shh...I’ve got you,” Regina said gathering her into her arms and rocking her.

Alex was exhausted and allowed Regina to hold her resting her cheek against her shoulder, and holding on to her like she was an anchor in the maelstrom of emotions threatening to swamp her. “I’m sorry I got so messed up...out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“Stop. You have no reason to apologize. Regina kissed her neck.

Alex lifted her head off Regina’s shoulder and rubbed her forehead as a monstrous headache started to develop behind her eyes. “My head hurts.”

“Here wipe your eyes with this.” She poured water from a bottle onto a washcloth she’d tucked into her back pocket to wash Sylvi with.

“I must look like shit. I feel like it.” The cool damp cloth felt soothing against her swollen eyes and Alex held it there.

“Take more time if you need it,” Regina said when Alex pulled the cloth away and red-rimmed eyes met her concerned gaze.

Alex nodded. “I’m okay. I feel like I could just fall asleep.”

“I can meet Sean and Ian.”

“No. No way are you going alone.” Alex sat straighter. “I feel better.” Telling the story had sucked the energy from her but now the truth was out. The burden of the memories still there but lighter.

Regina edged closer so she was kneeling between Alex’s thighs and looking into her eyes.

“I need...I wonder what it is you’re thinking now.” Alex’s eyes searched Regina’s and she reached out to touch her face with a trembling hand.

“I wish you never had to experience any of what happened but I’m glad you were there to protect your brother.” Regina touched Alex’s face.

“The thing is I don’t know if I did.” Alex leaned into the caress and sighed. “It’s done, in the past. I have to put it aside again. We should start so we can meet Ian and Sean.”

“Hold on a minute. Are you sure you’re all right?” Regina asked as she climbed to her feet and held a hand out for Alex.

“I...I need some time to sort through this,” Alex said as she stood and took a couple of steps.

Regina regarded her and said, “I’m here.”

Alex wrapped her arms around Regina and whispered, “I know. David’s scared of this Colonel Debois.”

“The guy’s a creep.”

“He’s a psychopath.”

“So what do we do?”

“I don’t know. Let’s go meet with these guys first so we can get back and figure out what we’re doing with the kid.”

## Chapter Ten

REGINA FOLLOWED ALEX along the path, surrounded by sugarcane plants and the ever-present noise of small animals rustling somewhere among the leaves. The sound of frustrated voices carried on the air currents alerted them of their colleagues ahead. The trail narrowed where the cane encroached on either side and Alex could see Sean standing ahead of them tugging on something.

“You stubborn, cussed animal. Move you son of a bitch! We’ll never make it to the school at this rate.”

“You’re not going to win against him,” Regina said when she realized he was pulling on the halter of the donkey who was sitting back on his haunches with his front hooves spread out in front of him and his teeth bared.

“Hey,” Sean said when he spun around and saw them. “Got any ideas how to make this animal move?”

Alex tilted her head and regarded Enzo who shook his shaggy head. “Carrots?”

“Yeah, sure right here in my back pocket, smart ass.”

“Where’s Ian?”

“Back here,” a voice called out and they saw his head when he climbed onto the back of the cart overloaded with boxes and waved a hand at them.

“Did David send you to see what was taking so long?”

“No. He wanted us to bring you back but leave the supplies.”

“What? Has he lost his damn mind?” Ian demanded from his perch on the back of the cart.

“Is he crazy?” Sean gritted his teeth and put his weight into pulling the donkey again.

“Stop,” Alex said and put a hand on his shoulder. “You’re going to hurt your back and this beast is not going to move. The path’s too narrow to get the wheels through.” Enzo shook his head, snorted and flicked his ears.

“Where’s Charles?” Regina asked.

“He went to get a machete,” Ian said. “He should be back soon. Can you frigging believe this? In all the years I’ve been doing this I’ve never had to transport supplies on a fucking donkey.”

“I guess there’s a first time for everything.”

“Why does he want us to leave all this stuff?” Sean asked with his hands on his hips.

“Just for a bit while he gets rid of the Colonel,” Alex replied.

“What’s he worried about?”

“He’s worried the Colonel will discover he’s holding out on him.”

“Shit, we don’t need to piss off that bastard.”

“What do you mean holding out on him?” Sean asked. “What part of the conversation wasn’t I there for?”

Alex sighed. “He’s paying the Colonel in drugs and supplies for our safe passage.”

“Son of a bitch.”

“Hey, I hear someone,” Ian said.

Seconds later Charles’s grizzled face came into focus next to Ian’s. “You brought the girl to the school?” he asked when he saw Alex standing on the opposite side of the cart.

“We did. Thanks to Alicia,” Alex said, with a humorless smile.

Charles set to work cutting away the cane to widen the path. His shirt was stained dark with sweat by the time he cleared one side and started on the other.

“Let’s see if we can coax Enzo to come along now,” Regina said as Charles and Sean pulled the last of the sugar cane from the edge of the path.

After a moment’s hesitation, Charles tugged the satchel he carried on his shoulders around in front and untied the bag. “Here.” He reached inside, pulled out an apple and tossed it across to Regina.

“Hey, where’d you get the food from?” Ian asked.

Charles backed away from him while he cinched the bag closed and clutched it closer to his body. “It’s from the garden.”

“Bullshit. I saw apples in the bag. There are no damn apples growing in Sister Juanita’s garden. Where’d you get it?” Ian asked, stepping closer. “Come on, who’d you steal it from?”

“Ian leave him alone,” Sean said.

“It’s none of our business. Let it go,” Alex urged.

“No he’s lying,” Ian took a swipe at the bag and Charles sidestepped him.

Alex exchanged a concerned glance with Regina and slipped past the wagon. “We don’t have time for this. Leave him alone.” Alex edged closer and said, “Hey, hey, HEY!” as Ian bull-rushed Charles and tackled him to the ground.

Alex bolted forward with Sean on her heels. Charles grappled with Ian fighting to keep possession of the bag. Sean and Alex grabbed Ian and hauled him to his feet in a short but furious struggle. Red-faced and outraged he thrashed in their grasp and nailed Alex in her chest with his elbow.

“Enough!” Alex said through clenched teeth as she yanked his arm behind his back. “Leave him alone.”

“Let go of me,” Ian growled. “I’m not fighting with a damn woman.”

“Not until you settle down, man. What the hell got into you?” Sean asked. He looked at Alex. “You okay?”

“Fine,” she held onto Ian as his struggles faded with his anger.

“I’m over it. I can see whose side you’re on,” Ian said.

“Did it occur to you the food might be for his family?” Alex asked.

“How do you know he even has one?” Ian shot back.

“Who cares? We don’t need to be involved with this.” Sean said,

Regina moved to Alex’s side and grasped her arm. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, never better.” She rubbed her sternum while she met Regina’s concerned gaze. “Really, I am.”

Regina patted her side and went to Charles. She knelt down beside him as he was gathering several tubers and pieces of fruit. An apple rolled several feet away during the melee and Regina handed it to him. “You’re hurt,” she said, pulling the collar of his shirt away from his neck exposing an angry red rope burn across his skin. “I’ll clean it for you when we get back to the school.” His eyes met her gaze and he nodded before he stood.

It made for an exhausting afternoon. They took turns coaxing the stubborn donkey along the trail, and stopped several times to hack down the sugar cane overgrowing the path and making the path too narrow for the cart to pass.

About fifty yards from the clinic, Charles unhitched Enzo from the cart and led the group to the edge of the clearing.

“I don’t see the Jeep,” Regina said peering out from her vantage point.

Alex gestured to Sean and Ian. “You guys walk to the clinic. We’ll check on the kid at the school. I don’t want us all appearing at the same time from this path if Debois left someone behind to snoop around.”

“You think he would?” Sean asked.

“I don’t know, but I don’t trust him one bit.” Alex grabbed Sean’s arm. “Make sure no one is around when you talk to David about where we left the supplies.”

“Right.”

Regina strolled alongside Alex as they approached the school from the rear. “You think this guy is dangerous?”

“I think this has been going on each time David has come here and he’s gotten more brazen in his demands.”

“What should we do?”

Alex stopped and stared at Regina. “What do you mean what should we do? What can we do? We do what we came to do and go home.”

“Is it the right thing to do—for these kids? For these people?”

“What is it you think we can do?”

“It just feels like we’re putting a band aid on a gaping wound.”

“Maybe we are.” Alex shook her head feeling dismayed and overwhelmed. “I...you, we’ve trained to be doctors. What do we know about dealing with this kind of problem? It’s beyond us. It’s beyond what we’re here to do.”

“There has to be something else we can do.”

“You’re right—and the something else is taking care of the girl we found in the hut. We’re not going to do her any good if we get sidetracked on something we have no control over.”

CLAIRE LOOKED UP from washing Sylvi when Alex and Regina walked into the school. “What took you guys so long?”

“The wagon wouldn’t fit through the path so Charles had to cut sugarcane down to make it wider.”

“Uh huh. I started the girl on some erythromycin.”

“Did you give her anything else?”

“No her fever’s still teetering around a hundred.”

“Thanks for taking care of her,” Regina said as she sat down on the floor, crossed her legs and held the girl’s hand in hers. “Did Sister Rose tell you anything else about her?”

“No. She went to the clinic to translate after you left. We’re doing physicals and vaccinations for the rest of the day,” Claire said and pointed to the table. “I...there’s some soup left in the pot. I know you haven’t eaten much since last night.”

“Thanks.” Regina said.

“It’s not much just some dehydrated stuff out of a bag but it’ll fill you up.”

Regina climbed to her feet as Charles sauntered in and stopped just inside the doorway. “Come on in, Charles.” She removed antiseptic wash and gauze from her pack to clean the abrasion on his neck.

“What happened to him?” Claire asked, observing the angry, red welt on his neck seeping blood.

“Ian lost it and went after him, thought he was stealing...I don’t know...he just got crazy.”

“You’re kidding,” Claire said with a stunned expression on her face. “Ah damn, he probably forgot to take his insulin.”

“What?”

“He’s diabetic and not terribly compliant with monitoring his sugar. He gets crazy when his blood sugar goes too high.”

“How the hell does he keep it refrigerated?”

“He packs it in a cooler inside another cooler packed with dry ice.”

Alex stood next to Claire. “You said you’ve been on a few of these trips with David.”

Claire undid her ponytail and let her hair down before re-doing it. “More than a few,” she said eyeing Alex.

“How many times have you been here with him?”

“This is my third time in the Dominican Republic.”

“Always here...to this orphanage?” Alex filled two cups with soup.

“David decided he wanted to spend more time making a difference in one place.” Alex set one of the cups on the desk next to where Regina was tending to Charles. “Tell me about this Colonel Debois,” she said.

“There’s not much to tell. The government likes to keep an eye on all the plantations. He just happens to be assigned here.”

“One of the girls we met earlier, Alicia, saw him and took off like she’d seen the devil himself,” Alex said

Regina glanced at Charles and met his gaze. She saw a pained expression pass across his face, but she didn’t say anything. She finished cleaning the angry rope burn and covered it with a bandage to keep it clean.

“There, all done,” Regina said. “Come back tomorrow and I’ll change the bandage for you.”

“Thank you,” Charles whispered and looked down at the huddled form on the floor. “Will the girl be all right?”

Regina glanced at Sylvi. “I hope so.”

Charles managed a sad smile as he buttoned his shirt. He inclined his head as if he was going to say something to Claire. “I must go,” he said and made his way to the doorway. “You may need this later to get the cart through the rest of the path,” he said stopping to hand Alex the machete tucked inside the sheath.

“Thanks,” Alex said, taking the tool from him.

Claire watched him leave and said, “The government officials are here to intimidate the cane cutters so they make their daily quotas. It’s not a pleasant business. These kids learn quickly what they have to do to survive out here.”

“What do they have to do to survive?” Regina asked while she scrubbed her hands with an antiseptic gel.

“The women find a man to be their husband—if they’re lucky.”

“And if they’re not lucky?” Regina pressed her.

“They become prostitutes themselves or worse.” Claire stared down at the ground and when she met Regina’s gaze tears welled in her eyes. “How do you end the cycle when this is all they’ve known? They—they think this is normal to let themselves be used.” She stared glassy eyed at Alex and rubbed the tears from her face. “I—I’ve said too much...I have to go help next door. I’ll find out from David if he wants to go back to the dormitory tonight or stay here.”

“Claire.” She met Alex’s eyes. “David’s not paying the Colonel for our safety is he?”

Claire shook her head and gnawed on her lower lip her face flushing red. “No.” Her voice sounded hollow. “It’s to keep his men away from the women and children while they come to clinic.”

THE CONFIRMATION OF the truth was too much and Alex stumbled out of the school as a wave of nausea swept through her. She made it around the corner of the building before she doubled over and vomited bile onto the dirt. With a groan, she reached an arm out and steadied

herself against the wall. She broke out into a cold sweat. It trickled down her sides as her sympathetic nervous system primed her body's fight or flight response with a cascade of hormones coursing through her body.

She didn't remember how she ended sitting up on the ground until a shadow blocked the heat of the sun and she lifted her head from her arms to find herself looking at Regina.

"Sorry, I just, I..." she stopped trying to explain and lowered her head back down onto her arms with a groan.

"Here's some water," Regina said and nudged a bottle into her hands. "Take your time. I'm going to sit with Sylvi so she's not alone if she wakes up."

"Thanks," Alex said, feeling Regina's hands clasped around hers as if to ground her here in the present.

She waited until Regina's footsteps faded away. Alex pressed her head back against the concrete wall and grasped the water bottle in her hands. Purposely shifting her thoughts to the Emergency Department back home, she pictured herself moving through the door from the locker room into the windowless hallways past the central nurses station lined with computers. Wearing scrubs and a lab coat, a stethoscope hanging around her neck, her pager and cell phone clipped to her waist, pockets stuffed with keys, pens and a small supply of bandages. A sea of technology, diagnostic tools and a myriad of hospital staff allowed the well-choreographed dance to churn the masses of injured, sick and dying through the hospital. In its totality, it was her battle armor. Here she felt naked—cast adrift.

A ball bounced past her and a barefoot boy sprinted after it. He stopped as he got to the ball and tucked it underneath his arm. He stopped short, a combination of fear and surprise on his face as he realized someone was sitting against the wall watching him. He crept closer to Alex, keeping a healthy distance between them. He studied her with big, round brown eyes.

She offered a smile and remained still. He took a step back as if considering what to do. On a vicarious whim he bounced the ball to her. She caught it one-handed and bounced it back to him watching as a smile broke out across his face.

"Tomas?" a voice called and a taller girl marched around the corner. Seeing Alex, she grabbed his arm and pulled him away casting a wary glance back as she guided him to the front of the building. Alex watched them go and felt her eyes brimming with tears.

REGINA SAT CROSS-LEGGED on the ground beside Sylvi. She was struck by how pretty the girl was as she slept despite her hollow cheeks and sunken eyes. The skin over her cheekbones was still flushed pink with fever.

Claire's words haunted her and Regina felt a profound sense of grief and sadness settle down on her. Tears rolled down her cheeks while she thought of the children, how vulnerable and alone they were, like Alex was all those years ago. A hollowness threatened to swallow her whole if she let it. She was tired and overwhelmed and she tried to quiet her mind and focus. Outside she could hear the high pitch of the children's voices some laughing, others crying or shouting.

Checking the bag of IV fluid Regina realized it was done and disconnected the bag and removed the small catheter from Sylvi's arm. There was no need to leave it in given how limited their hydration supplies were. It was up to Sylvi's defenses and the erythromycin whether she survived this bout of illness assaulting her frail body.



Regina dug into her backpack and pulled out her stethoscope. She adjusted the tips in her ears and listened to Sylvi's lungs. She dragged her pack closer, lifted the girl, and rested her against it so she sat higher. With a sigh, she looped the stethoscope around her neck. She heard the soft scuff of footsteps and glanced across the room to see Alex leaning against the doorjamb, watching her. The half empty water bottle dangled between her fingertips.

"How do her lungs sound?"

"No worse, no better," Regina said, her voice choked with emotion.

Alex sat down beside Regina stretching her long legs out and crossing them at the ankles. "You okay?"

"I should be asking you that," Regina said running the back of her hand against Alex's forearm but keeping her eyes focused on Sylvi. "I'm sorry I pushed you about us doing something before. I don't know what we could do. The more I think about it the more I think we would just make the situation worse for them when we left."

Alex clasped her hands in her lap and sat, thinking. "We're here for just a moment in their lives. We'll do what we can with what we have."

"We've been here a day and a half and I feel like I'm wearing my heart on my sleeve. It feels like it's breaking," Regina said and her voice wavered as she felt her resolve crumbling inside.

Alex wrapped an arm around her shoulder holding her. "It's awful. I know," she whispered and kissed her temple. "Get it out now. We need to be strong for the kids. Just remember, there are limits to what we can do."

"I know there are, but is it so cut and dry for you?" Regina watched Alex's gaze shift and go unfocused. She could see in her face the wear of the last year, the new lines absent when they first met.

"Not always," Alex admitted. She clasped a hand on Regina's shoulder and squeezed her. It was a subtle change but Regina saw it as the vulnerable look in Alex's eyes was replaced with the impenetrable walls meant to keep her demons at bay.

"Remember, *primum non nocere*."

"First, do no harm," Regina repeated.

Alex climbed to her feet and Regina followed putting a hand on her arm and forestalling her attempt to evade any discussion of what she said earlier. "Do you remember when we were in Provincetown...the morning you came back from running?"

A brief look of confusion followed by a half smile quirked at the corners of Alex's lips. "I remember. Why?"

"I asked you why you went into emergency medicine." Regina watched as Alex stared at the floor and furrowed her brow before meeting her gaze with a questioning look. "You said it was the adrenaline rush, sew 'em up and ship them out, you didn't have to get involved. It kept things...less complicated."

Alex pursed her lips together and stared down at Sylvi. "I guess I did..."

"You've been taking care of people long before you became a doctor. It's what you do. It's who you are." Regina pressed a hand on Alex's chest above her heart. "It's not because it's less complicated, it's because it is complicated. It's what draws you, even here—it always has." She pressed her lips to Alex's cheek and spoke close to her ear. "Thank you for telling me. It—I'm grateful you trust me with this part of you." Regina stepped back and watched the bewildered expression on Alex's face as she met her gaze. "Stay here and rest awhile. I'm going next door to help with the vaccinations."

"Is it an order?"

“No, it’s me asking you to please take care of yourself.”

## Chapter Eleven

ALEX WASN’T SURE how long she had dozed off for and what had startled her from sleeping. Sunlight streaming into the room through the window blinded her and she blocked it with her hand while she blinked her eyes. Her heart raced in her chest and she propped herself on her elbows peering around the room. Sweeping aside the mosquito netting she had a sense like everything she had experienced was a bad dream. But it wasn’t.

Sylvi was asleep several feet away in the corner on her bed of blankets. The pot of soup still remained on the table and the three chairs were still in a semi-circle a few feet away from where she lay. Her head felt foggy and Alex stretched her arms and arched her back to work out the stiffness.

Fighting a sense of disorientation, the harsh reality of their situation seeped into her consciousness. It had all been real. Alex climbed to her feet with a groan and staggered on wooden legs to the child. She checked the girl’s temperature and frowned.

“One hundred and one. Dammit, what I’d give for a simple blood test right now. At least we’d know if we’re using the right antibiotics. Right?”

She rummaged through one of the donated medical kits sitting on a table, sorting through packages of suturing supplies, several surgical packs with sterile hemostats, forceps and scissors. At the bottom, she found what she was looking for and removed the bottle of liquid acetaminophen. A further search and she found a dropper. After she drew the correct dosage, Alex slipped the dropper between the girl’s lips and squeezed out the viscous fluid while she propped the girl up in her other arm.

Sylvi pulled her head away but Alex managed to get her to swallow most of the medicine.

“Maybe this will make you feel better.” She returned the bottle to the backpack. A tag secured to the straps caught her attention and she flipped the laminated card to the other side and read it.

“Caring Alliance. Ohio? These supplies come from everywhere.” She studied the rest of the laminated card. “...Jesus said...into whatever city you enter...heal the sick that are there, and say unto them, the Kingdom of God is come near unto you.” Alex let the card drop from her hand.

A scuffing noise behind her drew her attention. At the doorway, peering in, its nose twitching as it sniffed the air stood a lean, brown colored dog with pointy ears and a thin tail held high. She guessed from its size it was somewhere between twenty and thirty pounds.

Alex stood her ground as it let out a low menacing growl and stepped through the doorway. Its lips pulled back in a snarl, the dog bared its teeth. Her nape hairs stood on end and her blood ran cold with the realization it was stalking the child.

“All right you little bastard. You just stay right where you are,” she said in a low voice as she fumbled for the chair closest to her and pulled it between her and the mongrel. “Come on, I’ve

got something here for you.” Keeping her eyes fastened on the stray she reached out and lowered the pot to the floor. She nudged it away from Sylvi with her booted foot.

The dog held fast to its spot, a guttural sound rumbling from its chest as Alex sidestepped closer to the girl. “Guess I would have a better chance of tempting you if it was real food in the pot, huh?”

In a blink of an eye it happened. One moment the dog was standing, the next it was airborne, teeth bared in a snarl and coming right at her. Time seemed to slow as it does when adrenaline releases into the blood, quickening reflexes, dilating pupils to absorb more light and making the heart pump faster, supplying the muscles with extra oxygen rich blood. Alex yanked the folding chair and swung it with all her might in an arc. The metal legs connecting with the dog’s head. She felt the jarring impact all the way up her arms and into her shoulders.

With a yelp, it landed on its side and scrambled to its feet. This time its head held low and cowed with its tail tucked between its hind legs. Alex crouched keeping her eyes on the stunned animal and picked up Sylvi in her arms shocked to see brown eyes staring back at her.

“Fine time for you to wake up.”

Sylvi’s eye welled with tears and her lower lip began to quiver.

“No tengas miedo,” Alex said, wishing she believed the words as she stood and felt her heart pounding in her chest. Alex crept back to the doorway, Sylvi propped on one hip with arms clutched around her neck in a vice grip and in her other hand Alex carried the chair.

The dog watched her and appeared to lose interest as it stepped toward the pot on the floor. When it dipped its head lower and started to lap at the liquid, Alex dropped the chair, bolted out the door and across the compound.

THE CLINIC RAN like a well-oiled machine throughout the afternoon. The Ministry of Health delivered coolers of vaccines stored in dry ice and air shipped from the states three days earlier.

Regina wiped an alcohol pad on a girl’s upper arm while the mother held her in her lap. With a practiced hand she jabbed the needle through the skin and depressed the plunger. She placed a Band-Aid on the site. She repeated the process for every child who arrived at her station and recorded the vaccine, date and child’s name on a clipboard filled with papers.

Once the children were vaccinated they moved to Sean’s station. A translator administered a visual acuity test and Sean issued the right pair of glasses to give to the child if their vision required correction. To her left Claire was busy vaccinating another line of children.

Regina felt someone standing behind her and glanced back. She recognized the doctor from Cornell Medical Center and wished he would go away. “Hi, Tony.”

“Hi yourself. You have gorgeous eyes.”

Regina heard Claire snort and felt her cheeks flush. “Thanks.” She vaccinated the last child in her line, discarded the syringe into a sharps container and removed her gloves.

“Listen, David told me we’re staying here tonight.”

“Again?” Regina sighed, not looking forward to another night feeling so exposed and vulnerable.

“Something happened to the trucks. So we’re not going back to the dorms. We’re going to get a fire going outside and hang out.” He leaned in closer and rested his hand on her shoulder. “I’ve got some wine. Why don’t you join me? We might as well have a good time.”

“Wine? How did you manage to bring wine?”

Tony smiled and squared his shoulders back. “Packed it in bubble wrap. Gotta have some creature comforts out here.”

Regina stood moving away from his unwanted touch and washed her hands with an antiseptic gel. “Tony, I’d rather not.”

“Why?” He seemed incredulous.

“I don’t want to.”

“Don’t want to what?” he persisted. “Have wine, company or both?”

“Both.”

“It’s not like I’m asking for a commitment here. Just a little fun.”

“Tony,” exasperated she felt anger bubbling up. “Why can’t you just take no for an answer?”

“Because I don’t understand why.”

“I’m with someone.”

“So what’s wrong with having a glass of wine?”

“Nothing, except you’re not the person I feel like having one with.”

“Oh,” he straightened. “Well, what one doesn’t know...”

“You need to stop,” Regina said.

“Why? Can’t a guy flirt with a beautiful woman?”

“You’re beyond flirting and it needs to stop.” She saw his eyes glance down toward her hands and sensed what was coming next.

“I don’t see a ring, so how spoken for can you be?”

Regina felt a surge of unbridled anger rise. “I don’t need a ring to tell the world I love someone.”

“It is a tradition,” Tony said.

“I guess I’m a non-traditional woman,” Regina said, wishing she could wipe the smug look off his face.

“Look,” Claire said loud enough for Tony to hear. “I don’t have a ring either, but I consider myself spoken for. So why don’t you just back off and go find someone else who’s interested in a one night stand.”

“Hey, I’m just teasing,” he protested before he raised his hands and stomped away in a huff.

Claire snapped off her gloves and tossed them into a garbage can lined with a medical waste bag. “God damn it there always has to be one in every group. It never fails.”

There was a commotion at the front of the clinic and Regina looked across in time to see Alex burst through the doorway. One of the nurses met her and tried to take the child from her and was met with a keening wail as the girl clung to Alex.

“Excuse me,” Regina said as she squeezed by several nurses and hurried to Alex.

“You look better. How do you feel?”

“We had a visitor,” Alex replied. “Scared the crap out of both of us.”

“A visitor?” Regina furrowed her brow, watching a trickle of sweat roll down the side of Alex’s face.

“Of the canine variety. It was hungry and looking for a meal.”

Regina’s eyes widened. “Oh shit. Are you okay? You didn’t get bitten did you?”

“No, no. I’m all right.”

“I see Sylvi finished her nap.”

“Right in the middle of it.”

Regina tilted her head and studied Alex. “You mean the dog came after you?”

“It was after Sylvi and I was in its way.”

Regina looked around the clinic, spotted David and hollered. “David, come here.”

David stood and made his way through the crowded room. “What’s the matter?” he asked.

“We had a dog come after us in the school,” Alex told him as she tried to loosen Sylvi’s death grip around her neck.

“Did you get hurt?”

“No.”

“Is it still there?”

“It was when I left.” Alex blinked and looked around her. “How long was I out sleeping?”

“Since yesterday afternoon.”

“Shit you should’ve woken me. I didn’t mean to sleep so long.”

“After yesterday – you needed to sleep. You look rested, better than I’ve seen you look in months.” Regina watched with amusement as the child clung to Alex. “I think Sylvi has imprinted on you.” She giggled as Alex gave her an outraged look.

“What? Not even remotely funny, Dr. Kingston,” Alex growled.

“It makes sense. You carried her to the school during a thunderstorm and now you’ve rescued her from a dog attack. Surely you remember your developmental psychology, Dr. Margulies.” Regina tilted her head and rocked back on her heels enjoying herself. “You happened to provide an exogenous stimulus during a period of heightened sensitivity or crisis.”

Alex hung her head in defeat before fixing a mock glare at David. “You realize you’re really no help here at all, David.”

“Hey, I’m just standing here observing,” he replied with a lopsided grin.

“My point, you’re just standing there. You’re supposed to be helping me.”

“Here, let me take Sylvi.” After several moments of prying the girl’s arms away from Alex’s neck, Regina lifted the child away from her. “Why don’t you two go check and see if the dog is still lurking around.”

“YOU STILL TALKING to me?” David asked.

“Apparently, I am,” Alex said, watching as Regina’s shoulders moved under her scrub top as she carried the girl toward the back of the clinic. She let her eyes wander down her trim figure, appreciating the view. David cleared his throat and Alex caught his amused expression.

“She has got your number,” he said.

“Uh...let’s not go there right now,” Alex managed to say as Regina met her gaze. A smile touched her lips and warmth blossomed in Alex’s chest knowing it was for her.

“Look, I’m sorry about what I said yesterday. I just thought—”

“Forget about it. It’s done.”

“Is it?”

“As over as it’s going to be.” Alex settled her hands on her hips and studied the ground. “I took your advice.”

“You told her?”

“I had to.”

“Good, I’m glad you did. Let’s take a walk and see if your four-legged friend is still in the school.”

“I don’t plan on fighting this thing off a second time.”

David unclipped a black cylindrical case from his waist and held it for her to see. "I have just the thing if we need."

Alex's eyes narrowed as she studied it. "Mace?"

"Pepper spray. Strong enough to stop a bear."

"I should be pissed off at you. No, I am pissed off at you."

"Why?" David asked as he pushed the door open and held it for Alex.

"You weren't very honest with me." Alex marched past him into the compound and scanned the area for the dog before going any farther.

"What do you mean? These people live in subsistence."

"I'm not talking about the poverty. I wasn't expecting to find out the reason you pay off the Colonel is to keep his men away from the women and kids while they come to the clinic."

David stopped and stared back at Alex. "Claire told you?"

"Don't go getting pissed off at Claire. I didn't need her to tell me. I figured it out and she simply confirmed it."

"I've got bigger problems to deal with."

"What's the matter?"

"The trucks requisitioned to bring us all back to dorm have been, shall we say indisposed, courtesy of the Colonel."

"So we're stuck here for the night. We could walk back."

"No, we've got to wait for the crew I sent to the southern end of the plantation to get back first. We're better off staying here all together. The son of a bitch is letting me know who's in control."

"He wants to create an environment of fear. What better way than taking away our sense of security—our shelter? So, we don't give him the satisfaction."

"What are you suggesting?"

Alex surveyed the two buildings and crossed her arms. "There's not enough room for everyone to sleep inside."

"We know sleeping beauty."

"Hey!" Alex shoved him hard with her shoulder causing him to stumble back a couple steps. "I already feel like enough of an ass."

"Don't. You're not the only one who's been affected by what we've encountered here so far. It's always an emotional roller coaster. No one's ever prepared for what they experience on these missions. Sometimes things hit close to home." Fear and sadness shined in his eyes when she looked at him and she wondered what haunted him.

"We'll need to rig something for the mosquito nets." Alex peered inside the door of the school, listening for any noises.

"I'm all ears if you've got any ideas. Last night was awful."

David stepped past her with his pepper spray out and his finger on the trigger.

"You got it pointed in the right direction?"

"What?" David glanced down. "Of course I do."

"Just asking. You'd hate to accidentally spray yourself in the face."

"That would suck."

"Don't think it hasn't happened. We've had people come through the ER who tried to ward off an attack and ended up spraying themselves instead."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," he said and stepped through the doorway. The dog was nowhere to be seen. He picked the pot off the floor. "Damn, it licked it clean."

“I’m telling you the dog came looking for a meal,” Alex said as she followed him into the room and the thought of what might have happened made her shudder. She knew what damage a dog could inflict on a child when it was intent on attacking. She’d seen too many victims of dog attacks pass through her emergency department through the years.

David shook his head. He set the pot on the table and lifted a chair lying on the ground. “How did the legs get bent?”

“I hit the little shit with it.”

“Remind me not to piss you off.”

“David, what happens if things really get bad with this Colonel while we’re here?”

“We always contact the embassy before we’re in the country so they know we’re here.”

“And if you need help how do you get in touch with them?”

“We have a satellite phone.”

“What will the embassy do?” Alex asked.

“We’ve never had to call for help before. I guess if we needed to bug out they could help transport us out of here.”

“In the mean time, we’re on our own.” Alex grabbed the medical kit she had sorted through earlier and slung it over her shoulder. She grabbed a second one after a brief examination of its contents. “I think we should set a watch around the camp tonight.”

David stared hard at Alex. “Are you serious?”

“Come on. Don’t tell me you haven’t already considered it. Do you want to risk a dog attack in the middle of the night or have the Colonel and his thugs come snooping around while we’re all asleep? Speaking of, did you get the supplies we left back on the trail?”

“We got swamped yesterday and never got an opportunity to bring it back. Sean went back earlier today to check and everything was still there. We laid a tarp on it last night. I’ll get a group of the guys to go get it before dark.”

“Have you seen Alicia?”

“No. Why?”

“She ran off yesterday when the Colonel arrived.”

“There are a thousand places out there for her to hide. She could be anywhere.”

## Chapter Twelve

ALICIA CREPT THROUGH the narrow space between the rows of cobbled together huts. She nibbled on her lower lip trying to push down the nagging sense of panic. She’d gotten herself hopelessly lost in the maze of shelters. When she saw the Colonel drive into the schoolyard, she’d broken her own rule and run into the shantytown without checking her landmarks. She’d spent a nerve-racking night hiding in one of the empty shacks listening to unfamiliar noises.

She let out a shaky breath and continued to work her way forward. She heard rustling behind her and spotted one of the many stray dogs around the plantation sniffing along the edge of one

of the shelters. Her heart pounded against her ribs and she tried in vain to contain her nervousness. Sister Juanita had taught them not to run and to tell the animals to “go home,” in as strong a voice as they could muster.

Most of the strays were skittish animals. Many could be scared off with a stick but some of the bigger brutes had become more brazen and dangerous, attacking and mauling the youngest and weakest in the plantation. Running was the worst thing she could do. The dog was distracted by something at the bottom of the hut and started to dig furiously in the dirt.

Alicia forced herself to walk putting more distance between her and the dog. Leaning against the frame of one of the huts was a long stick. It was worn smooth at one end and she guessed someone used it to help them walk. She felt a momentary twinge of guilt for taking it. She glanced behind her to see the dog crouched down now, tugging at something. She grabbed the limb, balanced it in her hand, ducked around the corner and ran until she was breathless. She came to a break in the endless rows of shanties. Standing in a small clearing, she searched for the sun.

West, she thought. “I need north,” she whispered to herself. She found a soft patch of dirt and worked the stick down as far as she could into the soil. Alicia gathered some stones and propped them around its base to secure it. She stood back and looked at where the shadow lay and marked both ends of it with a pebble. She heard voices coming from somewhere along the path and ducked back in between the rows of sugarcane bordering the village.

Seconds later, two men passed by where she was hiding. One stopped and examined the stick, running his fingers along its length. He stepped back and with a vicious swing of his arm splintered the pole into pieces with his machete.

Alicia had to bite her lip to keep from crying out. She waited until they disappeared from sight. She crept from her hiding place, reset a piece of the stick in the dirt and waited, again. After watching the sun and the stick she ran back out and marked the end of the second shadow.

“This is west and east,” she said indicating the first rock as her west point and the second as her east point. She picked another stick and laid it at ninety-degree angle to her first line. “North, east, south, west,” she repeated, remembering what Sister Juanita had taught them. “Got it!” She lifted the longer piece of the stick and started moving again.

The sun was dropping below the horizon by the time Alicia was headed north on the main path leading towards the church. She kept to the side, close to the sugar cane and trotted along hoping to reach the compound before dark. She knew she was getting closer when she passed the crossroads for Sister Juanita’s garden and crested the small hill leading down to the compound.

A breeze rustled the tops of the sugar cane and brought with it the scent of sweat and pungent body odor. Her blood ran cold and her heart hammered in her chest when she heard a noise behind her on the path. She broke into a run. In the growing darkness, she could make out the dark outline of the dorm to her left and beyond it lay the small church. Her lungs burned as she raced down the hill. She stumbled and almost fell but managed to keep her balance as she ran with every last bit of energy she could muster toward Sister Juanita’s dwelling.

“*Hermana, ayúdame! ¡Ayuda!*” Alicia cried out as she reached the door and pounded her fists on the door.

It felt like an eternity before she heard hurried footsteps from inside and the rasp of the latch. The door swung open wide.



SISTER JUANITA STOOD in the doorway holding a flashlight. “Good lord Alicia. What are you doing out here after dark?” She grabbed the girl by the arm and yanked her inside. “What is it?” She shined the light out into the courtyard. She swept it past the church and stopped as the beam caught two eyes glowing back at her.

“Who’s out there?” she called trying to hide the fear she knew was in her voice by lowering it an octave. “I can see you standing there. Shame on you for chasing after a child.” She repeated it again in Spanish and in Creole so whoever was standing there understood her. She didn’t identify whether it is a boy or girl who was chased. She didn’t want whoever was lurking out there in the darkness to know. Her stomach hurt and her heart beat faster as she sensed the malevolence and evil stalking Alicia.

She made several more passes with the light but when she returned to the spot, the glowing eyes were gone, the evil emanating from it remained behind like a stain on the earth.

She slammed the door shut and slid the lock in place. “What happened?” Sister Juanita demanded.

Tears welled in the young girl’s eyes and she broke down crying. Sister Juanita gathered Alicia into her arms. “Come on.” She guided her to a chair and sat her down. “You’re safe, now. Tell me what happened.”

“I saw the Colonel today,” Alicia whispered.

“Did he see you?”

“I—I don’t know. I ran—it’s how I got lost.” She was crying so hard she started to hiccup. “There was a dog and he was digging for something by one of the huts. Somebody chased me when I got to the garden.”

An impotent anger rose inside Sister Juanita as she was sure who it might have been. He must have seen the girl and waited for her to come home. It was just like him to lie in wait. What she didn’t understand was how Alicia outran him. He was bigger and faster and it dawned on her. He didn’t want to catch her. He did it to scare her and to find out information. Her mind raced, her thoughts like electricity flashing through wires and she fought to rein them in.

“Shh, it’s over. You’re safe now.” Sister Juanita squeezed Alicia’s shoulder. “There’s some water in the pitcher on the table. Go wash yourself. Sleep in the back room tonight. There are some clean sheets you can use.”

“Where is everyone? I thought Sister Rose and everyone from the medical mission would come back to the dorm tonight.”

“It was their plan to come back. I’m sure they have a good reason for staying where they are.”

“Will they be all right?”

“They’re in a large group. They’ll be fine.” Sister Juanita let her gaze drift away from Alicia. “Get to sleep. We’ll walk to the clinic in the morning.”

Sleep was elusive and when Sister Juanita did nightmares plagued her. The Colonel’s face was the head of a hideous monster instilled with otherworldly powers. Every breeze stirring the mosquito netting was his shadow reaching across time and space to touch and torment her. Moonlight filtered through the windows and cast shadows across the room, the doorway a yawning chasm into the abyss.

When Sister Juanita woke before dawn she was exhausted. She had no idea where the Colonel was but she sensed his presence all around her.

# Chapter Thirteen

ALEX STOOD OFF to David's left listening. A dozen men and women stood in a loose circle listening to the heated discussion. The mood was deteriorating with each passing minute.

"I'm not saying anything bad is going to happen. We just can't bury our heads in the sand and pretend it's not a possibility," David said.

A doctor stood next to David wearing a Yankees baseball cap. He looked hot and uncomfortable in scrubs stretched tight across his pregnant looking belly. "This is crap. We were supposed to be going back to the dorm each night."

"It's not much better." Emma stepped closer and continued on, "The mattresses we threw out were disgusting. God knows what was on or living in them."

"At least we had a roof over our heads even if there are no doors," someone else chimed in.

"What the hell are we supposed to do about the mosquitos?"

"We're all going to contract malaria."

"Tell me about it."

"Complaining about what we don't have control over is getting us nowhere," Claire said as she stepped toward the center of the gathering crowd. "Most of what these people had was swept away in a flood last year. Some of them have nothing but the clothes on their backs. Everyone standing here has what they need to survive for the next ten days and we get to leave and go home." Her voice hardened as it tinged with anger. "This for all it is lacking, is their home. Remember why you volunteered to be here in the first place. Our goals are the same."

"Things don't always work out the way we plan them or want them to on these missions. We'll do two-hour shifts. I'll take the first watch," David said. A series of hands went up as three other men volunteered. The man in the baseball cap wasn't one of them. "Good. Let's make the best of it people."

"How are we supposed to use the mosquito netting if we don't have anything to hang it from?"

"We'll figure something out," David said. He strode over to Alex. "I think the meeting went pretty well."

"Once they realized there wasn't an alternative. Like you said, we'll make the best of it." She heard muttered complaints as they passed several staff. The words bitch and hard ass reached her ears and she knew David heard them too. Alex hiked along the perimeter of the compound holding the sheathed machete in her hand.

"You don't think I'm doing the right thing? Do you?" David asked as he joined her.

Alex sighed, stopped next to a clump of sugar cane, and unsheathed the machete. "About what?"

"The Colonel."

“I’m not sure I know what the right thing to do is. This is like living in the stone ages. There’s no running water, there’s no electricity, there’s no rule of law from what I can tell. Just survival of the fittest. Darwin at his best.”

“The women live in fear and the men have been so demoralized they feel like they have no power to change anything about the way they live. So they just exist day to day with no hope their lives will ever get better.”

“Regina asked me if there was anything we could do to make things better. If rape is condoned or people are conditioned to think this is normal because they’ve been brought up with it, how do we change the behaviors without making things worse when we leave?”

“I wish I knew. There are educational programs but without the support of the local government—”

“What government?” Alex asked.

“My point. There’s no one to administer it. You’re right, there is no rule of law here.”

“I’m not sure what the right thing to do is. I understand why you paid him, but at this point the Colonel is manipulating the situation to his benefit. I don’t think he gives a damn one way or the other if his men leave the women and children alone while we’re here. You have no way of knowing what goes on beyond this compound.” Alex said before she stepped back and swung the machete down chopping until she succeeded in severing an armful of sugarcane.

“What are you doing?” David asked.

“There are no hooks to hang the mosquito nets from outside. We can stretch them out on the stakes and sleep underneath them.”

“Wish I thought of that yesterday. Would have saved us a lot of aggravation and worry.”

With sharp decisive strokes Alex cut down a half-dozen thick stalks of bamboo. “Not sure which will work better,” she said as she wiped the sweat from her face. “Is it why you keep coming back here?”

David looked away unable to meet her eyes. “Sister Juanita pleaded with me to come back. No other missions have been to this plantation because it is so remote.”

“Why do you say it like coming back is a bad thing?”

“I—I never told Claire the real reason why I decided to keep coming back here. There’s more —”

Alex’s eyes went wide and she shook the machete at him. “Don’t you dare even think about telling me. Not before you tell Claire about whatever it is you haven’t shared with her. Got me! Christ, she’s already jealous. Don’t be a jerk and add to it.”

David let out a sigh. “Talking to you is like talking to one of the guys.”

“Thanks. Just because I happen to fall in love with women does not make me one of the guys, David.” Alex gathered an armload of staves.

“As if I needed clarification.” David tried not to think of the way she looked. Alex always had an easy confidence about her and never seemed aware anyone might be observing her.

“I’m serious. Don’t tell me anything. Not a damn thing.” Alex glared at him. “Can you handle the rest of these?”

“Got it. I’ll send someone back for the rest.”

They hiked back to the compound in silence each carrying large armloads of sugar cane and bamboo stalks.

“Where do you want these?” David asked.

“This is as good a place as any. Set them in a pile right here.”

Alex set about stripping the leaves and cutting them to three-foot lengths and left one end sharpened to a point. By the time she was done a small group had gathered around her looking on with interest.

Alex sheathed the machete and handed it back to David. "Give this to whoever you're sending out to get the supplies. They're going to need it to widen the path.

"You three guys come with me," David said and led them towards the path at the back of the clinic.

Alex stood and glanced around her. Finding a good-sized rock she chose four stakes and chose a spot near the school. She spotted Ian coming out of the clinic.

"Ian, come here. I need your help."

"What do you need?" he asked, a wary expression crossing his face.

"Lie down."

"What is this? Payback?"

"Just do it," Alex said and drew a rough outline around him on the ground. "Go get your mosquito netting."

He stood and disappeared into the clinic. Alex took one of the stakes and pounded it into the ground so the top was angled outward. She repeated the process three more times. She looked at Ian when he returned.

"Sit down. Now hook the netting around the two stakes by your feet, pull it over you and hook it behind your head."

"What do you think?" she asked, studying her handiwork. She knelt down at his feet and tied the excess net into a knot so it stretched taut above him.

"I think it'll work except maybe they'll fly in from underneath," he said blinking at her through the net.

"It can't be helped."

"Can I sit?"

"Sure," Alex spoke to the group of scruffy looking doctors and nurses. "There are hooks in the ceilings for mosquito nets but we're not all going to fit inside. Anyone who sleeps outside tonight, do what I did here with Ian."

Satisfied it would provide at least some semblance of protection from the mosquitoes, Alex dusted her hands off on her pants and considered what to do next. She studied the remaining pile of bamboo stalks and selected several she hadn't cut down to shorter lengths. Each had a sharp end.

She cast a look around the compound. Sean was carrying a wooden pallet. He set it down as she approached.

"We found some pallets in one of the abandoned shacks. Figure we could use it as firewood."

"They're bone dry," she said touching the wood. "It'll burn fast."

"There's a bunch of them. Guess we'll work on busting them into pieces and see what else we can find. I'd kind of like to keep a fire going all night."

Alex watched his eyes wander past her and take in the scattered clusters of people standing around them talking in low, furtive murmurs. She could see by Sean's expression he sensed the rising tension in the group as well. "One night out here was bad enough. They're worried."

"Gotta keep everyone busy." Alex said, when his gaze returned to hers. "Give 'em a job to do so they don't have time to dwell on things."

"What're those for?" he asked, pointing to the bamboo she was carrying.

“Insurance. Take one. If we get any unwelcome four-legged visitors prowling around tonight we won’t be defenseless.”

“I think you’re worried about more than dogs.”

Alex studied Sean’s face. He was sporting a five o’clock shadow. It reminded her of how he used to look during their time as interns. “If you were trying to intimidate someone wouldn’t you want to see the effects of your handiwork?”

“I guess so,” he said and Alex watched him shift uncomfortable with the implication. “I guess you see the baser side of humanity working in trauma.”

“Not all the time, for some poor bastards it’s just being in the wrong place at the wrong time, but yes, the baser side of humanity is there, lurking.”

He hefted the pallet with one hand and reached for one of the canes with the other. “They’re stout suckers,” he said balancing it in his hand. “I wouldn’t want to get hit by one of these.”

IT WAS LATE and the moon and stars were out. In the center of the compound Sean had started a fire from the pallets and dried wood they scavenged from around the perimeter of the bately. David had retrieved the hidden supplies and Alex was finishing stitching one of the doctors who had managed to slice his lower leg open with the machete.

She looked up from her work and studied his pale face. Sweat beaded on his forehead above his bushy eyebrows. “How’re you doing Matt?”

He gritted his teeth and shook his head. “How many more do you have to put in?”

“Twelve to thirteen. You’re gonna have close to thirty altogether.

“Dammit where’s the guy who has the bourbon?”

Alex stopped her suturing and sat back on the stool. She looked around the room, her headlamp illuminating several figures in the dark. “Hey, anyone know where Ian is?”

“We can find him,” a female voice said.

“Tell him I need his bourbon. This topical analgesic isn’t cutting it.”

“Son of a bitch,” Matt winced and pushed himself onto his elbows. “How deep is it?”

Alex lifted the gauze and looked at the rest of the laceration. “Almost down to the fatty layer. “You’re going to have to stay off of this.”

“Shit.”

“So you stay here and man the clinic instead of going out into the villages. You can’t risk this getting infected by standing on it all day.”

“Yeah, I know,” he grunted. “Son of a bitch.”

Alex looked as Ian approached her with his bottle in hand a couple of minutes later. “What do you need?”

“Give him a couple of shots. It’ll make this go a little easier for him.”

“Good thing I brought more than one bottle,” he said and offered the bottle to Matt.

Alex sat back and waited as the young doctor took a healthy swig of the amber liquor. He sputtered and coughed.

“Holy shit it’s strong,” he said and tipped the bottle back for another mouthful.

Ian shifted his weight as he stood at the foot of the table. “Listen, maybe after you’re done you’ll share a drink with me. I, uh, never hit a lady before.”

Alex snorted and looked at him. “You throw a mean elbow.”

“You hit her?” Matt asked.

“Jesus, don’t announce it to the entire group,” Ian hissed. “There’s a band of bitches out there who might lynch me.”

“Yeah, a drink might be a nice way to end this day.” She looked at Matt. “You ready?”

“Let’s get this over with.”

ALEX STRODE OUT of the building and tucked her headlamp into the pocket of her cargo pants. Across the compound she saw Claire and Regina standing next to Sean as he tuned his guitar. They were laughing and carrying on, engrossed in their conversation as she approached.

The firelight flickered and danced and she heard the crackling and popping of the dry wood as the flames consumed it. A smile broke across Regina’s features when she saw Alex.

“I thought you were going to be with him for half the night.”

“It wasn’t easy. All we have is a topical anesthetic, which didn’t help much considering how deep it was.” She draped an arm over Regina’s shoulder and felt Regina shift and lean against her in response. “You providing entertainment, Sean?”

“I could think of worse things to be doing. Hey, where’d my drummer go?”

“Right here,” one of the nurses twirled two sticks of bamboo in her hands and winked at him.

“Alex, you’ve got to see this.” He set his guitar down and brought her to a metal trashcan.

“One of the men from the village gave this to us after we treated his son today. He makes them by hand and molds the metal by sitting them in a fire. They’re steel drums. Tracy, give it a try.”

A sound like mellow bells filled the air as the nurse used thick hunks of wood to coax the reverberation from the drum.

“Nice.” For a moment the edginess she felt faded away. Alex saw Tony sitting on a log next to Emma on the other side of the fire. Ian was having a lively discussion with David. There was a cluster of younger therapists, nurses and doctors sitting a few feet away waiting for Sean to go back to his guitar.

Camaraderie, despite the fear and the lurking sense of danger, was there among them. The alcohol spurred some of it on as inhibitions fell away, but it was still camaraderie nonetheless.

“Don’t go anywhere,” Alex said into Regina’s ear. She made her way around the fire to Ian.

“Hey, I’ll take you up on the drink now.” Glassy eyes met hers in the firelight.

“You’re a good sport. You could have dislocated my shoulder the way you handled me today.” He poured them both a shot of bourbon into flowered paper cups.

“You’re a Marine. You would have broken the hold before I had a chance to take it farther.”

“Where’d you learn the hold anyway?”

“I was a tough kid with a smart mouth growing up in a bad ass neighborhood. I had to learn how to fight to keep up with my mouth.”

Ian lifted his cup in salute and handed Alex hers. “Here’s to not getting knocked on my ass.”

Alex touched the edge of his cup and tipped it to her lips. She swallowed the alcohol, feeling the burn as it coursed down her throat and spread warmth throughout her belly. “Give me another cup and fill mine again.”

Her eyes met David’s and he saluted her with his drink. “We’re starting work on the latrine tomorrow. I could use your help.”

“Count me in. I could use some physical labor right about now.”

“Cleanses the mind and the soul,” David said with a knowing expression.

“Something along those lines,” Alex agreed. Across the campfire, Claire and Regina were swaying to the rhythmic beat of the music their arms draped around each other.

Ian handed her another cup and topped hers off. She clapped him on the shoulder before she strolled back to Regina. “Thanks for the drink.

“Anytime.”

“What was that about?” Regina asked when she returned.

“Ian’s way of an apology for belting me earlier.”

“Jackass.”

“Eh, he’s harmless enough.” Alex handed Regina a cup and took another sip from hers enjoying the slight buzz. Her eyes roamed the perimeter of the compound cast in deepening shadows. She sensed rather than saw the boundary of the uncultivated strip of land separating them from the tattered fringes of the village beyond. It felt like they were teetering on the edge where the thin veneer of civilization faded away as the night settled in.

“DO YOU WANT to stay here by the fire?” Regina asked. It was full dark now and the faces of those sitting beyond the firelight had faded from view. Sean strummed a soft tune on his guitar and a few voices from around the fire caught on to the lyrics.

“I think I’ve had enough of humanity for two days. Let’s go sit by our packs.” Alex stood and led Regina to a spot she had arranged earlier in the evening.

“So why are we sitting back here?” Regina asked as she leaned back against the wall of the school.

“Don’t feel like being in a crowd right now. You?”

“No, this is fine. Some of them are starting to wear on my nerves.” Regina tipped her cup to her lips and swallowed the amber liquid. “Whoa, this has a kick to it.”

“Yeah, go easy.”

“Tony still hitting on you?”

Regina glanced up, surprised. “How’d you know it was him?”

“He’s not the type to quit easily. It’s the thrill of the chase.”

“I told him I was spoken for, maybe next time I’ll use a bat for emphasis.”

Alex chuckled. “Hopefully it won’t be necessary. Anyway, we have a better view from here.”

“Better view of what?”

“Look up.”

Regina did and gasped. “Holy Mother.”

“You don’t get to see the Milky Way by us unless you’re out in the country where you don’t have all the lights.” Alex tilted her head, resting her shoulder against Regina’s.

“It’s breathtaking, almost magical.”

The luminous band of bright stars arched in a splendid display of light across the night sky from one end of the horizon to the other. The stars were so bright and the night so dark it felt for one incredible moment the heavens were touching the Earth.

“The last time I remember seeing the stars like this was the night I called you in Provincetown.” Regina heard the sharp intake of breath and peered at Alex.

“I was busy wallowing in a cesspool of self-pity.”

“You scared the living daylights out of me.” The answer she got was the warmth of Alex’s fingers as she clasped Regina’s hand and brought it to her lips and said, “I’m sorry.”

They sat in silence, legs stretched out in front of them. Out of the darkness a bright light flashed across the sky and dipped beneath the horizon.

“A shooting star.” Regina snuggled closer to Alex.

“Make a wish.”

“I think I got my wish already,” Regina said. Alex was studying her Regina realized and she couldn’t resist running her fingers through Alex’s hair. A tingle went through the palm of her hand when Alex pressed her lips against the soft flesh.

“I read my chart before we left.”

“I wondered if you were going to get around to reading it.” Regina swallowed as her throat constricted with a rush of emotion.

“I couldn’t at first but I needed to know what happened. I felt like I was reading about someone else—not me.”

“Do you think it helped?”

“Yeah. I think I can set it aside now. I’ve dissected it and analyzed it in my head til I just can’t anymore.”

The warmth of the alcohol, combined with the sounds of Sean strumming a familiar tune on the guitar and the flames from the campfire created a heady combination. Regina glanced to the fire where several couples danced to the slow rhythm of the guitar and the seductive sound of the steel drum. “It’s a better end to the night than I thought it would be.”

“Mm, I agree. Although I think we can make one small improvement here.”

“What?” Regina felt the cup lifted from her hand and strong arms wrapped around her waist as she was pulled into Alex’s lap. “Hey, you could have let me help.”

“I didn’t need any help.” Their faces were inches apart, breathing the same air and in the darkness Regina could only think of kissing her.

Regina slid her hands behind Alex’s neck and pulled her lips to hers. They were warm and soft and Regina tasted the hint of bourbon. It was a raw and powerful feeling, them pressed against hers, hungry and wanting, hidden here in the deep shadows. She felt strong hands slip around her waist pulling her close and exploring the soft curves of her body lighting fires along their path.

A soft brush of fingers on her breasts, teasing at first, started a burn low in Regina’s belly. Her blood felt like it was on fire and she wanted to feel all of Alex. Placing her hands on Alex’s shoulder Regina straddled her thighs in the dark and rubbed against her igniting the flames even further.

Desperate to feel her smooth, silky skin beneath her hands, she pulled Alex’s scrub top from her pants. She felt the tremor of Alex’s muscles as her hands roamed against her stomach and explored the expanse of silky skin until she cupped her breasts in her hands. She felt her nipples grow hard beneath her fingertips and somewhere she heard a rumbling low and distant. The blood rushing in her ears.

Alex pulled her mouth away, but Regina captured her lips again, moaning as her tongue slipped inside. Alex responded by pulling her in deeper.

Alex’s hands gripped her waist guiding the rhythm of her hips and they were tumbling past the point of no return. Alex’s hands slid to her thighs and Regina arched against her begging for her touch. When Alex pressed her hand between Regina’s thighs against her arousal Regina couldn’t breathe and she shuddered as her body crested the peak. She knew Alex could feel her wetness and pressed shamelessly against her all control lost.



Alex eased back on the intensity and pulled her hand back to rest on her thigh, kissing Regina gently now. “Easy, we can’t do this here.”

“Aren’t we? Oh God, don’t stop now.”

“Yes,” Alex whispered between kisses.

“No.” Regina groaned in frustration as Alex stopped her hands from exploring more intimate areas.

“Yes,” Alex said again.

“God, I want you. I need you,” Regina said letting her head fall forward onto Alex’s shoulder as her heart pounded in her chest.

“I do too, but not here.”

“I know, I know. I don’t know what got into me.”

“Oh, I think I do.” Alex let out a husky laugh. “The atmosphere, the alcohol and its just a little bit to the dangerous side of things.” Alex pulled her in for one more slow, sensual kiss, tugging on her upper lip as she pulled away. “I’m going to need to run five miles—tomorrow.”

“You? I need an ice cold shower and there’s not one even remotely close by. What was I thinking?” Regina tapped her head repeatedly against Alex’s shoulder. “I must be out of my mind.”

“I like you out of your mind.”

“And you just left me like this.”

“You?” Alex chuckled and shook her head. “What do you think you just did to me?”

Regina climbed off her lap and sat on the ground staring into the darkness feeling suddenly foolish. “I should go check on Sylvi.”

Alex grasped Regina’s hand and pulled her closer. “Don’t. There are half a dozen nurses fussing over her and Matt right now. Check on her in the morning. Stay here with me.” Alex started to laugh as muted sounds of people making out reached their ears.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing really. They’re not going to be feeling so lucky in a couple of days if they get a fungal...” Regina clamped a hand on Alex’s mouth and in the darkness could swear she saw Alex’s eyes dancing with mischief.

“Don’t say another word.”

## Chapter Fourteen

ALICIA SAT ON the edge of Sister’s Juanita’s second floor porch with her legs sticking through the balusters swinging them to and fro. The water below her swirled and frothed around the rocks in the creek as it flowed down the outer edge of the plantation. The scent of moss and water warming in the morning sun filled her senses. Behind her she heard Sister Juanita moving about in her room.

“Sister?”

“Yes Alicia?”

“What’s on the other side of the mountain?”

“More mountains,” came her reply.

“Yes, but once you get past the mountains what is there?”

“If you go far enough you’ll reach Haiti.”

“Have you ever been there?”

“No.”

Alicia looked over her shoulder when she heard Sister Juanita walk behind her. “What direction are you facing?”

“North,” she answered and sighed. It was dangerous to ask questions of Sister Juanita because questions were often answered with more questions.

“What body of water is to our north?”

Alicia was quiet, thinking of the tattered world map Sister Juanita used to teach them geography and history. She loved her fantastic stories of the Greek and Roman empires. “The Atlantic Ocean, but what does the land look like? Is it all like this?”

“No. There are mountains running north to south and valleys greener than the moss along the banks of this creek as far as the eye can see.”

“Where do the mountains lead?”

“Down into the foothills and out to the coastline where the land meets the ocean.”

“Have you ever been there?”

“Alicia did you practice your multiplication tables?”

“What do I need to practice them for?” she protested.

“Because one day you will leave here and you need to know these things. Math is important.”

“I hate math. Besides nobody ever leaves here,” she pouted.

“Not true,” Sister said. “Two boys left last year and went to the orphanage in Santo Domingo.”

Alicia looked back at the nun. “I don’t want to go there. I won’t know anybody.”

“You can’t stay here forever Alicia. You see the life before you. You can not stay.” The rumbling of an engine grew louder and Alicia knew without looking it was the Colonel’s jeep approaching. Alicia watched as the expression on Sister Juanita’s face changed and she motioned her inside. “Stay here and don’t come down until I tell you to. Understand?”

“Yes, Sister.” Alicia climbed to her feet and stepped inside the room and stood uncertain of what to do. She slumped to the floor beside the bed, stared at the ceiling, and dreamed of what was on the other side of the mountains.

SISTER JUANITA REGARDED the stout walking stick propped in the corner by the door. She didn’t need it today to support her sometime aching joints but somehow the feel of the worn wood in the palm of her hand made her stronger. She needed all the strength she could muster to deal with the jackal outside her door. Something her grandfather had told her when she was a young girl was trying to work its way to the edge of her memory but it wasn’t there yet and she wished for the life of her she could remember it.

“Give me strength,” she whispered, opening the door and stepping outside.

“What brings you here Colonel?” Sister Juanita asked as she closed the door behind her.

“We have a problem.”

“We have many problems, Colonel. Which one are you referring to?” She watched as his brow furrowed and his eyes fixed on her first. His gaze wandered past where she stood to the ramshackle structure behind her.

“The child you keep so close to you is soon to be twelve. Is she not?”

“She is just eleven and there is still time for us to find a place for her.” Sister Juanita gripped her hands around the wooden staff to hide the trembling in her fingers. She felt his cold dead eyes on her and her stomach twisted into a knot.

“You know the orphanages in the cities are overwhelmed. They’re filthy and disease ridden traps.”

“We will find her a place to go.”

“There is always a place for her at my outpost. She will be well fed and educated. I will look after her. You know as well as I do she has no future here.”

It took all of her control not to react as he prowled around her, like a panther stalking its prey. She lifted her chin and forced herself to stare into his eyes. His pupils so dilated they looked like black holes.

“And you dare to suggest what you offer is a better future?”

“She is here?” He stood with his hands clasped behind him.

Sister Juanita held her ground as he stepped closer to her. He was so close she could see the sweat beading on his forehead.

“Let me speak to her.”

She blocked his path, brought the staff down in front of her, clutching it in both hands as she stood before him. “You. Will. Not. Do. Any. Such. Thing. I know what you did to her mother.”

“How would you know any of what I did? A hysterical woman spreading vicious rumors is all it was.”

“I tended to her after you discarded her like trash. I brought her child into this world. I know what you did to her mother.”

“She is nothing but a whore.”

“Because you give the women no choice!” She banged the end of her staff into the ground feeling the painful shock reverberate through her arms. “Let them work in the fields like the men do.”

The veins in the sides of his neck bulged as he raged at her. “No! Their quotas would be less than the men. It would not stand and I will not have a mutiny in my fields.”

“I will not let you continue this.”

“And what would you do to stop me?” She thought for an instant he might grab her, but the moment passed leaving her heart fluttering in her chest.

“For the children I would do anything.”

“Don’t start this again. You and your silly fairy tales about your god.” He paced in agitation casting furtive glances at the second floor of her home. “Where is he if he loves you all so much? There is what we have now and it is the powerful who win the day. Walk away from here and be free from this. Your life is not here. Go home Sister while you still can.”

She was shaking and she hoped her legs would hold her until he left. “My life is here with these children.”

“You are a greater fool than I thought, old woman.”

He started to turn away and stopped. A sneer curled his lip and he said, “Tell your people I am sending the water truck through today.”

She watched him walk back to the jeep. “Colonel,” her voice rasped.

He stopped and glared back at her. “What?”

“You never told me about the problem you wanted to talk about.”

“Someone is stealing food again from the depository. I will find them and this time there will be consequences.”

She heard the roar of the engine. He gunned the accelerator and the tires spun, churning dust and small rocks into the air. Her legs carried her through the door and to the steps where she collapsed in a heap. Her chest heaved and the tears came unbidden. She rocked back and forth as she clutched her staff. “I can’t do this. Oh God, please I don’t have the strength for this anymore.”

She heard footsteps at the top of the stairs and she reined in her emotions.

“Sister!” Now bounding down the steps and beside her. “Are you all right?”

Sister Juanita nodded and wiped the tears from her face. “I’m fine, dear.”

“Why are you crying?”

“It’s nothing, Alicia.” Sister Juanita assured her. She sat straighter and found some courage to face the girl. “Do you know what meekness is?”

Alicia shook her head. “No.”

“Meekness means ‘strength under control.’” She pressed her hand against Alicia’s face. “You are always strong. Remember it no matter what happens.” Sister Juanita climbed to her feet and held out a hand. “Come. We will hitch a ride on the water truck when it arrives.”

## Chapter Fifteen

IT WAS EARLY afternoon and the sun was beating down, baking the ground, and sucking the moisture out of everything it touched. Alex shoved the blade of the shovel into the unforgiving clay dirt and worked it in deeper with her booted foot as she leaned her weight onto it. Sweat trickled down Alex’s back and her scrub top clung to her body. She wore a water soaked bandanna around her neck and her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Fifty feet away from where she was digging the latrine, a line of women and children snaked out of the clinic.

There was more than a few medical staff who looked hungover with bloodshot puffy eyes. Alex knew the minute she woke she had drank too much and sucked down two bottles of water to help hydrate and flush the alcohol from her system.

After spending the morning doing physicals with Sister Rose, who translated for her, and handing out vitamins to a never-ending line of children and adults, she welcomed the physical labor. One woman in her sixties stuck out in her mind and she recalled the events as she drove the shovel into the hard-packed dirt.

It was as if her body was aging prematurely. She had a reddish-brown rash over the sun-exposed parts of her body. She complained of stomach pain and bouts of diarrhea followed by days of stomach cramps. She limped like she couldn’t feel her feet. As Alex examined her, she’d listen to the woman carry on a conversation and watched Sister Rose’s attempts to talk to her.

“What is she saying to you?”

“She’s not talking to me. She’s talking to someone who’s not here. They’re singing to her and she doesn’t like it.”

Alex looked up from writing her notes. “She’s hearing voices?”

“Yes, from what she tells me she hears them quite a bit,” Sister Rose said.

“Ask her if I can listen to her heart.” Alex slipped her stethoscope from around her neck while she waited. The woman tilted her head and peered through puffy eyelids at Alex. She spoke to Sister Rose who blushed and looked uncomfortable.

A sense of impatience grew as she watched the line. She glanced across the room where Regina was talking with Danny who was taking a break from filming their work. She was captivated, watching Regina’s animated gestures, the movement of her wrists and hands shaping and adding emphasis to what she was saying. Maybe sensing her eyes, Regina glanced at her, tucked her hair back behind her ears as a blush colored her cheeks and she smiled while she continued her conversation. Alex heard the sound of someone clearing their throat. “Yes, no—which is it?” She met Sister Rose’s eyes and knew without a doubt she’d seen their interaction.

“She says you already know what’s wrong with her. You don’t need to listen to her heart. Do you—know what’s wrong with her?” Sister Rose asked.

Alex tilted her head. “I have an idea. It’s not something we see much of in the states anymore.”

“What is it? She says she’s been to these clinics before and nobody tells her what is wrong.”

“Ask her what she eats.”

“Cassava, plantains, corn and some other root vegetables when she can get them,” Sister Rose said after the woman answered her questions.

“It’s a niacin deficiency. She has all the symptoms of it—dermatitis, gastrointestinal disorder and mental disturbances.” Alex touched her fingertips together while she considered what to say next.

Sister Rose spoke to the woman while Alex sorted through the crate of vitamins sitting by her feet. She felt a hand on her shoulder and realized the woman was standing beside her. She tensed, not sure what to expect. She held still and met the woman’s unwavering gaze.

“She wants to know what it’s called?” Sister Rose asked.

“Pellagra.”

“Thank you,” the woman said.

“Tell her she can take these vitamins.” The woman pushed the vitamins back at Alex and spoke to Sister Rose again.

“She doesn’t want them,” Sister Rose said. “She says to give them to the children. They can benefit from them more than she can. She wants to know if she will die from this.”

Alex stared into the tired eyes and said, “Eventually she will.”

Sister Rose leaned forward and peered at Alex. “Is there anything you can do for her?”

Feeling helpless, Alex shook her head. “She would need to take nicotinamide on a long term basis. We have some but not in the dosages and certainly not for the length of time she would need to take them for. With the mental disturbances she has...she’s already in the pre-terminal phase of the disease.”

A loud rumbling interrupted Alex’s thoughts and she looked across the compound. The roar grew louder and a large pickup truck carrying a stained industrial plastic water tank rolled into view.

As the truck rolled to a stop, the line for the clinic broke up as everyone darted off in different directions. Alex leaned on her shovel and watched as the passenger side door opened

and to her surprise Sister Juanita lowered herself down off the sideboard. Next, Alicia hopped to the ground with ease.

They disappeared inside the clinic and Alex resumed to her task. Several minutes later, Alex heard footsteps approaching.

“WHAT DID YOU do to rate this job?”

“I volunteered,” Alex said as she lifted another shovelful of dirt out of the hole. She wanted to be alone and the methodical work calmed her restless thoughts. She had carved out a depression three feet across and by the time it was done would be almost five feet deep.

“Your friend said I should make sure you take breaks because you won’t otherwise.”

Alex looked and felt a mild shock course through her as Sister Juanita stood in front of her holding out a bottle of water.

“Thanks,” Alex said. “What’s with the water truck?” A young man climbed to the top and unwound a hose from around a bracket. Adults and children reformed the line, bringing with them a variety of buckets and containers.

“I suppose the Colonel was feeling benevolent and remembered to send it today.”

Alex raised her eyebrows when the nun held out her hand. “You’re not going to dig...”

Sister Juanita smiled and rolled her sleeves. “Dig? Oh yes, I am.” She grasped the shovel Alex was still leaning on and gave her a stern look. “Drink.”

Alex shook her head and tilted the bottle to her lips as she watched the older woman sink the shovel into the soil and start removing dirt. She went back to the pile of tools and retrieved another shovel. Setting to work on the other side of the pit she gave the woman a wary sidelong glance. Wisps of red hair streaked with gray poked out from underneath the white coif. They worked in what Alex could only describe as an awkward silence for a while.

“When I was young woman, before I entered the convent,” Sister Juanita said breaking the silence as she continued to shovel. “I worked in the Peace Corps in Africa.”

Alex said, “Must have been an eye-opening experience.”

“Oh it was. I grew up quickly and realized just how privileged our life was back in the states. It humbled me to know people lived with so little, yet could find it within themselves to be generous and compassionate to complete strangers in the face of such extreme poverty.”

“What did you do there?” Alex asked.

A hearty laugh escaped her. “What didn’t we do? We worked with the Ministry of Agriculture to teach families how to grow vegetable gardens, raise poultry and goats so they could have food and a source of income for their family.” A smile lit up her stern features. “We taught them how to use buckets to collect the rain water by diverting it off their roofs.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Fifteen years,” Sister Juanita said without hesitation.

“You wanted to stay here?” Alex stared at her, incredulous at the idea of being immersed in this harsh environment for such an interminable period of time. It seemed like it was more of a sentence than a vocation.

“For a time, no. I hated it. Some days I still do.”

“Why do you stay?”

“Knowing it would be worse for the children if no one was here to keep them safe.”

“It’s difficult to believe these people would come here to work and choose to stay.”

“It’s no choice. When someone is desperate to find food for their family and they’re told there’s work for them, they come, hoping to make a life for themselves. If you ask the people from Haiti, they will tell you ‘It’s open season.’”

“What do you mean?”

“People are collected off the streets and brought to the bateys to work. They come here with nothing but the clothes on their backs.”

Alex looked down at the ground her stomach churning now at the stark implication. “Do they pay them anything?”

“The men are paid in vouchers for every ton of sugarcane they harvest. The money they earn isn’t worth a cent anywhere but on the plantation.”

“Do any of them ever try to leave?”

“If they try to escape and are caught they’re beaten or killed. It’s a strong disincentive for anyone else considering it.”

“So it’s slavery.” Alex met Sister Juanita’s eyes and saw for a fleeting moment the despair and exhaustion blurring her eyes.

“It is. As much as we like to think our species has evolved beyond such ugly practices we haven’t.”

Alex stopped digging and stared across at Sister Juanita. “But you and Sister Rose are here.”

“We are.”

“Doesn’t the church know what goes on here?” Alex asked and watched as a sad expression broke across the nun’s face.

“Humans have enslaved other humans as far back as history is documented. This is so much bigger than most any of us can imagine and it’s but one small example.”

Alex felt an enormous weight settle on her and fought back the swell of emotion. The futility of it all tightened her throat and filled her eyes with tears. “What did you do after you left Africa?” Alex asked as she dumped another shovelful of dirt over the edge of the hole. She stepped out and started casting dirt away from the edge with the shovel.

“From there I went to Appalachia in West Virginia.”

“Why Appalachia?”

“I made friends with a group who were going there next. So West Virginia it was.”

“What was it like?”

“An education of a totally different kind. I learned what hooch smelled like when the men sweat it out of their pores from an all night bender.”

“Hooch?”

“Moonshine.”

“Rotgut.”

“Yes, one and the same. I learned how to shoot a Winchester rifle, although the man who taught me swore I would never hit the broad side of the barn.” Sister Juanita cast her wicked grin. “Lucky for him he was wrong. A boar chased him one day. I shot it between the eyes.” Sister Juanita stopped shoveling and leaned on the handle.

Alex just stared at her and shook her head. “Not exactly what I would have expected to hear.”

“Why? Because I’m a woman of the cloth?”

“I...well, yes but you’re out here in the trenches trying to help these kids make some kind of a life,” Alex stammered.

“It’s a good way of describing it.” Sister Juanita leaned on her shovel and stared off into the distance as if searching for something beyond her earthly vision. “We are in the trenches of humanity for all its pain and horror. There are still moments of beauty to behold. I’m not as young and agile as you are anymore. Can you give me a hand getting out of here?”

“Sure,” Alex stepped out of the pit and offered a hand to Sister Juanita. She was surprised at the calloused palm and fingers gripping hers. She leaned back and braced herself as she climbed onto the edge.

“You’re a strong one,” Sister Juanita said as she patted Alex on her arm.

Alex found herself caught in the strong regard of serious amber colored eyes. She cleared her throat and stepped back feeling exposed and vulnerable under Sister Juanita’s scrutiny.

“What kind of doctor are you?” Sister Juanita asked.

“Emergency medicine and surgery.”

“So you live in the trenches as well. We don’t know each other but we can talk about the human condition while we work.”

They settled into a rhythm of shoveling the dirt out of the hole and moving it away from the edges. Before it got deep enough to make climbing out a challenge, Alex retrieved two crates from inside the clinic and set them in the bottom of the pit. “What’s your plan for this place and the children?” she asked as she handed a bucketful of dirt to Sister Jaunita.

“Plan?”

“Well, you have a vision of what you want it to be?”

“Visions and dreams are free. Plans and a future require more than hopes and prayers. My plan for today is to make sure all the children eat one meal and stay safe tonight.”

Alex regarded her and went back to digging.

“There are days like today when I feel like he has forsaken us.”

“Who? The Colonel?”

“Ha! That would be a blessing.” She raised an arm over her head and pointed at the sky.

Alex stared at her open-mouthed.

“Close your mouth. You’ll catch flies.”

“But—you.”

“But nothing. Look around you. He leaves us as stewards of this wonderful creation and this is what humanity does with it. We’ve lost our way. We enslave, rape and kill all out of greed and the insatiable need for more power...and he watches as we destroy our collective souls.”

“Isn’t self-determination about making our own choices?” Alex asked.

“Yes, free will. You are Christian?”

Alex shrugged and continued digging. “Born and raised into it.”

“But now?”

Alex gave her sidelong glance and continued to fill another bucket with dirt. She hoisted it up and set it on the edge of the hole. “Sister, I think we’ll get along better if we stick to talking about the human condition.” She climbed onto a crate and hoisted her body out of the hole with her arms. “I’m going to get some more water.”

She met David halfway across the compound. “I was just coming to relieve you,” he said.

“Perfect timing, by the way.”

“I hope you don’t feel half as lousy as I do.”

“I’ve had worse hangovers. Hey, what happened to the kid we put the NG tube into the first night we were here?” Alex untied the bandanna from around her neck and wiped the sweat and dirt from her face.



David frowned and rubbed his forehead. “We got two of the doctors to take a train back into Santo Domingo and bring him to a hospital. I don’t know anything more. Sorry.”

“It’s better news than I hoped for. I’m almost three feet down.” Alex grinned at David’s expression. “Don’t worry I think you’ve got the hardest part in front of you.”

“You getting along with Sister Juanita? I saw she had your undivided attention back there.”

Alex gave him a rueful grin. “She’s all right, but I’ll skip the discussion about religion. I’ll leave her in your capable hands for now.”

“DON’T YOU THINK it’s a little hot out here for the way you’re dressed?” David asked as he approached Sister Juanita. He stopped her from continuing to shovel and held onto the handle when she didn’t look at him.

“It is for this kind of labor,” her voice rasped.

David clasped his hand around her wrist when she reached for him and helped her climb out of the hole.

“Sister you’re upset. What’s wrong?”

“We need to talk about Alicia.” She wiped her hands off on the front of the apron she was wearing.

“Why? Did something happen?”

“The Colonel paid me a visit today to remind me she’s reaching the age limit here. He offered her a place to live at his outpost.”

“He’s out of his fucking mind if he thinks he’s going to take her.”

“I’m afraid we’re not going to have as much time as we thought to figure out a plan to get her out of here.”

“Shit. Isn’t there another orphanage she can go to? What about somewhere closer to the city?”

“You think the city is any less dangerous than here? The devil just changes his clothes to fit in. Besides, I didn’t go through months of the courts investigating the minute details of my life before granting me guardianship of her so I can leave her in another orphanage.”

“Of course you didn’t. What do you intend to do?”

“I’m going to need your help again David.”

“To do what Sister?”

“Is there anyone else here you trust?”

“Claire.”

“Who else?”

“Alex and Regina. But what is it you’re planning to do?”

“I’m going to take her out of here once and for all.”

## Chapter Sixteen

ALEX ENTERED THE clinic to the shrill screams of a child. She spotted Regina and Claire in a corner, realizing as she headed in their direction the high-pitched discordant shrieks were coming from there. Claire was cradling the inconsolable child in her arms rocking her back and forth as she sat on the concrete floor.

“Where were you?” Claire asked.

“Digging the hole for the latrine,” Alex said, not mistaking the peevisish tone to Claire’s voice.

“Sister Juanita went out there a while ago.”

“Yeah, she was there with me. I left her digging.” She cast a glance at Regina who smiled and winked back at her.

“You survived longer with her than most do one on one.” Claire continued to rock Sylvi in her arms.

“What do you mean?”

“Did she get around to having one of her religious talks?”

“She talked about what she did before she became a nun and eventually got around to religion.”

“Didn’t feel like listening to a lecture about the finer points of Catholicism?”

“No, I didn’t. What’s wrong with her?” Alex asked putting a hand on Sylvi’s forehead and she immediately jerked away and hid her face.

“She woke a little while ago and we can’t get her to stop,” Regina said in an exasperated voice.

Alex crouched down in front of the girl. “You think she’s hungry?”

For an answer Claire pointed at the front of Regina’s stained shirt and the upended bowl lying on the ground. “And yes before you’re the third person to ask. We’ve changed her diaper and given her water.”

“What was in the bowl?”

“Cereal,” Claire said.

Alex sniffed at Regina’s stained shirtfront. “I think I’d be pissed off too if that’s what I had to eat.”

“Ok, smart ass. What’s your suggestion?” Claire snapped.

Alex stepped across to her backpack and rummaged through it. She returned with a package of beef jerky and tore it open.

“You are not going to give jerky to her,” Claire said.

“Why not? She has teeth. I’ll give her a little piece of it.” Alex squatted down in front of Sylvi and slipped a piece of jerky into her mouth first. She held out a piece in front of the child who still had big tears rolling down her cheeks.

Brown eyes full of suspicion stared at Alex and Sylvi hiccupped. “Go ahead. Take it.” Alex motioned with her hand. “You’re a tough sell, huh?” With a sigh, she lowered herself to the ground and gnawed on the piece in her mouth. “Here, maybe she’ll understand it’s safe if we all eat it.” She handed Regina and Claire each a piece as they sat around the child.

“Oh my god this is the best thing I’ve tasted since we got here,” Claire said while she chewed. “Right now this ranks better than sex.”

“Hey, keep it PG.”

“I don’t think she understands what we’re saying,” Alex said still holding the jerky out in front of her.

Sylvi looked at them all with a serious expression. She snatched the jerky from Alex with her small hand and popped it in her mouth. “Ex!” she exclaimed and proceeded to gnaw on the piece of meat.

Claire shook with fits of laughter as she held the girl in her lap. “Maybe not, but she can certainly parrot what we say.”

“Great, now you can explain to the Sisters why she’s repeating ‘ex’ all week long.” Regina buried her head in her hands.

“At least it’s ex...and she left the first letter off,” Claire almost tipped over and clutched her stomach. “Oh god, I haven’t laughed this hard in weeks.”

“What’s so funny back here?” David asked as he approached them.

“Here have a piece,” Alex handed the bag to him, stopping to take a closer look when she saw his face. “You look pale. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” He popped a piece in his mouth and sighed. “Oh my god.”

“Stop! Don’t say anything else,” Regina begged him.

“What? Why?”

“Ex!” Sylvi demanded and reached for the bag.

“Don’t ask,” Alex said with a deadpan expression intercepting the bag and handing Sylvi another piece. She tucked the sack into her back pocket.

“You’re back already? What happened to digging the rest of the latrine, macho man?” Claire asked.

“Sister Juanita was in the mood to talk. I couldn’t get much done with her out there. You know how she gets. She demands your full attention.”

“She needs to let you work and not meddle so much.”

“I didn’t say she was meddling. She just needed to talk. Besides I recruited a couple of the guys to dig the rest of the hole this afternoon. I want the whole thing done in the next two days.”

“Why the rush?” Alex asked.

“I was talking to one of the cane cutters and he pointed out the clouds. They’re low and thin. Usually means rain in the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours.”

“Did we lose all our patients to the water truck?”

“At least for the afternoon. If you guys want to take a break for awhile Claire and I will cover here if any stragglers arrive.”

“I’ll work on the framing later if they get the hole finished.”

“Thanks, Alex.”

Alex met Regina’s eyes and indicated they should leave now while they had the opportunity. “We’ve been in the same clothes since yesterday and I need to get the dirt off me.”

“You read my mind,” Regina said as they left the clinic.

They both needed a shower but settled for stripping down inside the school behind a sheet someone had hung from hooks and washing with a camp towel and well water.

Afterwards, Alex discovered a rope in one of the crates and set about stringing it between the clinic and the school. They hand washed a few things and draped their sleeping bags over it to air out.

“Since this is where we’re staying for the time being, might as well make the best of it,” Alex said to Regina as they finished their tasks.

“I told Claire I’d help her reorganize supplies so we’re not wasting time tomorrow doing it. What are you going to do?”

“I’ll work on the latrine again.”

It was later in the afternoon, and the heat of the sun had past its peak when a breeze stirred bringing with it the complex briny smell of salt and seaweed. Alex tied her hair back in a ponytail and strolled over to work on the latrine.

Several other volunteers had taken shifts filling buckets with the clay dirt and lugging them away to the edge of the compound. Someone had framed the inside of the hole and nailed the floorboard with a rough hole cut out to the timbers.

She sorted through the pile of reclaimed two by fours. She gave up trying to make the frame plumb and level when most of the wood was warped. She spent the next couple of hours framing the three-sided shelter. When she finished she went to work sawing a piece of plywood to cover the sides and roof. The manufactured boards were coarse and full of knots with splintered pieces along its edges so the work was slow.

When she was done she leaned the board against the two by fours and stood back considering what to do next. She heard voices behind her. An impromptu game of soccer had ensued in the courtyard. Shouts and laughter erupted. She recognized the boy who had raced past her the day before evade several of the doctors, maneuver the ball between them and score an easy goal.

“Are you about done out here?” Alex studied Regina as she approached. Her hair was pulled back in a short ponytail and her cheeks were tinged pink from being outside in the sun. Her sweat dampened tee shirt clung to her torso and she felt a surge of desire course through her as she flashed on the memory of last evening and for a fleeting instant wished she had thrown caution to the wind.

“Yeah,” she said rubbing at the burning sensation in the palm of her left hand.

“David said we’re staying here again tonight.”

“I figured as much.”

“Maybe you could talk to him about just deciding to stay here so everyone’s not wondering and worrying each day where we’re going to stay.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Alex said.

“He’s worried about Matt’s leg.”

“I am too.”

“What did you do to your hand?” Regina lifted Alex’s hand and sucked in a breath. “You’ve got a nasty splinter.”

Alex regarded the shard of wood imbedded beneath the surface of her skin. “It stings,” she said unable to pull her eyes away from Regina’s. She saw the blush rise in Regina’s cheeks.

“Why are you looking at me?”

“You know why.” Alex growled close to her ear and nipped at the soft flesh of her ear lobe. “You started this last night and now I can’t stop thinking about you.”

Regina raised her hands and tried to push her away. “Stop.”

“I don’t want to,” Alex said brushing her lips lower along the curve of her neck smiling when she felt Regina shiver at her touch.

“You—are—bad.” Regina slipped away from Alex’s touch and flashed a brilliant smile at her. “Let’s get this out first.”

“First?” Alex watched Regina walk away a few steps, swept a hand through her hair and followed, smiling.

Regina whirled around and poked a finger at Alex’s chest. “I know what you’re doing.”

“What am I doing?” A glint reached her eyes as Alex looked down at Regina’s finger and met her eyes with a soul-searing gaze.

“You’re thinking about...” she laughed and stepped back as Alex leaned closer and drew a finger down the muscles of her neck, curving in at her collarbone and trailing down to the V in her scrub top.

“Mm, what am I thinking about?”

“I...you...oh—don’t you smirk at me.”

“I...I’ve been...picturing you naked at completely inappropriate times all day.” Alex tilted her head, waiting while she watched Regina open her mouth to say something and stopped.

“Nothing? I’ve left you speechless.”

Regina let her head drop forward onto Alex’s chest and gave her a shove. “You do not play fair, Margulies.”

“Neither do you,” Alex said, bumping against her with her hip.

They threaded their way through the throng of people sorting through crates of supplies and packing as much as they could carry into their backpacks.

“Where are they going?”

“They’re hiking to the West side of the plantation tomorrow. They’ll leave at sunrise. Sit here.” All business now, Regina motioned to a wooden table as she opened her pack and pulled out small forceps from a medical pack. She doused it in alcohol and moved to stand beside Alex.

Her cotton shirt brushed against Alex’s arm as she examined her palm and probed the inflamed area of torn skin where the splinter had imbedded itself. Alex flinched as Regina worked to pull one deep sliver out.

“Sorry.” Alex leaned against Regina’s shoulder. “You’re blocking my light,” Regina said and moved to stand in between her thighs to get a better view. “Hold still. I need to make sure I get it all out.”

“You’re going to cause permanent damage standing there,” Alex whispered her voice hoarse with desire as she watched the color rise on Regina’s face.

“You’re crazy.” She worked to remove the last shard.

“You make me crazy.”

“There.” Regina reached for a tube of antibiotic and a bandage only to have her hand caught in a gentle grasp. “I have to cover it.”

“In a minute.” Alex slipped a hand around Regina’s neck, her thumb caressing her skin and drew her closer.

“We’re not exactly alone in here,” Regina protested leaning into the caress.

“I know,” Alex said, her voice a hoarse whisper and pressed her lips against Regina’s temple.

THE NEXT DAY Alex sat beside David at one of the tables as they sorted through paperwork and started to compile the statistics from the first few days of the trip. They’d averaged treating five hundred patients a day with each doctor seeing between thirty and fifty patients. They treated everything from parasites, gastrointestinal complaints, fungal infections, scabies, malnutrition, back pain, burns, schizophrenia, animal bites, birth defects, a fishbone stuck in a woman’s throat and an infected pig bite.

Adult males composed twenty-five percent of the patients. Adult females and children totaled the remaining seventy-five percent. Most of them had not had any medical visits within the past year.

Alex sat back in her chair and glanced to where Matt was sitting in the corner with his leg propped up on another chair. She had changed his dressing earlier in the morning and was not pleased with what she had observed. She found the stitches straining against the swollen tissue and a scant bit of purulent drainage was visible on the gauze. She'd removed half of the stitches to let the wound drain and applied a liberal amount of triple antibiotic solution to the wound.

"Matt's leg is infected. We need to get him out of here."

"I know. It's a three day train ride to Santo Domingo," he said, glancing from his paperwork. "He'll just wait days to be seen."

"What about the Ministry of Health? Can't you call them on the satellite phone?"

"I can but you forget they were supposed to bring us back to the dorm each night. The Colonel has shut down our transportation."

"What will he do when it comes time for us to leave?"

"What he's done each time before. He'll allow the buses onto the plantation and be more than happy to see us go."

"I'm concerned Matt will get septic before we leave." She watched as David pressed his palms against his eyes and arched his back. She knew he was warring with exhaustion and the strain of being responsible for everything and everyone. "He's been on Cipro since I closed the wound."

"Do what you can for him," David said as he arranged the paperwork into neat piles and avoided her eyes.

HER FOOTSTEPS HAD carried her farther into the batey than she usually dared to walk without Charles as her escort. A boy clothed only in underpants ran past her rolling a tire along the rock-strewn ground with a stick. She ducked under a worn clothesline stretched across the lane, attached on each end to a wooden post at the corner of aluminum-clad shacks. Weeds grew along the edges of the path and would soon become unmanageable if no one bothered to cut them down.

Branches from trees placed across piles of banana leaves and random pieces of trash blew off in the last thunderstorm, leaving gaping holes in the roofs. In the distance she heard the rhythmic sound of machetes chopping sugar cane.

She'd passed several of the Colonel's men aware of their armed vigilance. None of them acknowledged her. She hadn't expected them to. Her religious garb effectively made her invisible to them. Their presence was there to ensure the men worked from sunup to sundown harvesting the sugarcane in the brutal sun-drenched fields beyond the villages. Under their watchful eyes the workers carried arm loads from the field to the mill bins on the railway track where it was weighed and recorded. It wasn't unusual for fights to break out when one man felt another was cheating or stealing harvested cane to add to his own.

A little farther down the lane she rounded a corner and recognized the shack. Sister Juanita ducked through the doorway and entered the mud-walled hut, with a bare earthen floor. To one side was a worn wooden platform set off the floor perched on broken cinder blocks. A wooden table built of scrap wood held a chipped bowl and a teacup without a handle.

Sitting on top of the worn mattress and wrinkled bed linens was a woman. Her bony legs were hanging off the bed, crossed at the ankles, and she was leaning to one side on an outstretched arm. Sandals lay discarded on the floor where they had slipped off her feet. She was

dressed in a faded pink housecoat covering her to mid thigh and wore a kerchief over her balding head. The woman tilted her head as Sister Juanita drew closer.

“It has been awhile since you last visited, Sister,” she said in Creole.

“How do you always know it’s me, Philomene?”

“I can smell the soap you use and after all these years I know the sound of your footsteps.”

Sister Juanita nodded and stepped forward. “Charles gave me some food to give to you.” She pressed the cloth wrapped bread and fruit into her hands. “Hide it and make sure you eat it. Don’t give it away.”

“Thank you. He is a kind man.” She set the food on her bed beside her.

“How are you?”

“I am tired and in pain. I want to go to sleep and not wake up. I am miserable and I know it.”

“I can always count on your blunt honesty.”

“What else is there when your life is stripped down to this? I spend my days waiting...for death.”

“I need to talk to you.”

“I have nothing but time, Sister.” Philomene braced her arms on the bed and waited.

“It’s about Alicia.” She studied Philomene. The prominent cheekbones made the hollow in her cheeks more pronounced.

“What do you need to tell me about her I don’t already know? She hardly visits anymore. She has little use for her decrepit old mother with one foot in the grave.”

“It’s not because she doesn’t want to. She would never make it past the guards who patrol the path leading here. They would bring her to the Colonel in an instant. You know it as sure as I do.”

“My body is wasting away. I have missed my daughter’s life.” Philomene raised a trembling hand to her face to wipe the tears away. “I’ve missed so many things and I’m angry. He ruined me and I want him to die.”

“His fate is not for us to decide. The Lord will judge him as he will judge all of us.”

“It is not enough for me. I want him to suffer and pay now for what he did to me.”

“She can not stay here any longer.”

“Why not? She was born into this life.”

“You know as well as I do what her choices are if she stays.”

“What difference does it make? It’s all she knows.”

“She’s maturing into a bright young woman.” A proud smile touched Sister Juanita lips.

“You’re filling her mind with useless, dangerous, and foolish dreams. They will never come true.”

“They can be real if you let her go.”

“Where can she go? There is no place for her to go. She’s the only thing I have left in this life.”

“Because she is yours, you should want more for her than this existence.”

“She was mine until I got sick.” Philomene’s voice rose to a hoarse cry.

“You couldn’t take care of yourself let alone a newborn child.”

“You don’t know what it’s like to bring a child into this world and have it taken away from you.”

Sister Juanita ignored the pain welling inside her. It caused her throat to constrict with emotion. “I won’t let him take her.”

“You don’t have a choice. You know he will.”

“Do you remember when I first came here?”

“Yes. You would tell us stories of when you were in Africa.”

“And what it was like living in the States.”

“I used to hate you for sharing them. I was jealous you had those experiences and I never would. I couldn’t understand why you would tell all those stories. I realized after awhile the children would beg you to tell them more.”

“For those brief moments they got to forget where they were and dream of another world. You asked me to promise you something. Do you remember what it was?”

“I asked you to take care of Alicia when I couldn’t anymore.”

“You asked me to do something else as well.”

“I asked you to take her away from here to somewhere she could get an education.”

Sister Juanita stepped closer and placed her hand on Philomene’s clenched fists. “Eighteen months ago I petitioned the courts for guardianship.”

“What does it mean?”

“It means I would be legally responsible for her. It means I can take her out of here.”

“But she’s my daughter.”

“She always will be. This isn’t about who she belongs to. It’s about giving her a chance she’ll *never* have if she stays here.”

“You said you petitioned the courts...”

“It is done. They have granted me guardianship.”

“No. No, no, no, no. My baby, I’ve lost my baby.” Philomene slid off the bed and crashed to the floor.

“Philomene, you can’t lie here on the floor.” Sister Juanita grunted with the effort of wrapping her arms around the fragile body and hoisting her back onto the bed.

“Who...will...look after her?”

“I will.”

“You’re too old to raise a child.” Her voice was wracked with sobs.

“She can become a citizen once she’s there. She can go to school, Philomene.”

“You’re going to take her to America? I’ll never see her again.” Philomene’s eyes overflowed with tears.

“Tell me you want her to stay here, Philomene. Is this honestly the life you want for her?”

Philomene shook her head. “No...please don’t let him steal her life away.” There was a catch in her voice.

“I won’t,” she assured her running her fingers over Philomene’s cheek. “Lie down.” Sister Juanita pulled the threadbare blanket on top of her frail body. “I promise I won’t.”

“When will you leave?”

“There is a medical mission here now. I will leave when they do and take Alicia with me.”

“Don’t let her forget me.”

“I won’t. I give you my word. She’ll remember you.”

Sister Juanita stayed until Philomene cried herself to sleep. Afterwards she started the long walk back to the school.

## Chapter Seventeen



ALEX STUDIED ALICIA'S posture, anticipating her next move as the girl rolled the soccer ball back and forth beneath her foot. She'd been beaten once already with a feint forward and a sideways flick of Alicia's back leg. The move sent the ball off to the left and just outside Alex's defense.

She didn't fall for the maneuver the second time keeping her weight on the balls of her feet and her knees loose she lunged forward when Alicia committed herself and blocked the ball with her foot. There was a brief scuffle for possession and Alex was able to pass the ball to David. He was swarmed by three boys who stripped him of the ball.

A triumphant yell erupted from the group of children who goaded the staff into a game of soccer and were trouncing them on the makeshift field between the school and the clinic.

"Come on Ivez. I thought you played soccer in college." Alex jeered backpedalling into position as one of the boys dribbled the ball back and kicked it past her.

"They're running circles around us." He darted right as the boy tried to maneuver past him.

"I think kicking our butts was the idea of the challenge," Alex said.

"Hey! A little help back here," Regina called out as Alicia took possession of the ball, bore down on the goal, and rocketed it toward her. Regina did a successful block and collapsed in heap on the ground.

"You okay?" Alex crouched down next to her.

"Fine. Whose brilliant idea was this anyway?" Regina asked as she sat holding her shin. "I think the ball is made of cinder block."

Javier toddled over and threw himself into Regina's lap. "Hey, you're no lightweight, kiddo." Regina tickled the boy who giggled and kicked his legs until she rolled him off of her legs. "Uh, oh...something's wrong with Sister Juanita." Regina nudged Alex in the shoulder.

Across the compound, David was holding Sister Juanita around her waist, helping her walk back towards the school. Alicia was hovering close by with a frightened expression on her face. They exchanged glances and Alex held out a hand and hauled Regina to her feet.

"Go see if he needs help," Regina said. "I'll get us all some water."

Alex trotted across the field meeting David at the doorway of the school. "What's the matter?"

"She was out walking in all this heat. Damn close to heat exhaustion," he said. "I don't know what possessed you. Sister we have to get some of these layers off."

"No, I'll be fine," she protested and stumbled as her knees buckled.

"At least the outer ones, Sister. I'll make sure no one comes in," Alicia said standing by her side.

"Here's some water," Regina said as she caught up to them.

Sister Juanita struggled to get on the table, taking Alex's hand as she offered to help her.

Alex lifted the nun's sleeve and felt the rapid fluttering of her pulse beneath her fingertips.

"Her heart rate's tachy. Do we have any fluids to spare?"

David said, "Regina, would you check with Claire? She should know what inventory we've got left."

"I'll be right back."

When Regina left, Alex pulled Sister Juanita's sleeve down. "Are you wearing anything under this?"

"I have a tunic on."

"Take it off please."

"You're making a big fuss. I just need to drink and rest for a bit."

Alex dug into one of the medical bags and pulled out a large absorbent dressing. She doused it with water, squeezed out the excess and handed it to Sister Jaunita. "Put this around your neck."

"You're quite bossy." Sister Juanita slipped the top part of her habit off, folded it and set it beside her on the table.

"Probably one of the nicer things people say about her," David said with a smile.

A couple of minutes later, Claire and Regina came back with two IV bags. "What did you do to yourself Sister?"

"I don't think this is all very necessary." She slumped forward almost falling off the table, stopped only by David and Alex grabbing hold of her.

"Alex, what happened?" David asked lowering Sister Juanita down onto her back.

"Sister!" Alicia said and started to cry.

"Hold on." Alex found the woman's pulse, and felt an overwhelming sense of relief as she observed the shallow rise and fall of the nun's chest. "She's still with us Alicia. You need to give us some room." She nudged Alicia into David's arms. "Claire, get the IV started. Reg, is there a stethoscope around here? Find a blood pressure cuff."

"Right here." Regina pulled one out of a crate beneath the table and handed it across to Alex.

Alex opened the woman's tunic and placed the bell of the stethoscope against her chest listening to the irregular heartbeat. "Take her pressure," she said and shifted towards the head of the table to make room.

Moving around the table, Regina slid in next to Alex, wrapped a cuff around the nun's arm and inflated it.

"IV's in," Claire said a moment later.

"Her pressure's one twenty over fifty," Regina said

"David, do you know anything about her medical history?"

"No. She's never shared any information with me."

Alex glanced at Alicia who was watching Sister Juanita. "Let's move the table closer to the window so we can hang the IV from the hand crank.

On the count of three the four of them lifted the table and carried it to the side of the room.

"What do you think?" David asked.

Alex lifted the stethoscope from around her neck and motioned for David to walk with her. She waited until they were out of earshot from Alicia. "She's got an irregular heartbeat. It might be from the dehydration but it might not be. She needs an EKG."

David stood with his arms folded across his chest. "It'll be hell trying to convince her to leave here."

"Let's see how she is after the fluids are finished. Ultimately, it's her decision."

"Alex, she's coming around," Regina called out.

Alex crossed the room and looked down at Sister Juanita watching her blink in confusion and focus in on the faces around her. "Do you know where you are?"

"I'm in the school. What happened?" she asked trying to sit and was held down by David.

"Just stay put, Sister."

“I feel fine,” she protested. “Let me sit.”

“Slowly,” Alex conceded as she studied Sister Juanita’s face and shook her head as she watched the color drain away. “Oh no you don’t. Just stay down. You’re dehydrated and you need the fluids.”

“David, I need to talk to you now,” Sister Juanita insisted.

Alex slipped the stethoscope from her neck and dropped it into the crate beneath the table. “Make sure the IV finishes before you let her walk around,” she said to Claire. “Check her pressure before you take it out. Give a dose of baby aspirin.” She started to leave but Sister Juanita grabbed her hand.

“I need you and Dr. Kingston to stay, please.” Alex tilted her head in question and glanced at Regina who shrugged.

“Alicia, come here.” She pulled the girl close to her. “I’m fine. They’re just making a fuss. Will you go see if Sister Rose needs help with the children?”

“I don’t want to go.”

“I need to talk to Dr. Ivez and his friends. I’ll come find you when I’m finished,” she said in a firm and unwavering tone.

“I know where she is, Alicia. Come with me,” David said.

AMID PROTESTS FROM the doctors, Sister Juanita sat atop the wooden table, her hands folded in her lap, aware of the cool, moist pad wrapped around the back of her neck. The school was cluttered with backpacks and duffel bags, some open and erupting their contents on the floor around them. Crates of donated medical supplies were stacked along the back wall.

She wasn’t sure how any of them were going to react to what she had decided on her walk back to the school. She felt like she was looking into the rearview mirror of her life as she arrived at what seemed like the only logical conclusion. Every mistake she’d ever made in her life seemed to be haunting her now. She twisted the silver band she wore on her left ring finger wondering what consequences would be brought to bear.

“What’s this all about, Sister?” David asked once he returned.

She set her doubts aside and settled on the course she was going to follow. “I talked to Alicia’s mother today.”

“You walked all the way there—alone?” His voice tinged with anger now. “You should have at least brought Charles with you.”

“Charles needs to keep a low profile for a while.”

“Why? What has he done?”

“He took food from the Colonel’s depository. The Colonel doesn’t know it was him but he’s looking for a culprit. Enough about Charles, he’s wily enough to look after himself.”

“Wait, Alicia has a mother? Here on the plantation?” Regina asked.

“Biologically speaking, yes. She’s been in no condition to take care of Alicia let alone herself for many years,” Sister Juanita said, and watched understanding dawn in Regina’s eyes.

“That’s why she stays here with you.”

“What does this have to do with us?” Sister Juanita glanced at Alex, who was standing with arms folded across her chest watching her a wary expression flickering across her face.

“Alicia can’t stay here anymore. It’s too dangerous for her.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Alex said.

“Why is it any more dangerous for her than the other children on the plantation?” Claire asked.

Sister Juanita hesitated before she answered, clutching her hands together. “She is the Colonel’s offspring. He used her mother and when he was done with her he threw her out like trash.”

“You knew!” Sister Juanita flinched as Claire rounded on David and shoved him in the chest. “You knew he was the father and you didn’t tell me. He came after you last time we were here, because you found out and confronted him.”

“I...I couldn’t—”

“Stop! Claire, I told him not to say anything. The more people who knew the more dangerous it is for her,” Sister Juanita said.

“You’re sure he’s the father?” All eyes fixed on Regina as she spoke.

“Yes. He doesn’t concern himself with the children or the women he takes to his bed. There hasn’t been a day in the past eleven years he’s expressed an interest in Alicia, until now.”

“Why?” Alex asked.

Sister Juanita cleared her throat against the tightness she felt. “He knows she’s going to be twelve soon and the orphanages are overcrowded in the cities. He told me he would take her to his outpost and...take care of her.”

“The bastard.” Claire pulled a chair over and slumped into it.

“The soldiers on this plantation take their cues from the Colonel. He has no compunction about taking a woman against her will. I’m afraid Alicia would end up like her mother. I can’t let that happen and live with myself.”

“So what do you intend to do?” Alex asked.

Sister Juanita knitted her fingers together before she spoke. “I’m taking her out of the country.”

“What?”

“How are you going to get her out of here?”

“Is it even legal?”

“Where are you going to bring her?”

“Quiet, all of you. I can’t talk if you’re all talking,” Sister Juanita said over the din of agitated and incredulous voices.

“You’re just going to get on a plane with her?” Claire asked.

“If it were only so easy. We have to leave the plantation first. I need to work out a plan to get her out of here without the Colonel realizing it.”

Silence hung thick in the air as her words sunk in and the enormity of what she was proposing dawned on each of them.

“How can you do it? Isn’t it kidnapping or child trafficking?” asked Regina.

“Alicia has no papers identifying her. Here on the plantation there is no official record kept of births and deaths.”

“No one keeps track of births and deaths?” Alex asked.

“I keep a record but there is nothing official. Alicia has no birth certificate, *nothing*. She has no rights, no voice and never will have one as long as she lives here.” Sister Juanita spent a few seconds studying their reactions. David was leaning with his back against a wall as if he didn’t have the strength to support his own weight. Claire was hunched forward in her chair with her head in her hands. Alex was leaning forward on a chair clenching the seat back with a white knuckled grip, studying the ground and Regina was staring back at her with an unfocused gaze.

“I petitioned the courts for guardianship eighteen months ago. They’ve approved me as her guardian, so legally I can take her out of here.”

“Where is it you plan to take her?” Sister Juanita met Alex’s sharp, unrelenting stare.

“Home to the states,” Sister Juanita said and gazed at David. “I’m sorry. I never meant to drag you into this but I don’t know what else to do.”

“S’allright,” he said and she watched him glance at Claire who was staring off into the distance, ignoring him.

“I need to know if you’re willing to help me. Getting her out of here is the first step in this process.”

“What else, exactly, are you talking about?” Alex asked.

“I haven’t been home in fifteen years. I’ve drafted a letter to the bishop who oversees my order but by the time it arrives I will be gone from here. There will be repercussions and what they decide to do well…” she shrugged, “is not for me to question or worry about now. What I’m trying to say is I may not have a home to go to.”

“This just gets better and better,” Alex muttered and paced across the room.

“I know this is unexpected and a difficult decision to make but please understand I have nowhere else to turn.”

Sensing she’d said enough for now, Sister Juanita gathered her outer garb and stood “I’m going to find Alicia.”

“Are you sure you feel well enough to walk?” David asked.

“I feel much better.” She coiled the IV tubing and lifted the bag of fluid. “Should I let this go until it’s empty?”

“Yes. Let one of us take it out,” David said.

“Wait, you’re not going to say anything to her, are you?” Claire asked jumping from her seat.

“No, I won’t until you’ve settled on what you’re able and willing to do. One way or the other I am getting her out of here,” she said and left them alone with their thoughts.

“I CAN’T BELIEVE you didn’t tell me he was the father,” Claire said.

“She asked me not to,” David said.

“Eighteen months at home and you never said a word to me.”

Regina asked, “How was she able to get guardianship?”

“I hired her an attorney who specializes in adoption and immigration law,” David said.

“I can’t even wrap my mind around what she’s asking us to do. I can’t imagine what’s going through their heads.” Claire said, motioning to Regina and Alex.

Alex pulled her gaze away from the window and shook her head. “I have no words right now.”

Regina sighed and covered her face with her hands and rubbed her eyes. “I can’t even think straight.”

“It’s not like she’s asking us to be her parents,” David said.

“Now hold on just one damn minute and think about what she just told us,” Alex said moving closer to the group for the first time since Sister Juanita left. “If she can get the kid out of here and it’s a big if right now, where the hell are they going to live when they get to the states? It’s not like she’s got a life waiting for her there, let alone a job to pay for basic necessities. The kid

needs to go to school, which means vaccinations and a physical. For God sakes, she doesn't even have insurance. Did you think about any of this the last time you were here?"

"All I did was help her get a lawyer."

"It never occurred to you to ask why and what she was planning on doing?" Claire asked.

"It seemed like the right thing to do and frankly last time we were here she wasn't even sure what her plan was." David pulled a chair around and slumped into it, his arms draped across the backrest.

"You're heart was in the right place, David. How old is Sister Juanita anyway?" Regina asked.

"Late sixties I'm guessing."

"It'll be seven years before Alicia would be eighteen," Claire said.

"So what? Just because she's of legal age doesn't mean she'd be capable of taking care of herself. The goddamn prefrontal cortex isn't fully mature until they're twenty-six," Alex said.

"Do you know how exhausting it is to take care of a kid, let alone a teenager and all the worries associated with puberty?" Claire asked. "Oh God, it makes me shudder when I think of myself at her age."

"My point exactly," Alex said. "What if something happens to Sister Juanita? Who takes care of the kid?"

"I guess that's what she meant by 'the first step in the process,'" said Regina.

"Jesus," David rested his chin on his hands. "What are we going to tell her?"

"We?" Claire asked. "This was your idea. What are you going to tell her? You led her on thinking there was hope to get the kid out of here by paying for an attorney. What were you thinking?"

"I thought I was helping her. I didn't think about what it meant beyond legal question of guardianship."

"Isn't it enough what you've already done here? We're here to treat them. We can't fix all the problems of the world." Claire stood and ran a hand through her hair. "I need to take a walk."

"Wait. Are you all saying you're okay walking away from this and going back home knowing what Alicia has to face here?" Regina posed from her chair.

"What are you saying?" Alex asked her voice hoarse with emotion.

"I'm just thinking about getting on the bus in five days, knowing we could have done something and leaving, knowing we didn't. Can we all live with doing nothing? Or are we just hoping it'll conveniently fade in our memories after we've been home?"

"Shit!" Claire jammed her hands on her hips and stormed across the room. "What the hell are we supposed to do? When did Alicia become our problem?"

"If, and I mean *if*, we were to consider this, what happens if Sister Juanita gets sick, or incapacitated or dies? Whose going to be responsible for this kid? You!" Alex pointed at David. "Are you willing to take a child in and raise her under those circumstances?"

"Why are you singling him out?" Claire shot back. "What would you do?"

"It was his idea. Now all of a sudden we're all apparently involved," Alex snapped.

"What would you do?" Claire repeated.

"It's not a responsibility I've ever considered or wanted."

"What about you, Claire?" Regina moved to Alex, resting a hand on her back.

"I—I always thought I would have children, someday. What about you?"

"Maybe, someday. Not now."

“Look, we’re not talking about someone getting pregnant here,” David said and ducked to the side as Claire grabbed a shoe and threw it at him.

“Don’t be an ass. It’s easy for you to say being the only male here. Who does the child rearing responsibilities usually fall to—the women. All of us have careers. We’ve busted our asses to be successful. You threw money and power at the situation without regard for the consequences.”

They argued and speculated until they decided it was pointless to continue.

“All right! I get it,” David said. “We’re not getting anywhere. Let’s all go cool off.”

Regina nodded and Alex shook her head in exasperation. “Then what?”

“We’ll talk again later.”

ALEX RUMMAGED THROUGH her gear, trading her scrub pants and boots for a pair of shorts and sneakers. She was aware of Regina’s silent presence.

“What are you doing?”

A sarcastic retort almost passed her lips but she held back knowing her anger wasn’t directed at Regina and tied her laces. “I’m going for a run. Want to come?”

“Sure.” Regina retrieved a pair of shorts and her running sneakers from her backpack.

They strode through the compound on the receiving end of more than a few curious stares as they passed by a line of people still waiting to be seen at the clinic. Once they were on the trail leading north to the dormitory, Alex increased her walk to a jog allowing Regina to match her pace. They ran in silence, passing the long trail of oxidized railroad tracks on their right.

“Do you remember the first time you went running after you were home from the hospital?” Regina asked after they’d been at a good pace for a while.

“How could I forget?” Alex glanced at Regina with a wry expression on her face. “It was the first time I ever watched you get really angry with me. I didn’t know what you were going to do when you came out the door.”

“I had a short list of potential options. I promptly forgot about it the minute I saw your face and realized you were about to keel over all sweaty and pale.”

“I wanted my body to do more than it was ready to. I was pissed off and pushed myself too hard.”

“Like the first day you went to work and chose not to tell me,” Regina pointed out. “You have to be one of the most stubborn and hard-headed individuals I’ve ever met in my life.”

Alex winced at the not so subtle jab at keeping Regina at arms length while she fought with her inner demons throughout her recovery. “Not one of my better decisions about us. The longer I waited the more afraid I was about how it would be to go back. I should have just told you.”

“We didn’t have much time together before the shit hit the proverbial fan,” Regina said with a wistful expression cast in Alex’s direction. “We were both still figuring out how we were going to handle work and us.”

“Hey.” Hearing the catch in her voice, Alex veered in front of Regina and caught her in her arms. “We’re getting through it and we’re still here together.”

“It still sticks with me,” Regina said.

“You did what you were trained to do. You saved my life. If it weren’t for you I would have bled out in the ER.”

Regina touched Alex's cheek with her hand. "Sometimes I don't even think about it and other times it replays in my mind out of nowhere like it just happened yesterday."

"I think it's a pretty normal reaction." Alex wrapped her arms around Regina and held her. "I hardly remember any of it and you saw it all. I wish I could make those memories go away for you."

"No they're part of me...us. Without them we aren't who we are today."

"Mmm—you want to keep going?"

"Yes, let's go."

They fell into a comfortable rhythm and didn't stop until they made their way to a slight incline. They broke into an all out sprint as they raced each other down the other side toward a fork in the trail. Alex slowed her momentum, shortening her stride as Regina ran past her and slowed to a walk. Both of them were breathing hard and sweat ran freely, staining their shirts. Alex paced with her hands on her hips, keeping an eye on the trail as they recovered.

"You don't want to go farther?" Regina asked pacing alongside Alex.

"No, this probably isn't the smartest thing we've done since we've been here," Alex said looking back over her shoulder at the empty path behind them.

"It felt good though."

"I needed to clear my head," Alex said starting to lead the way back along the worn trail.

After a few minutes of silence Regina asked, "Any thoughts about what Sister Juanita said?"

Alex cast a wary glance at her. "I think's she's got a lot of guts trying to sneak Alicia out of here but I think it's a crazy idea. Frankly, I'm pissed off we somehow got dragged into this."

"She trusts David and he knows us," offered Regina.

"So what? You just take it at face value?" Alex paced backward a few steps studying Regina's face.

"I believe what she says."

"All of these kids are in the same boat."

"True and I can't even begin to reconcile what it means for them in my heart. I think she's probably been more of a mother to Alicia the past eleven years than the one who gave birth to her. Maybe it's as simple as she loves the kid and wants her to have a chance at a life she would never have here."

"It's a noble idea but first we have to get her out of here and second Sister Juanita isn't a young healthy adult. What if something happens to her? Kids don't raise themselves."

"I think it's why she asked the four of us."

"She doesn't know us or anything about our lives. Maybe Sister Juanita knows Claire and David a little better, but who asks almost complete strangers to do something like this?"

"I think she's just trying to do the right thing for Alicia."

"You sound like you would agree to do this." Alex bent down and picked up a couple of rocks. She tossed one, caught it and threw it ahead of them on the path.

Regina remained quiet for a few minutes while she and Alex hiked along the sugarcane-lined trail.

"Can you honestly tell me you can just keep on going and leave here and not have this weigh on your conscience?"

Alex stopped and faced Regina, a painful expression on her face. "Of course not, but what she's asking scares the crap out of me on so many levels I've lost count."

"It scares me too and I wish it never came to us," Regina said.



“What does it mean for all of us if something happens to her? We’re talking about a potentially complicated situation.” Alex stared down at the ground for a moment before meeting Regina’s eyes. “What does it mean for you and I? We’ve been through a lot in such a short time and I feel like we’re finally getting to a good place.”

“We are.” Regina stepped closer, threaded her arms around Alex’s waist and looked into her brooding eyes. “I think you’re worrying about trouble which hasn’t even happened yet and she’s asking the four of us to consider this, not just you and me.”

Alex draped her arms across Regina’s shoulders and regarded her. “What she’s asking of us makes me worry. I want to know what her motives are.”

“You don’t trust her?”

“I don’t know the woman, but I do understand something about human nature. Think about it,” Alex said, as Regina let her go and they started to walk again. “She’s willing to leave all the children here for the sake of one of them and risk throwing away everything she’s dedicated the last fifteen years of her life to. I don’t buy it. I want to know why and I’m willing to bet there’s more to the story than just the Colonel.”

“You may be right,” Regina acknowledged.

“There’s too many unanswered questions for me—I just don’t know.”

## Chapter Eighteen

WHEN THEY RE-ENTERED the compound, Regina went to the clinic first. She stopped in the school searching for Claire. She found her sitting on a log in the same spot Alex and she had shared what seemed a long time ago. From where she stood on the path, she could see Claire’s face was blotchy and tear streaked. When Claire realized Regina was standing there she wiped the tears from her face and took a deep breath.

“I’m sorry to intrude, Claire. I couldn’t find you or David and I wanted to make sure you were all right. Do you want anything? Water?” Regina asked, holding out a bottle she’d taken from the clinic.

“No, no. I don’t need anything.”

“Do you want some company?”

Claire struggled to smile. “I’m sitting here going back and forth between being pissed off at David and thinking about the lives these kids are living. Is it really significant he didn’t tell me? I’m hurt and I wish more than anything I knew where our relationship was going.” She lowered her head and sighed. “I’m sorry. You don’t need me dumping my relationship problems on you.”

“Sometimes it helps to talk about it.” Regina sat down on the log adjacent to Claire and clasped her hands together in front of her. “Did you tell him any of what you’re feeling?”

“No, I’m too angry and I’m not ready to talk reasonably to him about any of this yet.”

“Yet.” A whisper of a smile hinted at the corner of Regina’s mouth. “Alex and I can never stay mad at each other for long.”

“Neither do we, but it’s too easy to just sweep things under the rug and pretend everything is alright.” She hesitated for a moment and gave Regina an anxious sideways glance. “How is Alex, really?”

Regina considered this for a moment. “She’s doing better. The whole ordeal was awful.”

Claire studied Regina. She sat straighter and said, “Most of us just go through each day taking for granted what we have, never thinking it can all change in one blink of an eye.”

“True. When it does it shatters everything.”

Regina’s voice broke and Claire moved closer putting an arm around her shoulders.

“Sorry.” Regina wiped her eyes. “We spent the last year putting us back together again.”

“You made it. Some people wouldn’t have.”

“We only knew each other a few months before Alex was shot. After everything it was like starting all over.”

Claire sighed. “I’m afraid I haven’t been very nice to Alex since we’ve been here.”

“You hardly know her. Why?”

Claire gave Regina an embarrassed look and shook her head. “After the hospital called to let him know what happened, David and I got into a huge fight.”

“I don’t understand. He was listed as her emergency contact.”

“People don’t list someone as an emergency contact unless there’s some connection there. Right?” There was acid in Claire’s voice and her emotional response shocked and angered Regina.

“Did it occur to you Alex had no one else she wanted notified? She lost her partner to breast cancer a year before I met her and she hasn’t had a good relationship with either her brother or mother in a long time.”

Claire looked horrified. “David never told me about her mother.”

“Perhaps you never gave him a chance and maybe Alex never told him what was going on. You really think they had a relationship?”

“There’s something about the way David always talked about her. It made me wonder if they did.”

“I’ve never heard Alex speak of David in a way that would make me think she loves him as anything other than a brother.”

“Why would she tell you?”

Regina sat back remembering the first couple of nights when everything was so touch and go. She’d woken in the ICU waiting room with her heart racing in her chest and without thinking she’d whispered into the darkness, “You’re okay, Alex. I’m here and you’re going to be alright.” She knew she felt Alex’s fear come through whatever connection might be between two people in times of stress.

When Alex was extubated, awake, and able to talk, she shared with Regina something she experienced. She didn’t know if it was a dream or real. It felt real, she had told Regina. Alex recalled waking with the tube in her throat and panicked. In front of her she could see her face like she was looking into a line of mirrors going on into infinity. She was afraid she was going to die. Alex said, “I heard your voice. You were talking to me. I didn’t know what you were saying but the feeling I was going to die went away.”

“We talked about a lot of things when Alex came out of the ICU. Almost dying stripped away some of the defenses she kept so carefully in place. I learned more about her in those days than I did the first three months I knew her.”

“I know they were close, but Alex was never interested in him romantically.”

“I think it was David who always wished it could be more than just a friendship with Alex.”

“We all have our pasts. Being jealous of them doesn’t do any good.”

Footsteps on the hard-packed earth drew their attention. Claire looked up as David appeared at the edge of the clearing.

“Everything okay?”

“We were just talking,” said Claire, meeting his steady gaze and holding it.

Regina put a hand on Claire’s knee and stood. “I should go.”

“Thanks for listening” Claire said.

“Ditto,” Regina said, smiling at Claire before she started back.

Her mind wandered to what Claire shared with her and she realized she wasn’t upset or concerned, but felt sad because Claire was so insecure about her relationship with David.

Regina was almost to the clinic when the wind shifted, rustling the tops of the sugar cane and carrying with it the sound of someone shouting followed by the bellowing of angry male voices.

Sister Rose ran to her side, eyes wide with alarm. “You heard it too?”

“Someone’s in trouble.”

“Children! Inside the school now,” Sister Rose called, waving her arms and motioning them toward the concrete building. A mass of bodies broke from the lines and a group of older children playing soccer scattered past the two women.

In the chaos and panic, Regina spotted Javier clear across the compound wandering alone, oblivious to what was going on around him. The yelling and shouting grew closer.

“Javier!” Regina screamed and sprinted forward. Out of her peripheral vision she caught sight of Charles running. In the next instant, all hell broke loose.

## Chapter Nineteen

DAVID STOOD AT the edge of the clearing, hands shoved in the pockets of his cargo shorts, watching Claire. He looked for some indication his presence was wanted.

He never intended to hurt her by suggesting Alex and Regina join him on this medical mission. It was his mission to run after all and he trusted them both enough to want them here.

“I took Sister Juanita’s IV out.”

“It couldn’t have been finished.”

“It wasn’t, but she was about to take it out herself.”

“Why didn’t you tell me the Colonel was Alicia’s father?”

David hesitated before he sat down beside her on the log. “Sister Juanita asked me not to say anything to anyone.”

“So you lied to me instead.”

“You’re upset. I wish you wouldn’t be.”

“Of course I’m upset. Oh, excuse me, I’m not supposed to be upset about any of this.”

“What’s upsetting you more? Alicia or Alex? We might as well get this out in the open once and for all.”

“Don’t patronize me,” her voice broke.

“I’m not patronizing you.”

“We’re talking about having to potentially raise a child. A child— can you commit to raising a child, commit to me?”

“Haven’t I always been by your side?”

She looked at him and put a hand on his cheek. “Yes, you always have but we’ve been moving from one day to the next. We’ve been doing it for years believing there’s always going to be a tomorrow. One day there’s not going to be and what will we have been to each other?”

“Jesus.” David stood and paced to the other side of the clearing. “You bring this up now?”

“You said yourself we might as well get it out into the open. If not now, when? I have to know.”

“What?” His voice sounded tired and resigned and he wished he had a drink. A single malt scotch would be nice and it certainly would make him feel better.

“Did you ever sleep with Alex?”

“Why are you so obsessed with her?”

“Me? You’re the one who always talks about her.”

“You’re exaggerating. I don’t always talk about her. If you hadn’t noticed she’s gay—not an earth shattering revelation.”

“Some people are more fluid about their sexuality than others.”

“Oh for god’s sakes. As long as I’ve known Alex she’s only batted one way.”

“You wish she didn’t.”

“Do I find her attractive? Yes. Have I slept with her? No. Let it go, Claire. Some things you just have to let go. We both have our pasts. Nothing happened. I know yours and you know mine. But my past is the problem, isn’t it? You can’t stand that Alex is still a part of my life. She’s a good friend. At some point you need to accept it.”

Claire joined David at the edge of the clearing. “I know she’s a good friend, but I need you—all of you.”

“All of me, includes my friends. It’s not like I go out and drink or play cards every Thursday night. I’ve never told you not to see your friends. Have I?”

“No. You always give, David. Sometimes too much, I think. Do you even realize how much you’ve done for Sister Juanita? When is it enough? Where do we fit in to all of this?”

“I don’t know when it’s enough. I do know I want you with me.”

“I don’t want to argue with you. I’m sorry.”

David whirled around. “Do you hear it? Come on. Let’s go.” David grabbed her hand and they raced back to the clinic.

## Chapter Twenty

ALEX’S MIND WAS still reeling with the veritable bomb Sister Juanita had dropped into their laps earlier. She decided to check on Matt. Grateful for the distraction, she cleaned his leg

wound with gauze and bottled water. She applied more antibiotic ointment and covered it with an absorbent dressing. The wound was still draining, but for now the skin around it didn't look anymore inflamed than it had earlier in the day. Matt's face was pale and his eyes clouded with worry.

"What do you think?"

She stared down at her gloved hands holding the roll of gauze. "I think you're damn lucky the cut wasn't deeper."

"My wife's going to kill me. She didn't want me to come on this trip in the first place. We've been trying to get pregnant and she's been on an emotional rollercoaster the past few months."

"She's taking hormones?"

"Yeah, it's been rough and to make it worse her sister is pregnant with her second."

"It doesn't make it any easier." Alex finished wrapping his leg and pulled her gloves off. "Why'd you come?"

"I always wanted to do this and figured it would be the last chance I'd get if she does get pregnant."

"At least for awhile."

"Or forever. Do you have kids?" asked Matt.

"No." She caught Sister Rose rushing toward her out of the corner of her eye and she stood from the stool. "What's wrong?"

"The Colonel's men are chasing someone."

Through the doorway Alex caught sight of people running and heard cries of alarm and angry voices followed by a single voice screaming a child's name.

"Regina!"

Alex bolted past Sister Rose, grabbing hold of the doorway to bleed her momentum and take in the scene in front of her. Some of the medical staff herded children into the school while others stood frozen, gaping in horror and shock.

In the middle of the plaza she saw Charles trying to protect himself from three soldiers who were circling him. He warded off two blows but the third dropped him like a stone. They fell upon him kicking and beating him, caught in a violent pack mentality.

Across the compound, Alex spotted Regina scooping Javier into her arms as another of the Colonel's men bore down on her swinging a club. Regina by some miracle managed to duck under it.

Her breath caught in her throat and for a moment she was filled with dread. Panic exploded inside her. Shock and disbelief gave way to determined rage. Alex sprinted forward lowering a shoulder as one of the soldiers spun away from the frenzied beating and tried to block her path. She caught him in his solar plexus and dumped him in a heap, gasping for breath, never stopping as a surge of adrenaline and fear powered her past him.

She darted between the second man and Regina as he raised his arm to strike, surging inside his guard, using her momentum to shove him backwards and moved past him wrenching his arm savagely behind his back.

He cried out in pain, the club falling from his hand and clattering to the ground. He used his larger bulk to twist out of her grip and sent Alex tumbling to the ground.

Behind her she was aware of hollering and panicked screams and the sickening sounds of wood hitting flesh. Alex rolled to her feet coming face to face with the angry soldier. A sneer crossed his lips and he lunged at her. She slammed her boot into his crotch doubling him over.

She spun around and slammed an elbow into his right kidney. He bellowed as he stumbled forward and she kicked the club away from his outstretched arm.

“Don’t even think about it,” she growled.

She looked past her assailant to see Ian take a blow to his face. Blood spurted from his nose and he yelled in pain.

“You goddamn son of a bitch!” The soldier swung again but Ian caught his arm mid swing and spun him around. He shoved his hand between his shoulder blades and rode the soldier to the ground dislocating the man’s shoulder as he landed on top of him with all his weight. The man screamed in pain and passed out.

“Enough!” A loud voice shouted and the sounds of fighting faded until the only sounds were of children and adults crying. Alex opened her arms as Regina stumbled toward her still holding Javier in her arms. She enveloped her in a hug and felt both of them shaking.

“Are you hurt?” Regina asked in a hoarse whisper.

“No. You?”

“I’m ok.”

“Alex!” David crouched beside Charles’ limp form, his scrub top torn and his left arm seeping blood from an ugly gash.

“Go, I’m ok,” Regina said already letting go of her firm grip around Alex’s waist.

Alex released Regina, pressing her lips against her temple as she did. On the ground a few feet away from Charles, Ian climbed to his feet, blood pouring from his nose. Sean and two of the other doctors had another soldier pinned against the wall of the clinic. She staggered toward David hoping her trembling legs would hold her until she got there.

She dropped beside him in the dirt her, eyes going to the blossoming stain of blood seeping through Charles’ shirt. She felt herself go hollow inside.

“I need a suture kit and some water,” she called out in a voice she hardly recognized as her own.

“Leave him.” Alex caught her breath as the Colonel’s boot came into her peripheral vision.

“You will care for my men first.”

Alex felt nauseous and swallowed before she found her voice. “Your men are responsible for this.”

“He’s a criminal.”

“I’m a doctor and now he’s my patient. He’s critical they’re not. Stay out of my way,” said Alex her voice shifting lower as a trembling rage welled up from deep within.

“I would do what she says colonel,” said Sister Juanita as she stepped among clusters of staff and soldiers to position herself between Alex and the Colonel, “or you’ll have the eyes of the world on you.”

“What are you talking about old woman?” He demanded.

Alex peered around and saw more than a dozen of the medical staff standing in a circle, half of them filming the scene with cameras and phones. Standing in the middle was Danny with his camera held out filming the awful events as they unfolded. Their eyes met in a silent exchange.

“Take those things away from them!”

None of the soldiers moved as the women and men surrounding them stood their ground, pushing back against them.

Ian held a bloody tee shirt against his nose. “Welcome to the twenty-first century Colonel. The videos will be online faster than you can whip it out and take a piss. You could find yourself in the middle of an unwelcome international incident. Be careful what you choose to do next.”

The Colonel cast a glance down at the man his soldiers had chased from his depository. “He will die. You’re wasting your time.”

Alex let the stand-off go past her as she tore open Charles’ shirt to expose the deep machete wound in his flank. She heard footsteps and Regina was at her side with a suture needle and thread. Someone shoved gloves into her hands.

“I need two of you to roll him. Keep his neck still.” Alex waited while several people positioned him. “Pour some water on the area so I can see what’s bleeding.”

A voice behind her protested, “But it’s not sterile.”

“Sterile? There is no sterile here. Just pour the water so I can see what in the hell is bleeding.”

Alex worked tying off one bleeding vessel and moving to another knowing even as she did the damage was likely too much to be survivable. He needed fluids, blood and antibiotics to support his traumatized body; to give him a chance to fight and precious time to begin the arduous task of healing the damage so starkly evident.

A hand appeared in her peripheral vision and more water poured into the wound flushing the particles of grit and blood away clearing the field once more so she could continue her work. She spared a glance to her right where Regina was hunched over Charles’ bulk, a stethoscope in her ears listening to his heart.

For a fleeting moment, she allowed herself to hope, to pray he might have the reserves deep inside him—the will and the strength to survive. She shoved the emotions aside focusing every sense she had to continue to repair the horrific damage and the passage of time was lost to her.

Her thighs and back were cramping by the time she finished repairing all the damage. “I can’t do anything more for him now,” Alex said, leaving room between the stitches to allow for swelling, if he survived the next twenty-four hours. She met Regina’s troubled gaze as she leaned back on her heels and observed for the first time her immediate surroundings. Women, children and medical staff all stood in a loose circle watching like silent sentinels. She would have never tolerated this in her emergency department but here she realized their numbers kept the soldiers back, a buffer against the awful brutality they’d all been witness to.

The sky was darkening with clouds, threatening rain. “We need to find something to carry him inside,” she said. A bone deep weariness overwhelmed her as she climbed to her feet. The first drops of rain splattered down around them. Alex felt a hand on her arm. Regina brushed past her on her way to where Claire was standing with Javier in her arms. She watched as Regina took hold of the boy and examined him. She wrapped an arm around Claire who looked stunned and dazed. Alex peeled the blood-covered gloves from her hands and tossed them onto the pile of bloodied gauze and bandages beside her on the ground. There would be no transfer to an ICU, no delicate dance of balancing his fluids, nor transfusing blood or chemicals to keep him sedated.

“Does he have a chance?” Sister Juanita asked before she knelt beside Charles and touched his face.

“I’m not sure there’s much standing in between him and heaven right now,” Alex said.

She reached out a hand as Sean carried a scrap piece of plywood from where the latrine was being constructed. They slid the board beneath Charles’ limp frame and rolled him onto his back. Four men lifted and carried him into the clinic.

Alex watched them go. Emptiness seeped through her soul as she threaded her way through the stunned crowd of people. She wanted only distance and quiet. “Thanks for having my back out there,” she said to Ian, clamping a hand on his shoulder as she stopped and lifted the shirt from his nose.

“Anytime.”

“You’re going to need to have it set.”

“It’s not the first time I’ve had it busted.”

She was aware of the Colonel’s approach, intercepting her as she cleared the last of the staff and blocking her from entering the school.

“You—even if he lives his life is forfeit.”

“If he dies someone will be right behind him to take his place.” Alex said drawing herself to her full height as the Colonel approached.

“You do not understand. There must be perfect order here for the plantation to operate and I am the absolute authority. They will not dare after the example I made out of him.”

“Making a martyr of him might be more dangerous for you than letting him live.”

His smug expression faded and she strode past him into the school.

## Chapter Twenty-one

SHOCKED AND DAZED Alex stood inside the back room and stared down at the bloodstains on both her legs. The coppery smell caught in the back of her throat and she grimaced, realizing she’d been kneeling in Charles’ blood while she stitched his wounds. She hunted through several bags until she found a bottle of alcohol and used it to scrub the gore from her arms and legs.

She stripped out of her tee shirt and shorts, trading them for a fresh pair of scrubs. The dampness made her side ache where her other scar was between her fifth and sixth ribs. She caught sight of Sister Juanita coming through the door way as she was about to slip the scrub top on.

“Something wrong?”

“No.” Sister Juanita hesitated. “What you did out there was very brave.”

“It’s what I’m trained to do,” Alex said feeling a wave of exhaustion roll over her.

“True, but not like this—in these conditions or with such seething hatred around you. You were so...focused and calm when you worked on him.”

“I can’t do what I need to if I get upset.” She was just as horrified at what happened as anyone else, but to allow her reactions to overwhelm her when she needed to focus would paralyze her. So she let her training take over, focused on what she could do, and separated herself from the emotion of the moment. “The odds are not in his favor he’ll survive. You need to know he may die and be prepared.”

“I know. Thank you for trying. It is more than any of them expected.” Sister Juanita clenched her hands together. “I offended you before, prying into your beliefs. I didn’t intend to.”

“You didn’t offend me. Our lives are just polar opposites and some things are better left not discussed.”

“Why?”



Alex looked away, mindful of Sister Juanita studying her before she took a step closer. “This isn’t a good time...to have a conversation like this. Not when we’re dealing with what just happened.”

“I can respect you not wanting to talk now. I know you’ve been hurt. You carry it in your eyes.”

“Haven’t we all?” Alex said bending down to tie her boots. “No one gets through this life unscathed.”

“Yes, I imagine we all have at some point in our lives. Our burdens are different but we carry them with us nonetheless.”

Alex straightened and regarded Sister Juanita as she removed her glasses and wiped them with a cloth. “Why?”

“Why what?” Asked Sister Juanita, adjusting her glasses beneath her habit.

“I understand why you want to remove Alicia from this place, but why us? Why now? Why leave what you’ve dedicated your life to?”

Sister Juanita paced across the room. For a long moment she was silent seeming to collect her thoughts.

“Do you remember I told you about the man who taught me how to shoot a Winchester rifle?”

“I remember.”

“I was young, foolish, and in love.”

Alex saw tears flicker across her eyes and heard a gasp as Sister Juanita clutched the front of her vestments and for a brief, panicked moment, thought she was having a heart attack.

Sister Juanita composed herself and said, “I carried his child.”

Alex sat down. She looked at Sister Juanita trying not to show the astonishment she felt. “You have a child?”

“She’s grown now. I was only twenty-three when I had her.”

“A girl. A baby girl. What happened?”

“He made it clear he wasn’t interested in being a father. I went home. My parents were devastated. I disgraced the family and humiliated them they said. They sent me to a convent where I carried the child and gave birth to her nine months later. I never left and so here I am today.”

“What about the baby?”

“I had to give her away.” Sister Juanita wiped her eyes.

“Why?”

“The sisters told me I had to. They said it was the right thing to do, there were plenty of families who wanted children and couldn’t have them.”

“Do you know where your daughter is now?”

Sister Juanita closed her eyes and bowed her head. “No, I never saw her again.” She put her head into her hands and wept.

Alex stood and brought a chair to her. “Sit down, Sister.” She sat beside her and after a moment’s hesitation put an arm around her shoulders.

She thought about Sister Juanita as a young woman falling in love for the first time. A woman who carried a pregnancy for nine months and in the end was forced to give away her child and had carried this guilt and anguish with her all these years.

Minutes passed before Sister Juanita composed herself and wiped the tears from her face. “I was there when Alicia was delivered. I’ve watched her grow. Maybe it’s a selfish indulgence, trying to regain what I lost but I’d do anything to give her a better life than this.”

“I believe you,” said Alex, clasping her hands together as she leaned on her knees.

“I have to get her out of here. She’s an innocent child.”

“I know she is,” Alex said. Movement in the doorway caught her eye. She motioned Regina in and took solace in the comforting weight of her hand on her shoulder as she stepped alongside her.

“Everything okay?” she asked in Alex’s ear.

Alex glanced at her concerned expression and shook her head. “How’s Charles?”

“I’ve got two people in the group who are O negative and willing to donate blood. I know there are risks, but given the situation I’m wondering if it’s worth trying it.”

“Do we even have kits to do it with?”

“David was working on something with Ian when I left.”

“There are no good options here. Sorry, we’re talking around you, Sister. Do you have any questions?”

“I’m not even sure what to ask.”

Regina said, “If we do nothing his organs will start to fail because of the trauma and blood loss. If we do transfuse him he could have a reaction to the antibodies in the blood. I’m not sure we can do enough to save him either way.”

“Like you explained to me,” Sister Juanita began and for a second her face twisted with grief before she continued and said, “the odds of Charles surviving aren’t good,” Sister Juanita rose to her feet. “I’ll go sit with him. At least he won’t be alone.”

Alex pulled Regina closer to her and rested her head against her mid-section listening to the steady heartbeat under her ear while she watched Sister Juanita walk away. The rhythmic steady sound of blood pulsing through her veins soothed her. She sucked in a breath and gazed at Regina. “I want to go home,” she whispered.

“I do too.” Regina cradled her face in her hands and touched her lips to Alex’s. It was a gesture of affirmation; a reminder of roads traveled and promises still to keep.

Alex blinked, focusing on Regina’s face when she pulled away. She felt raw like her nerves were on fire and inside there was an awareness she believed Sister Juanita. It tugged at her and for the first time it all felt connected as if the threads to their individual journeys had brought them together in this place, this moment, where time seemed to be standing still, but the knowledge it wasn’t demanded something bigger than any of them could accomplish alone.

“I—we should help her,” Alex said and realized she was trembling.

“Why? What made you change your mind?” asked Regina running her fingers through the hair at Alex’s temples.

“She told me why. I need to talk to David. Come on.”

Clasping her hand, Alex ran with Regina through the rain back to clinic. The air was humid and close as most of the medical staff huddled just inside the doors watching the rain pour down. The sound of it pounding on the aluminum roof created a thunderous noise.

People moved aside as Alex and Regina stepped through the doorway, opening a path leading to the back of the room. Alex felt Regina’s hand clench as they passed by and she sensed the edgy, agitated atmosphere permeating everything in the room. It drifted around her like tendrils of smoke rising from a fire and she identified the emotion—fear.

David was leaning against the wall, his face pale, looking exhausted. Claire was cradled in his arms, a faraway look in her eyes. Charles lie unconscious on the plywood, his chest still rising and falling erratically. Sister Juanita sat in a chair close by and next to her Alicia leaned against her, staring down at Charles.

David's eyes rose to meet Alex's as they drew near. "I'm sending whoever wants to go back to the dorm."

Alex let go of Regina's hand and looked behind her. Most of the group looked shell-shocked, some wept and others stared vacantly into space. "Do you think it's a good idea to split the group? Doesn't it just make us more vulnerable?"

"Everyone you just passed wants to go back to the dorm. After what we just witnessed would you make them stay here?"

"No, I wouldn't."

Sister Juanita stood. "Sister Rose can go with them. Alicia come with me. We can at least help with the children who need to walk...home."

"Where's the Colonel?" Alex asked.

"Gone...for now. He came and accomplished what he set out to do," Sister Juanita said moving away from them. "They need time. I think we all do." Alex watched her move between people, offering a quiet word of comfort or a hand to their arm and wondered what, if anything, she might have said to David.

"I don't understand why people, how people, have the capacity to be so cruel." Regina said, crouching down beside Charles and placing a hand on his shoulder.

"I called the embassy," David said, his voice hollow and vague.

"What can they do? Alex asked.

"They'll make sure we're out of here on our departure date."

"Ever so helpful."

"Since there's no direct threat to us there's nothing for them to do."

Alex knelt down in front of David. She unwrapped the gauze and peeled back the dressing from the laceration on his arm. "You need stitches."

"I told him, but he said no," Claire said joining the conversation for the first time.

"Can you get me a suture kit?" Alex asked and watched as Claire climbed to her feet and went searching. "We need to talk about Sister Juanita."

SHE WAS AWARE of the quiet and the stifling humidity. It was lessening now. Everyone decided to walk back to the dormitory. There was just the four of them, with Sylvi curled in the corner watching with her big round eyes, and Charles, whose body was succumbing to his injuries.

Soft rain fell now and with it the unbearable noise had tapered off leaving a deafening silence into which thoughts and emotions roiled. Alex was aware of a twisting and gnawing in her gut. She couldn't remember the last time she ate and the thought of food brought a wave of nausea with it. Her eyes burned and a headache made it an effort to keep her eyes focused.

"Wait! Dammit it hurts." David jerked as the needle pierced his skin and blew out a breath as Alex drew the thread through, pulling the layers of skin together.

"Hold still," Alex warned looking at him from beneath furrowed eyebrows. "Breathe in."

“Ah shit.” Beads of sweat broke across David’s forehead and Claire sat down next to him. “Hold my hand and squeeze.”

“Can I say that to you when you’re in labor?” he said through gritted teeth.

“It depends.”

“On what? No, don’t answer me,” David grimaced.

Alex sat back holding the needle in her gloved hands and stared at David and Claire. “Is there anything the two of you want to get settled before I continue? I don’t want to be accused of having you confess to anything under duress.”

“There is something...completely wrong with this conversation happening while you’re stitching my arm closed. Ah Jesus—wait,” David said as Alex leaned forward to start again.

She pinned David with a stare and mouthed the word “chicken” while Claire was looking away.

“Thanks.”

“Anytime.” She glanced at Regina who was kneeling on the floor next to Charles examining him. “What’s the matter?” she asked, when Regina stopped and settled back on her heels her head lowered and eyes closed in defeat.

“He has a depressed skull fracture above his left ear.” Regina said her voice hollow and devoid of emotion.

“How can someone do something like this—in front of kids no less?” Claire asked.

“To maintain power and control,” Alex replied. “And because they can.”

“Why now? Why here? You don’t do this to somebody because they stole food,” Claire persisted.

“Maybe the Colonel sensed something?”

“What though? This? Nobody’s said anything.”

“Like I said maybe he picked up a vibe from Sister Juanita.”

“Charles is going to die and there’s nothing we can do,” David said.

“Yes, he is. We keep him comfortable as best we can and make sure he isn’t alone when he dies.” Alex pressed her lips together and returned her attention to David’s arm. “I think we should help Sister Juanita.”

“Why?” David asked and tensed as Alex resumed stitching his arm. “You seemed pretty set against it.”

“Something she told me earlier.”

“What did she say?” Claire asked still holding onto David’s hand.

“Look, it wasn’t easy for her to tell me. It was in confidence. I shouldn’t even be telling you.”

“I think we’re well beyond extenuating circumstances,” David said.

Alex was aware Regina had picked Sylvi up, holding her on one hip as she re-joined the group. “You came in on the tail end of her telling me.”

“I thought she was upset about Charles,” Regina replied and brushed Sylvi’s bangs out of her eyes.

Alex tied off the suture and snipped the remaining thread with scissors David handed to her. She peeled her gloves off and recounted what Sister Juanita had told her.

“You mean to tell me Sister Juanita has a child?” David said as he leaned across the table toward Alex.

“She was in her twenties when she had her.”

“She told you this?” Asked Claire.

“Yes, before when she came to me in the school,” Alex replied glancing between Regina and Claire.

“How? I mean I know how obviously but—I just—I can’t believe it.”

David sat back shaking his head. “Claire you wanted everyone’s cards on the table. I guess this is the time.”

“I think the idea of sneaking this kid out of here is crazy to begin with. Does she really intend to raise her?”

Alex twirled the water bottle she held in her hand. “It’s what she told me.”

“She’s going to need a place to stay until she gets settled. She has to find some kind of employment to support herself and Alicia,” said Regina.

“There are apartments walking distance from UMASS,” offered David.

“There’s also a six month waiting list to get in there, assuming we actually get her out of here,” Claire said. “No offense, but after what happened to Charles today I’m not too keen on pissing off the Colonel and his sick little band of psychopaths.”

“How would we get them out?” Alex looked across the table at David.

“The only opportunity they have is when we leave. We’d have to sneak them onto the buses.”

“What do we do about everyone else whose traveling with us? They’ll know something’s the matter as soon as they see Alicia and Sister Juanita,” asked Regina. “There may be some people who don’t want anything to do with this. They’ll be afraid.”

“Aren’t you?” Claire asked.

“Yes. So much so, I can’t think straight,” Regina admitted.

“Assuming we can, what’s the chance they get a flight out the day we leave?” asked Alex.

“Depends on how crowded the flights are,” David said.

Alex sat back and stared at David. “What do you think? You’ve known her longer than any of us.”

“She’s lived in this hell hole for fifteen years teaching and trying to keep these kids safe. I have to believe her if she says she wants to do this for Alicia. How can I not?”

“What about Sister Rose? Doesn’t it make things more dangerous for her if Sister Juanita leaves?” asked Regina.

“We can’t worry about it. Sister Juanita, Sister Rose and their order need to sort out what they’re going to do,” Claire said.

“So what do we do? What do we want to do—if anything?” Alex asked setting the bottle down. “We’re running short on time if we’re going to commit to this.”

“Jesus,” Claire said. “I wish she had never asked us.”

“How would we feel if we did nothing?” asked Regina.

“Do you have to keep asking the same goddamn question?” Claire stood and paced to the front of the clinic and stared out the door.

“Don’t we have to ask it? What’s the right thing to do?”

Alex cleared her throat. David looked ready to bolt from the room and she felt a chill run through her. “I guess it comes down to a matter of trust. Do we trust each other to help raise Alicia if something happens to Sister Juanita?”

“How the hell is this going to work? We don’t live close to each other. What if we’re not together in a year?” Claire asked from across the room.

“I don’t know.” Alex folded her arms and looked at Claire.

“Who bears the burden of raising her?” Claire asked.

“Look, there are no goddamn guarantees in this life.” Alex went to Charles and stared down at a man she hardly knew. A wary trust grew between them the day he led them to Sylvi. She wished things could end differently for him. “Maybe we just have to accept we’ll cross the bridge when we have to.”

ALEX LEANED AGAINST the doorway of the clinic watching the sky. The rain had passed on to the east and nature was painting an ethereal canvas in the sunset sky colored in rich splashes of blue, lavender, pink, red and fiery orange. The colors shifted with a magical quality and bright rays of light penetrated the remaining clouds upwards into the heavens.

She thought about how fragile their existence was. Time coalesced in a series of moments fleeting at best, sometimes magical but forever changing. Only the present mattered.

When a figure took shape in the dying light at the edge of the pathway, Alex pushed off the doorframe and strode out into the courtyard. She recognized the stocky frame and purposeful gait as Sister Juanita drew near.

“You came back...alone.”

“I’m not alone.” She motioned to someone standing in the shadows.

“No, I suppose you’re not. Before you go in...”

“I am no stranger to death.”

Alex put a hand out to stop Sister Juanita. “No, I’m sure you’re not. When we leave—”

Sister Juanita stiffened. “David left this to you?”

Alex frowned and hurried into an explanation. “No, he’s sleeping. The stitches were difficult to put in.”

“It was a lot to ask. I know,” Sister Juanita said, looking away.

“We thought it would be best if you didn’t wear your habit.”

“Excuse me?” she asked.

“The Colonel will be looking for you and Alicia. He won’t recognize you out of your habit.”

“Wait.” Sister Juanita shook her head. “You’re saying you’ll take us with you.”

“We talked about it after you left.” Alex paced away a few feet before she faced Sister Juanita. “I...I told them. I wasn’t sure they would understand why, if I didn’t.”

“Oh dear...” and her face flushed with color. “What David must think of me?”

“You were young and in love.”

“Yes, there is that, but I can’t do what you’re asking.”

“Why?”

“I haven’t worn anything but this since I took my vows,” Sister Juanita said a hand moving on the coarse fabric.

“Has he ever seen you without your habit?”

“Of course not. I understand why, but I can’t do what you’re asking.”

“Help me out here Sister because we’re running out of options and he’ll be out there waiting when we leave.”

“Look at me.” Alex lifted her head and met Sister Juanita’s steady gaze. “My grandfather fought in the trenches of World War One. I can only imagine his experience was hell on earth. He taught me...to fear no man and to do...the right thing. The devil’s been standing on my doorstep for years now. This is not the time for me to run and hide. It might be the easier choice but it will only embolden him. I can’t do that to the children who must go on living here. If I’m

leaving with Alicia it will be on my terms—not his.” A man who she waved forward approached them. “This is Rodrigo. Charles and him have been like brothers. He would like to see him.”

## Chapter Twenty-two

TWO DAYS LATER, Enzo and Jennie pulled a wagon carrying a rough-hewn wooden casket. The sun was just rising above the horizon and the crescent moon was still visible in the western sky. The air was thick and heavy with humidity. Rain was coming and it would turn the dirt path muddy and into a miserable quagmire when it did.

Sister Juanita followed behind the cart, a quiet, solemn expression on her face as the small procession hiked south alongside the rust covered tracks. Railroad cars filled to overflowing with harvested cane were stacked in a long line waiting to be hauled to the refinery. The harvesting stopped for no one.

The temperature was already oppressive when the men walking in front veered off the main path and led the donkeys to a remote place hidden among the many hectares of sugarcane. The surefooted beasts picked their way along the rocky path, the wheels rattling as they rolled and bumped along the uneven ground.

Alex felt her throat constrict as they passed simple worn wooden crosses bearing the faded names of those who had died before. Many of the markers were old and weathered, some were broken, leaning at precarious angles out of the ground.

Towards the back of the cemetery was a freshly dug mound of dirt. Three heavy ropes lay stretched across the grave. Arms draped around each other, Alex and Regina remained behind Sister Juanita with Claire as the men lifted the coffin out of the wagon and carried it to Charles’s final resting place.

Six others, including David, held the end of the ropes and lowered the casket into the ground. A ragged sob escaped Claire’s lips and Alex reached out and pulled her into a hug. The pallbearers stood by with their heads bowed while Sister Juanita said a short prayer for Charles.

Rodrigo stood at the grave holding one of the shovels. He motioned to Sister Juanita and handed her the shovel. She hesitated before lifting a mound of dirt and tossing it into the hole. One by one each of them came forward and took turns shoveling a bit of earth onto the coffin. In this painful and final shared task they said goodbye.

When it was done, David moved to stand beside Sister Juanita and slipped an arm across her shoulders. Alex watched David whisper something in her ear and said, “Stand beside us.” Claire went to David and wrapped her arms around him.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t do more for him,” Alex said to Sister Juanita. She felt an arm slip around her waist and she grabbed Sister Juanita when she felt her collapse against her.

Sister Juanita composed herself and said, “We should sing him home. He would like that.” A moment later her strong voice filled the air. Four other voices joined her and together the eclectic group sang for him.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost but now am found  
Was blind, but now I see

At the top of the path, Alex caught sight of the Colonel leading the three men who had murdered Charles towards them.

“You’re wasting your breath. He’s dead and finally where he belongs and the rest of you will be too if you don’t get back to work,” the Colonel said.

Alex felt Regina shudder and pulled her closer. Beside her Sister Juanita looked heavenward and continued to sing in a rich voice intent on honoring her friend.

T’was Grace that taught my heart to fear.  
And Grace, my fears relieved.  
How precious did that Grace appear  
The hour I first believed

One by one, each man who was filling the grave stopped their task. They lowered their shovels to ground, and came to stand around the group lifting their voices as one, boldly drowning out the Colonel and his henchmen.

Standing there in the middle of nowhere, arms linked, they sang the hymn. It gave them courage and the men lifted their heads in defiance.

Through many dangers, toils and snares  
I have already come;  
'Tis Grace that brought me safe thus far?  
and Grace will lead me home.

Sister Juanita glanced at David and Alex, and, clutching them tighter, proceeded to lead the group past the Colonel and his men. Without coaxing, the donkeys trotted along after them. Sister Juanita was still singing while they walked out of the cemetery. When they reached the head of the main trail Alex dared to look back. The Colonel and his men stared back, the air around them filled with their malice and hatred.

Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail, And mortal life shall cease,  
I shall possess within the veil,  
A life of joy and peace.  
Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost but now am found  
Was blind, but now I see.

After their voices trailed off, the men continued to walk with them. Rodrigo stayed close to Sister Juanita and at times it looked as if they were deep in conversation. Alex was grateful for their silent, protective presence at their backs. They strode along the trail lost in their private reflections.



None of them knew how old Charles was when he died. They didn't know his birthplace or if he had any family but they were present with him as he succumbed to his injuries and took his final breaths. His dying inextricably bound them together.

As they reached the outer bounds of the school and the clinic, Sister Juanita broke the silence. "Are you sure of this?"

Alex said, "We're sure."

MOST OF THE medical staff worked to clean the clinic and the property around it while the four of them had accompanied Sister Juanita to potter's field. Red medical waste trash bags were double-stacked along the entire sidewall of the center. A truck from the Ministry of Health was scheduled to arrive later in the afternoon and haul the refuse away.

Arms folded across her chest, Regina leaned against the door jamb of the school, staring out at the courtyard. The women and children who had waited for hours to be examined and cared for were memories now. Nine days had passed and she was certain the events would stay etched in her memory for as long as she lived.

A steady breeze blew and dried vegetation and debris fluttered along the ground. The sound of the leaves rolling across the terrain brought a swell of sadness reminding her of nature's vitality dying in autumn. She could smell rain in the air and in a way she welcomed its arrival. She wanted it to wash all the ugliness away.

"What are you thinking?"

Regina glanced back at Alex, taking comfort in her solidness as she leaned back against her and felt her hands come to rest on her shoulders. "If I'm quiet I can still hear the voices of the children playing out here." Mingled among those memories coming in painful flashes of light were the awful ones she couldn't restrain. Alex leaned in and kneaded her fingers into the tight muscles at the base of her neck. "Do you think they'll remember any of what happened?"

"I don't know. Hopefully, it becomes nothing more than a vague memory for them in time."

"I don't want to forget what we experienced here. I feel like I'm already losing bits and pieces and we haven't even left yet."

"Even what happened to Charles?"

"Not what happened to him, but what he did for us, what he risked for the people here."

"You'll remember what's important to you."

Not trusting her voice and refusing to shed any more tears, Regina closed her eyes and sucked in a lungful of humid air.

"Will I? Or will tomorrow and the next day come and we'll simply go on with our lives and theirs...will continue...just the same." She stumbled on the absolute dread of the last two words.

"Perhaps not entirely the same. We won't ever know what impact we had on their lives after we leave here. It's like a stone dropped into a pond. You see the ripples until they disappear."

"It feels like we're like the ripples, disappearing," Regina said.

"We made a difference."

"Do you believe we did?"

"It's what I hope," Alex said.

Footsteps drew Regina's attention. David approached them, his face gaunt and unshaven. "We have to get going. The buses will be arriving at the dorm soon."

“We’re ready,” Alex said and reached down to shoulder her backpack. She handed Regina hers. For a moment they studied each other’s haggard expressions and without so much as a word they started to walk towards the group of medical staff milling about by the trail head.

“Do you and David have a plan to get them on the buses?” Regina asked after they’d been on the trail for a while.

“Sister Juanita refuses to sneak out of here. She wants to leave on her own terms,” Alex said

“It won’t make a difference how she leaves. He’ll try and stop her,” Regina said.

“She knows him better than we do,” David said. “We’ll have to trust she knows what she’s doing.”

“What’s there to know better? He’s a psychopath and he’s cunning. He feels no remorse about anything he does,” Alex said.

“Imagine his reaction when he realizes Sister Juanita is taking Alicia from him. He’ll be enraged.” Regina exhaled in frustration. “He’ll vent his anger on anyone he can get his hands on.” Regina stopped, unwilling to go further, but David pushed her.

“What are you getting at?”

Regina looked impassively at him. “For the sake of one we’re putting how many more at heightened risk?”

“What are you saying?” he repeated.

“He sanctioned pre-meditated murder and condoned it happening in front of all of us, including children, because Charles stole food for people who are lucky to eat one meal a day. What will he do in response to losing his daughter?”

“So what’s the solution?” David asked.

Regina met his stare and looked away.

“Jesus,” David said.

They marched along in silence for the remainder of the hike. It was difficult for Regina to process all the conflicting emotions of the last few days. The horror of the savage attack at the school and the sorrow over Charles dying weighed on all of them. Mixed in was the knowledge they were leaving behind people who had worked their way into corners of their hearts and abided in spaces they would not soon forget.

She struggled with a sense of guilt when she thought of home and the hospital. Regina looked around her at the inescapable, grinding, soul-rending poverty surrounding them now.

Not caring anymore about what anyone thought or who was around to see, she slipped her hand into Alex’s and looked at her meeting a warm intimate gaze. She wanted to lose herself in it.

“You must think I’m crazy,” Regina admitted.

“Why?”

“Because part of me wants him to die.”

“You don’t think I’ve had the same thoughts? You’re just honest enough to voice them.”

They followed the path leading them back towards the dorm and the church where their journey had all started nine days ago. Regina watched Sister Juanita speak to Alicia, the girl nodding as she listened. Regina lost sight of them as the throng enveloped them.

“STAY OUT OF sight while we wait for the buses to come,” Sister Juanita said to Alicia as they reached the edge of the plantation where the pathway widened to reveal the compound.

“I’ll wait down by the creek.”

“I’ll come find you when it’s time.”

Sister Juanita stepped through the doorway of the place she had called home for the last fifteen years. She climbed the narrow steps leading to her bedroom aware of each board that creaked and the railing shifting when she held onto it for support.

At the top of the steps she stopped and observed the mosquito netting billowing out in the tropical breeze. On stiff knees, she knelt to the floor and pulled out a small carry on case. She set it on top of the bed and ran her fingertips across the worn, dust covered material.

She pulled open the top drawer of her dresser. Reaching inside she pulled out her extra vestments and set them inside the suitcase. Sitting beneath them was a manila envelope. She lifted it with shaking hands, unwound the string holding it closed and emptied the contents on top of the worn dresser.

She opened the passport and studied the photo of a younger version of herself staring back and set it down. She unfolded the papers and read the last lines confirming Alicia’s guardianship to her.

Sister Juanita shook out the remaining items in the envelope. One was a faded black and white photo worn at the edges of a young woman she hardly recognized sitting on top of a fence rail, behind her stood a smiling freckled face boy, barely a man with a Winchester rifle propped on his knee. A folded piece of paper, yellowed and fragile from the passage of time, was a diploma from Simmons College in Boston. It seemed like it was a lifetime ago when the nuns at the convent had sent her there to get an education.

Downstairs she heard the door open and close.

“Alicia?” She heard heavy footsteps approach the base of the steps and shoved the items back in the envelope, tucked them in the bottom of her suitcase beneath her clothes and zipped it closed. She slid it beneath the bed and stepped to the doorway, gasping when she came face to face with Colonel Dubois. She stepped back away from him, recoiling from his proximity.

“What are you doing here?” Sister Juanita watched as he strode past her into the bedroom.

“I thought I might find the girl here.”

“You can see for yourself she is not,” she said, gathering her composure before she faced him.

She watched his eyes scan the room, track back to her and darken with unbridled hostility. “Touching rendition of that pathetic song. I suppose you think it accomplished something.”

“Only to mend what was broken and give hope where there is none, Colonel.”

“You think I’m a fool. I know its history. It’s been sung on battlefields.” He stepped closer, towering over her smaller frame. “The Cherokee sang it on their Trail of Tears after your country committed genocide against them and los morenos sang it during their civil rights marches. Do you think I am stupid? I know what you were trying to do.”

“And what is it you think I am trying to do, Colonel?” she asked, forcing herself not to move away.

“To make the men think they can stand against me.”

“I think you are afraid.”

“Of what?” He spun and she could see the agitation in his demeanor as he paced away from her. “You? You, woman are not my equal and after all these years you still don’t know your place.”

“I know it well enough.”

“I know she came back with you.” His voice hardened and she heard the angry edge to it. “Where is my daughter?”

“How dare you call her daughter,” her voice cracked with raw emotion. “Do you even know her name?”

“What difference does it make? Where is she?”

“I told you. I don’t know.”

“You wouldn’t lie to me? Would you now, Sister?”

“What is there to gain from lying?” She pulled her eyes away from his callous stare fearing somehow he suspected her plan all along and was toying with her or more likely, trying to intimidate her into making a mistake. This sinister cat and mouse game, the hallmark of their relationship had gone on for far too long.

“I’m surprised you’re not out with the children. They need you now more than ever.”

“Sister Rose is more than capable of caring for them.”

She watched his eyes move back to the open door and he straightened, puffing out his chest as if he were gloating. “The buses are arriving and once again your newly made friends will be gone soon.”

“Yes, I will miss them.”

“I expect you will.” He crossed the room, a frown on his face as if puzzling something. “It must be difficult to see them go and for you to stay on. You’ve been here a long time. I often wonder what holds you here and what would make you leave?”

“I’ve told you I stay for the children.” Her heart rate tripped faster as she realized he was baiting her. She wondered if someone had discovered her plan and told him in return for a favor.

“Yes, yes you’ve told me many times but there are those for who your emotions run deeper. Don’t they, Sister?”

“There are always those someone may care more about. I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

“Yes you do.”

“Is there a point to this conversation?”

“We both know who we’re discussing.”

Her mouth was dry and she had trouble speaking as her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

“I think you do.”

“Colonel, I would like to say goodbye to my friends.”

She flinched as he slammed his fist down on the top of the dresser. “Tell me where she is!”

“Even knowing I wouldn’t tell you.”

He moved out onto the deck and looked out across the mountains. “I am her biological father.”

“You raped her mother!”

“What happened between her and I...is a matter of opinion but it doesn’t change what I am to the girl.” He stared at her and now she could see the cold seething, hatred in his eyes.

“I know what the truth is.”

“You and your truths. Don’t speak to me of the truth.”

“You are a sick, evil man, Colonel. Truly, you are a monster.”

She had no time to react before he lashed out and struck her across the face sending her crashing against the wall. “I will find her and when I do I will take her with me.”

*Please don't let him find her*, was the last thing she thought as her vision narrowed and the light around her faded into darkness.

REGINA LEFT ALEX talking with David and strode across the compound. Her footsteps brought her to the bridge where she looked around at the ramshackle buildings trying to memorize and soak in as much detail as she could.

She listened to the water rushing over the rocks creating froth and spray as it cascaded through the creek. Regina stood there thinking back to the first day when Alex stood by the edge of the plantation and how unsettled she felt as if the air itself carried an ominous warning within its currents.

Rodrigo and several of the men who had hiked back with them from the cemetery gathered between the church and the dorm. She watched as they gestured and spoke among themselves looked furtively in the direction of Sister Juanita's home.

Above the sound of the churning water she heard another noise and glanced behind to see the buses rolling to a stop on the other side of the bridge. When she returned her gaze to the compound the men were gone. Seconds later, she spotted Alicia sitting on a rock staring back at her from beneath the ramshackle porch. Alicia started to move toward her.

Regina caught her breath when she saw the Colonel walk around the corner of Sister Jaunita's weathered abode and come to a stop in the middle of the square, focusing his hawkish eyes on her and turned away.

Glancing from the Colonel back to Alicia, Regina emphatically shook her head and held her hand out. Alicia held her spot and dejectedly slunk down on the rock.

Regina started towards the center of the compound just as the Colonel turned around and pinned her with an icy glare.

"Shit." She felt his eyes scrutinizing her and she shivered in disgust but kept moving toward him.

She had no idea what she was going to say to him, anything to get him away from here. She closed the distance, watched his lip curl and he pivoted and moved away. Anger and relief flooded through her.

Sister Rose was in the pathway by the dorm, followed by at least a dozen children. One of the older boys was carrying Silvi in his arms. Regina glanced at Alicia and trotted towards Sister Rose.

When she was within arm's reach she wrapped the startled woman in a hug. "Tell David, Alicia is sitting down by the creek," she said in her ear. She pulled away seeing the puzzled expression on Sister Rose's face, a flash of understanding followed by a single nod.

"I'm not saying goodbye," Sister Rose told her.

"I'm not either." Regina lifted Sylvi's frail body out of the boy's arms. "I'm going to miss you. I won't forget you. Any of you," she said and hugged each of them.

Behind Sister Rose, Javier stepped out and stood, watching. Regina handed Sylvi back and scooped him into a tight embrace. "You grow to be big and strong and brave." Sister Rose signed the words for her. Regina kissed his forehead and set him back down. "I have to go. Tell David."

"I will."

Regina trotted back toward the creek, turning once to look back at Sister Rose. She ducked beneath the porch and scrambled down the moss-covered rocks.

Beneath the wooden deck the air was cool and damp. The sound of the water rushing between the rocks in the creek filled her ears. On the opposite bank, thick clumps of grass grew between the rocks obscuring her view beyond the other side of the creek.

“Are you okay?”

Alicia nodded, staring down at the water and continued to pull pieces of moss from the rock she was sitting on. “Sister Juanita said I’m leaving with her today.”

“What do you think about leaving?”

“I’m going to miss my friends.”

“They’ll miss you too.” Regina craned her neck to peer out from where they were sitting.

“Did she tell you where she was taking you?”

“America.”

“Did she tell you why?”

Alicia continued to pull moss from the surface of the rocks.

Regina thought she wasn’t going to answer her. “She’s afraid the Colonel will take me like he did my mother,” Alicia said.

“You’re too young to know about any of these things.” Regina reached out and hugged Alicia to her.

“Sister Juanita says I’m older than my years.”

“I imagine you are,” Regina said letting her go.

“Are doctor David and Claire married?”

From out of left field, Regina thought. “Why do you ask?”

“I’ve seen the way they look at each other.”

Regina grinned at Alicia’s curiosity. “No they’re not, but they love each other.”

Alicia was silent for a moment.

“You and doctor Alex look at each other the same way.”

Caught off guard, Regina laughed. “Oh and when did you decide that?”

“The day you came to the garden with Dr. Alex.”

“Yeah, I...we do.”

“One of the sisters who was here before said it was bad—for two women or men to be together.”

“Different people believe different things. What’s important is the person you love, loves you back and you take care of each other.”

“Sounds right to me.”

ALEX STRODE AROUND the corner of the dorm. Across the creek, at least half the medical staff gathered. Packs were strewn on the ground in front of the buses. Sister Rose was strolling among them with some of the children saying goodbye.

David came alongside her, limping.

“What happened to you?”

“I tripped coming out of the goddamn latrine.”

“At least you didn’t fall in it.”

“Thanks. Any luck finding, Alicia?”

“No. I’ve checked all the rooms in the dorm. I haven’t seen any sign of Alicia.” Alex nodded in the direction of the Colonel. “What’s he doing there?”

“Waiting for us to leave. Why don’t you go see what’s taking Sister Juanita so long. She should be out here by now.”

“Keep an eye out for Regina. I don’t know where she is either.”

“Will do,” he said.

She crossed the hard-packed earth as thunder rolled in the distance and fat raindrops started to fall. “Perfect.”

She pushed open the door to Sister Juanita’s cottage and called her name. When she didn’t get an answer she shut the door behind her and crept around the uneven floor of the downstairs. Dreary gray light spilled in through a window. A walking staff leaned in the corner. Alex lifted it and studied the worn handle before moving to the bottom of the staircase.

The bottom step creaked when her weight shifted onto it. She heard a noise, something scraping across the floor. Alex took the steps two at a time to the landing, her heart lurching in her chest when she saw Sister Juanita crawling on the floor to the bed.

“What happened?” Alex asked, dropping the staff to help the Sister Juanita sit on the bed. “Jesus, he did this to you?” she asked, trembling with rage when she saw the blood trickling from her nose and the bruise forming on her cheek.

Sister Juanita nodded touching a hand to her face.

“Son of a bitch.”

“He’s looking for her.”

“So are we.”

“She told me she would wait by the creek.”

“We’ll find her,” Alex said studying her unfocused eyes. She reached in her bag for a penlight. “Look at me.”

“I’m fine.”

“Let me be the judge.” Alex flashed the light over her pupils, relieved to see a brisk response from each.

“I told you I was fine.”

“You’re flying and I want to be sure you’re okay.” Alex helped her from the bed and handed her the cane.

“My case...would you carry it down the stairs?”

Alex retrieved the carryon. “Come on. Let’s get you out of here.”

Moments later, Alex stepped from the doorway and blinked the rain from her eyes. She guided Sister Juanita across the uneven terrain holding her by the arm. Alex felt a swell of relief when she spotted David stepping from beneath the porch, followed close behind by Regina and Alicia.

“Where’s Dubois?” Alex shouted.

“He’s still here somewhere. Keep moving to the buses and stay together,” Sister Juanita said. The bridge creaked with the strain of their combined weight.

“There! He’s coming off the first bus.” Alex blinked the rain from her eyes trying in vain to clear her vision.

“I see you found her, Sister,” the Colonel called out. Alex watched as a feral grin broke across his face. She sensed the change in his demeanor as soon as the words crossed his lips, “Come here, girl.”

“No. Alicia, stay right where you are.” Sister Juanita moved in front of David and put an arm in front of Alicia. “You have no claim on her, colonel.”

“She belongs to me.”

“As if she were a possession to lay claim to. She is not and never will be.”

Everything happened in an instant. He was on Sister Juanita before any of them could react, shoving her and yanking Alicia by the arm. Alicia kicked and clawed at him, trying to escape his vice-like grasp as he dragged her from the bridge toward a path on the far side of the clearing.

“No! You goddamn son of a bitch!” Anger and disbelief coalesced into determined fury and Alex heard herself shouting, hardly recognizing her own voice. She felt the bridge shudder and sway under their weight as David fought to keep Sister Juanita on her feet. Alex grabbed under her other arm and they lifted her onto the bank.

In the chaos, Regina snatched the walking stick from the ground, squeezed around the three of them and hurtled after the Colonel.

“Alex, take this.” David unclipped the pepper spray from his belt and tossed it to her while he held Sister Juanita upright. She took off running, her longer legs closing the distance between her and Regina. Behind her she heard shouts and the sound of people running after her—from the bus, she thought.

“Regina, no!” Shock coursed through Alex as she watched Regina overtake the Colonel and swing the staff, hearing the sound of wood connecting with bone as she caught the Colonel in the middle of his upper arm. It was enough to slow him down and turn to face his attacker.

Alicia sunk her teeth into the hand gripping her arm and he screamed in rage and pain. He released her as Regina struck him on his left forearm as he tried to ward off the blow. He wrenched the wooden stick from Regina and shoved her to the ground.

Alex was almost close enough to use the pepper spray, but between the wind and the rain it was futile so she made a desperate dive for his legs as he swung the staff down. She anticipated the impact and braced herself for the blow but it never came. The sound of footsteps pounding on the ground filled her ears and she found herself at the bottom of a pile of flailing arms and legs.

Shouts and grunts of pain erupted as everyone fought to get out from underneath the melee. Somewhere she heard Regina’s voice and she threw a vicious elbow eliciting a cry of pain. Strong arms pulled her to her feet and away from the scrum. She found herself face to face with Rodrigo, blood dripping from a cut over his right eye. It was already swelling and discolored purple.

“This is not your fight my American friend. It’s ours and mine to finish.”

Two of the other men pulled the Colonel to his knees pinning his arms behind his back and restrained him there. Sister Juanita stood in front of the Colonel and Alex thought she saw a small grin flicker across her face.

“Get your fucking hands off me!” he shouted.

“You’re not in any position to be giving orders. It seems your men have abandoned you,” Sister Juanita said.

Alex stood beside Regina and glanced around the field. Several of the Colonel’s men were standing at the edge of the sugarcane watching with blank stares. They made no move to intervene.

“I don’t know what you think you’re going to accomplish by doing this,” he snarled back.

“You asked what would make me leave, Colonel. I’ll tell you now. The courts granted me guardianship of Alicia. She is leaving with me today.”

There was a moment of shocked silence and he laughed. “You’re lying. You can’t take her.”

“It is done and she is leaving with me. You might be interested to know the man on to your right is Charles’ cousin, Rodrigo. I’ve counseled them to wait for the authorities and not mete out justice themselves.”



“Authorities? What authorities?” his righteous indignation faded and Alex saw another emotion register in his eyes as it rose out of the depths of his hateful soul. Fear, followed by desperation and his eyes took on the look of a cornered animal.

The men pulled him to his feet and dragged him away from the group as he continued to scream obscenities at Sister Juanita.

She approached Sister Rose, who’d been watching all the while with keen interest.

“I’m sorry,” Sister Juanita whispered as she wrapped the younger nun in a hug.

“Don’t be.” Sister Rose hugged her back. “You accomplished what you set out to do.”

“I sent a letter to the bishop. They will be sending you more help.”

“We’ll be all right. Go.”

Sister Juanita spoke and touched the faces of the children as she passed by each of them. She motioned Alicia ahead of her and toward the bus.

Alex stopped in front of Sister Rose before she climbed aboard the bus. “I wish we could have done more while we were here.”

“You can always come back,” Sister Rose replied.

Alex reached out and rubbed Sylvi’s back while the girl sucked her middle three fingers and regarded her. “I’m glad we found you.”

David laid a hand on Alex’s shoulder. “Time to go. Come on, Sister. This doesn’t happen without you.”

## Chapter Twenty-three

THREE HOURS LATER they were disembarking from the buses at the airport in Santo Domingo. Horns blared from impatient motorists stuck behind the busses, as luggage was unloaded. The acrid diesel exhaust burned Alex’s eyes while the heat emanated off the pavement in searing waves. The sidewalk filled with suitcases and bags. It was a nightmare for anyone trying to negotiate their way through the crowded walkway. Two young men dressed in high top sneakers and sports paraphernalia stared indolently at the buses as they sauntered past.

“Let’s get out of this mess,” Alex said to Regina as she picked her way through the maze of luggage.

“Alex!” She pivoted when she heard her name and watched Sean wind his way through the mass of people and bags.

“Ian told me I missed all the excitement. I fell asleep the minute I sat down on the bus. What the hell is going on?”

“Sister Juanita went through the courts and was granted guardianship of Alicia. She’s bringing her back to the states.”

“When did all this happen?”

“David hired an attorney for her the last time he was here.” Alex held out her hand as if to ward off his incredulous expression. “It’s crazy, I know.”

“Where is she...how...who’s going to...”

“Don’t—we haven’t even discussed those details.”

“We? Wait. I thought David was the one helping her? How’d you get wrangled into helping out?” He continued to pepper questions at her and Alex realized she had tuned Sean out as they continued to walk through the terminal.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine.”

“You look exhausted.”

“Find a mirror and check yourself out.” She slowed her pace as they caught David and the rest of the group. “When’s your flight?”

“In an hour.”

“I feel like we hardly spent any time together.”

“We were all busy.”

“Where’s Ian?” she asked.

“He’s not big on goodbyes.”

“How about Matt I didn’t get to see him before the buses left the plantation.”

“He’s gimping around here somewhere. If he’s smart he already got to his gate so he can elevate his leg until the plane leaves.”

He put a hand on her arm. “Next time we get together let’s make it somewhere a little less exciting.”

“How about we don’t wait a decade this time around?” Alex said while she watched David walk past with Sister Juanita and Alicia. “I’ve got to go.”

“You know where to find me,” he said and gave her a hug.

FOUR OF THEM approached the ticket counters: David, Alex, Sister Juanita and Alicia. There were no open seats on any of the departing flights back to the states. The next available flight was early the next morning with a connection into Fort Lauderdale before it arrived at Newark Liberty International Airport.

“Are you sure about this?” David asked.

Alex leaned into him and said, “The priority is to get them out of here, ASAP. The longer they stay the more at risk they are.”

“This wasn’t how I expected things to happen.”

Alex fixed him with a deadpan expression. “It’s too late to worry about it now.”

Their flights were leaving in less than an hour. Sister Juanita and Alicia would be on their own until tomorrow morning. The thought of it brought an unexpected wave of anxiety. She returned to where Regina was standing with Claire.

“Did you get them tickets?” Regina asked.

“One of the first flights out tomorrow morning.”

“Where do they fly into?” Claire asked.

“Newark. They’re going to need a place to bunk for awhile.”

“Now it gets real,” Claire said. “This is what David never planned on or gave any consideration to. What happens after we get them out of here?”

“We take it one step at a time, Claire. Walk with me,” Alex said to Regina as she watched David pace back from the counter followed by Alicia and Sister Juanita.

“What are you thinking?” Regina asked as she strode alongside Alex.

“I’m wondering if you—”

“They could stay at my place. I’m hardly there anyway between work and...”

“Your place?” Alex pivoted and stopped in front of Regina. “Are you sure you want them to stay there?”

“It’s not a matter of wanting to do it. It’s the right thing to do for them. What’s the alternative? Put them in a hotel?”

“No. I don’t want them in a hotel. Staying in a hotel sucks.”

“Not to mention it’s expensive.”

“I want you to stay at my place.”

“I’m already there most of the time anyway.”

“So...move in with me.”

“What?”

“I know you wanted to keep your own place...” Watching the perplexed expression on Regina’s face, Alex’s voice trailed off, a sudden wave of uncertainty moving in.

“That wasn’t...what I was expecting you to say, I...”

Alex watched the flustered expression as Regina fumbled for words and rushed on to say, “You don’t have to give me an answer. Just think about it.”

Regina’s eyes filled with tears. “This trip has been nothing but raw emotion for both of us. I want you to be sure you’re asking for the right reasons and me to be sure I’m saying ‘yes’ for the right ones.”

Alex watched David and Claire in a heated conversation with Sister Juanita observing from a distance, Alicia by her side. She wondered what Sister Juanita must be thinking. She met Regina’s gaze and said, “Fair enough. I don’t think leaving here is going to make me feel any different about you and I.”

“I don’t think it will either. I thought you were going to tell me you were upset about me going after the Colonel.”

“Shocked and scared, but not upset. I didn’t want you to get hurt and I knew I wouldn’t get there in time when he knocked you to the ground.”

“That was one hell of a tackle you made.”

“I was out of options.”

“What do you think will happen to him?”

Alex draped an arm across Regina’s shoulder, remembering Rodrigo’s words. “Sister Juanita may have an idea. Right now, I don’t want to spend one more minute thinking about the bastard.” They converged at the security checkpoint with the group.

“I wish you didn’t have to wait here alone,” Alex heard David say.

“We’ll be fine,” Sister Juanita assured him.

Alex raised an eyebrow when Sister Juanita turned to her with a curious expression. “Yes?”

“Do you still have the scrubs you offered me?” Sister Juanita asked.

“I do.” Alex dug into her pack searching and pulled them out a moment later.

“I’m feeling paranoid. I don’t think he’ll be able to come after us but I can’t be sure one of his men won’t try something.”

“You’re not paranoid,” Claire said. “You’re being practical.”

“Like you said, they’ve never seen me in anything but my habit.”

“What about Alicia?” Claire asked.

“Here,” David pulled his floppy hat off his head and set it on Alicia’s.

“Hang on.” Regina dug in her bag, pulled out a pair of shorts and a tee shirt.

“I’ll go with them,” Claire offered. “Let’s go find a bathroom.”

“We’ll wait here.” Alex folded her arms and watched while the three women went in search of a bathroom. She nudged David with her shoulder. “So, is this where you saw this going?”

“No, I mean yes, but not the way it happened. What happened to Charles was the most god awful thing I’ve witnessed in my life.”

“I don’t think what Charles did was something new or out of the ordinary. I think he took food to give to the people who couldn’t fend themselves. I bet the Colonel suspected who it was all along. It became a convenient excuse for him to vent his rage,” Alex said staring straight ahead, the image of Charles’ battered body so vivid in her mind it was as if she were still there with him. “I think he sensed something from the very first day he was at the compound with you. He felt threatened and used Charles as a way to try and scare everyone into submission.”

“All Sister Juanita wanted to do was to get Alicia adopted,” David said and continued on in a hard voice. “People want babies, not kids who’ve grown up in a dysfunctional system. Each year it was less likely it would happen. That’s why she asked me to help her retain an attorney the last time I was here.”

“What’s your plan from here?”

“I’ll see what strings I can pull when I get back to the hospital. I may get lucky finding an apartment for them outside of the medical center’s campus.”

“They can stay at my place for the time being,” Regina said.

“Are you sure? I mean...I thought I would drive down on my first day off.”

“They still have to stay somewhere in the meantime. Besides, when are you realistically going to be able to drive down to pick them up? We all know what it’s like when you get to work after being away.”

“I know, I know. It takes a week just to crawl out from under all the crap everyone left waiting for you. Are you sure about this? I know you don’t even really know them.”

“We talked about it and it’s the right thing to do. I’m going to see if Claire needs help.” Alex felt Regina grasp her arm as she moved past her.

“When did you decide this?”

“Just a few minutes ago,” Alex said as her lips twitched into a smile and she avoided his questioning stare.

“You’ve got someone special there, Alex.”

“You do, too.”

“I know...I just...”

“I’m beginning to think you’re clueless when it comes to women. There’s always going to be doubt for her until you ask her to marry you.”

“How would you know?”

“Just trust me on it.”

“The last time I stood in front of family and took vows with someone I thought it was forever. It lasted all of eighteen hellish months. I’m not looking for a repeat performance. Christ, my mother never liked her from the beginning. Can you imagine what it was like having to listen to my mother tell me, “I told you she was no good for you.”

“Your mother knew you deserved better than that crazy bitch.”

“She always hoped it would be you.”

“Yeah, I got that the day she told me you and I would make beautiful babies together...right in the middle of dinner at the restaurant. What was the name of it?”

“I don’t remember.”

“I wanted to crawl under the table.”

“You? So did I.”

They were both quiet for a moment. Alex said, “Claire knows what she’s getting into. She’s not like the other chick who thought she was going to be a doctor’s wife and live some fairy tale existence she’d concocted in her own head.”

“Yeah, us infectious disease folks don’t rake in the big bucks like the anesthesia docs do.”

“Is that what she did? She ditched you for an anesthesiologist—a bigger paycheck?”

“I found out she’d been sleeping with the guy six months after we were married.”

“What a gold-digging materialistic bitch.”

“Now you understand why I haven’t pushed my relationship with Claire in a more serious direction.”

“If Claire hasn’t run screaming into the night after all this time, I don’t think she’s going anywhere. Unless of course...you’re suffering from a terminal case of being gun shy, in which case you have a different problem.”

David stepped closer and tilted his head. “All right, smart ass, I’ll make you a deal.”

“Deal? Oh no, I’m not making any deals with you.”

“Oh sure, all bluster and bravado until the tables get switched around.” He clucked and flapped his arms.

Alex looked at him. “Ask her to marry you.”

“You, marry her,” he growled.

“Sorry, not interested.”

“I meant Regina.”

“Oh,” Alex whispered.

“And don’t give me crap about not knowing if it’s what she wants. You two will probably grow old together.”

“Can’t we leave you two alone for five minutes?” Claire asked as she sauntered in their direction followed by Regina.

“What are you two carrying on about?”

“Nothing.” They both answered together, though David snorted and Alex laughed. Both of them stopped when they looked beyond

Claire and Regina.

“We didn’t have much to pull this together but I think it works.”

Alicia’s thick, coal black hair was brushed out and tied back in a loose ponytail. She sported Regina’s tie-dyed tee shirt and shorts. She carried David’s hat in her hands looking awkward and shy in her new attire. Behind her, Sister Juanita was dressed in wrinkled blue scrubs, her reddish blonde shoulder length hair streaked with white brushed back behind her ears.

“I had some concealer in my toiletry kit so we touched up the bruise around her temple.”

“You need to get going or you’re all going to miss your flights,” Sister Juanita said.

Alex hugged Sister Juanita, pulled away and said, “We’ll be at the airport when you arrive.”

“We’ll see you tomorrow,” Sister Juanita said and Alex could see the edge of anxiety creeping into her eyes when she stepped back.

“Here, take this.” Regina handed Sister Juanita her phone.

“Won’t you need it?”

“You can give it back to me tomorrow.”

“I will,” Sister Juanita said and held it in her hand. “How do I use it?”

“Press this.” Regina showed her. “It’ll display Alex’s number.”

“What do I do?”

“Touch the screen on her number and tap ‘call.’”

“Don’t worry, Sister. I’ll remember what to do,” Alicia said as she looked on with intent curiosity.

Alex turned her phone on and held it out for Sister Juanita to see the incoming call come through. “Just call us when you’re leaving here. That way we’ll know everything’s all right.”

David wrapped an arm around Sister Juanita and pulled her into a hug. “You should be smiling.”

“This is just the first step. There are many things I still have to do so Alicia is properly taken care of.”

“I know. We’ll get it done.”

One by one they said their tearful goodbyes and started making their way through security.

“Call me when you hear from them tomorrow,” David said to Alex.

“Count on it.”

At the other end of the line, Alex found Sister Juanita and Alicia watching them. A flood of mixed emotions overwhelmed her as she waved one last time before they turned a corner and they were lost from sight.

“Do you think they’ll be all right?”

Alex watched Regina, a fleeting look of panic in her eyes. “We’ve gotten them this far. Sister Juanita’s kept Alicia safe for the last eleven years. I think she can handle one more night. She’s a smart lady with good instincts.”

“This feels surreal,” Regina said as they strode through the concourse. It was bustling with fellow travelers. The noise of the intercom and the awful acoustics created an echo. It was overwhelming and noxious to her senses. “We’ve been completely immersed in this mission, cut off from everything and now...it’s just...over.”

“I didn’t miss not having this phone connecting me to the outside world.” Alex frowned as her iPhone chirped, one message after another dropping into her phone now that it had connected to a network. “Apparently, I spoke too soon.”

“Why? Whose texting you?” Regina asked.

“Sandy. She texted me at least a half dozen times since yesterday,” Alex said with a frown as she used her thumb to scroll down the screen. “What in the hell...”

“Something wrong?”

“She wants to know if we’re safe.” Alex thumbed a quick response back to the nurse. A few seconds later her phone chirped an alert and she read Sandy’s response and groaned.

“Did they get slammed with admissions? It’s not a holiday or a full moon...”

“Here, read it.” Alex handed the phone across to Regina as they approached their gate.

“What does she mean they crashed the website watching...oh shit...on YouTube...at work? Danny wouldn’t have posted anything.”

“There were a dozen people filming what happened during and after the attack. They might have linked the videos to the website when they uploaded them to YouTube. Morbid curiosity would draw that kind of attention,” Alex said.

“Oh my God. How awful.” The fragile veil of distance and time were ripped from freshly healing wounds revealing the heartache and anguish of the last couple of days.

“It might very well be, but the threat of it being posted kept our asses safe. I never got a chance to talk to Danny before we left. I gave him a hard time about him filming everything at the beginning of the trip.”

“Who knew it was going to end the way it did?”

After stowing their backpacks they settled into their seats and waited for the plane to pull away from the gate and taxi out to the runway.

“It’s hard to conceive we still live in a world where people are slaves,” Regina said.

“The sad part is it happens all over the world... I suppose even at home if you knew where to look for it. We just don’t see it.” Alex reached out and clasped Regina’s hand and tucked it against her.

Alex felt drained, as if some sinister force had sucked the life energy out of her. She could still smell the briny ocean air mixed with the odor of the batey and the wet metallic smell of Charles’ blood clung to her. The memory was a horrific slide show playing again in her mind.

She remembered the words she spoke to Rodrigo, telling him what had happened, why Charles was dying and apologizing for not being able to do more. She held Regina as the jet accelerated, sensed she was crying, and knew there was little she could do to make the anguish dissipate.

## Chapter Twenty-four

A STIFF FALL wind was blowing and it rained down fire in a blaze of orange and red leaves from the branches of the towering hardwoods surrounding them. Angry blue jays flying among the trees squawked their indignation while they were buffeted about by the unpredictable gusts.

Alex turned the key in the lock and held the door open for Regina, watching the taillights from their limo until they were nothing more than pinpoints of light before the vehicle disappeared from her view. It was hard to believe not more than seventy-two hours ago they were witness to a horrific attack that left a man dead and she suspected they both had yet to process or deal with the emotions from the ordeal.

A gust of wind chased leaves through the door as Alex stepped across the threshold. She dropped her pack on the floor by the entryway and locked the door. She paced across the living room to the right where the stairs led to the bedrooms. She flicked on the hall light.

“Leave your stuff. We’ll deal with it later. Right now all I want is a hot shower.” The air inside was stale and when she got to the top of the stairs she threw open a window inhaling the crisp autumn air.

Alex stripped off her windbreaker; shed her scrub top tossing them onto the top of the hamper on her way to the bathroom. She twisted the faucet on for the shower and watched mesmerized as the water sprayed out of the showerhead. “Hot running water. I’ll never take it for granted again.” She removed her sneakers and tossed them out the door.

“Hey! Watch where you’re throwing those things.”

“Sorry.” Alex stripped out of the rest of her clothes. She stepped in and groaned when she felt the hot water pound on her shoulders. She dipped her head and let the hot water course down her body. God, she needed the hot water. “Coming in?”

“Yes,” Regina called out.

When she stepped into the bathroom, Alex could see Regina had already stripped out of her clothes. Her lean lines and small breasts were a beautiful silhouette through the steam fogging the door.

“My body is screaming for soap and water.”

“Come here.” Alex opened the door and guided Regina under the jets of water letting it wet her hair thoroughly. She pumped soap into her hands and lathered it into Regina’s hair, massaging her scalp, smiling when Regina moaned and leaned against her.

“It feels simply decadent.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“Rinse.” Alex stepped back to wash her own hair, lathering and rinsing it twice before she felt clean. Her hands stilled as she stood under the stream of water when she felt Regina rub a cake of soap across her shoulders and work her way down, swirling suds over her breasts and belly.

Alex framed Regina’s face with her hands and between kisses they traded the bar of soap and washed each other’s bodies. Suds and water washed the filth and the grime from their bodies and she felt the heavy weight of despair and exhaustion lifting. Alex trailed her fingertips down Regina’s flank feeling the curved bones of her rib cage, more prominent than before they left. “You lost weight.”

“So did you. I see it in your face,” Regina said brushing her fingertips over Alex’s angular cheekbones.

“Nothing some good home cooked food won’t take care of.” Alex brushed her lips against Regina’s temple.

Regina braced herself against the wall with her arms and let the pulsing stream massage her back. Alex moved closer and pressed the length of her body against Regina her hands traveling up the front of her body, kissing her neck and wrapping her in a fierce hug when she felt the choked back sob.

“Look at me.” Her voice was a soft command as she turned Regina around and lifted her chin. “We have to accept we did what could be done while we were there.”

“I keep seeing the children’s faces. They’re so young and innocent and I can’t help but wonder what kind of life they’re going to have.”

“I don’t have any good answers for you. I can’t reconcile in my own mind what we saw and experienced. It shouldn’t be.” Alex stroked her fingers along Regina’s jaw, down the muscles shaping her neck and shoulders. “You made a difference and that’s what you have to focus on.”

“Right now I just want...please, make it stop...I just want to stop hurting.”

“I can try.” Alex turned the water off, found Regina’s hand and led her out of the shower. She wrapped them in a bath towel as the cool afternoon air filtered in and chilled their skin.

“I missed touching you,” Alex whispered watching their reflections in the mirror as she lowered her head touching her lips to the side of her neck. Alex bit down lightly, eliciting a gasp and smiled when Regina leaned into her and arched her neck exposing more of it for her to explore. Her hands traveled over Regina’s soft skin, tracing a path over her ribs, her fingertips stroking and caressing her breasts, feeling nipples harden beneath her touch. She trailed her hand down the slight depression in the middle of her abdomen, lower, until she felt Regina’s hips arch at her intimate touch and a moan escape her lips.

“Ten days is a long time,” Alex breathed as she sucked the soft flesh of an ear lobe between her lips using her teeth to nibble, pulling a tortured groan from Regina lips.



Regina twisted in her arms and pressed against Alex's body as their lips met in a feverish, desperate need and a growl escaped Alex's mouth. The first touch consumed her, all the wanting, the anguish and the desperate longing to be home together and safe coalesced into an unquenchable desire. Her mouth possessed Regina's, the kiss deepening their tongues gliding over and around each other. The sensations fanned a fire and whipped through Alex's blood.

Gasping, Alex broke away, stopping Regina's roaming hands before they aroused her too much and pulled her into the bedroom.

Alex ripped the comforter and sheet back, slid onto the bed and propped on an elbow unable to tear her gaze away from Regina's eyes, dark with arousal as she moved toward the bed, the mattress sinking beneath her weight as she knelt beside Alex.

"Stop thinking."

"Who says I'm not planning my strategy."

Alex slid her fingers beneath blonde hair stroking the nape of Regina's neck. "You've never needed one. Now come and kiss me."

Regina leaned closer, her lips leaving a fiery trail from Alex's breasts to her mouth. Alex groaned as Regina deepened the kiss, exploring with her lips and tongue.

Still wet from the shower, their legs intertwined and bodies fused together. Alex wrapped her arms around Regina and rolled her onto her back. She stretched out on top of Regina, braced herself on one arm, and caressed the soft curves of her torso down her hip and around the well-defined musculature of her thigh to the soft curls between them. Feeling Regina tremble lit a fire in the pit of her belly. She loved the feel of Regina's supple body beneath her hands, how warm and smooth her skin was and the herbal scent of her fresh from the shower.

Regina's hands stroked possessively over her back, playfully tormenting her with her nails. Eagerly Regina pulled Alex down. She arched beneath Alex when her lips roamed over her neck and nipped the skin at the base of her neck.

"I want to feel you inside me," Regina pleaded her voice ragged with need.

"God, I want you so much."

Alex slid her hand down between Regina's thighs teasing her fingers through her wet folds before capturing her lips again, the taste of Regina exploding inside her. She almost lost control when Regina's thigh slipped through the slick wetness of her legs creating a pressure. The pressure sent her adrenaline coursing through her blood and her heart galloping.

"Ah, God, not yet, not yet." Alex pressed her body up, struggling not to lose control and lowered herself between Regina's legs. She clamped down on her own naked desire as she slipped the palms of her hands beneath Regina's buttocks and pulled her close to her. Alex nuzzled the soft skin of Regina's inner thigh inhaling her scent before caressing her with her lips.

"Make me come...please...just take me," Regina pleaded.

She stroked the length of her clitoris with her tongue feeling its pulse beneath her touch and knew Regina was close. Lowering her head, Alex pulled the swollen flesh into her mouth, Regina's gasps and cries stoking a fire inside her. Regina arched off the bed, twisting her hips. "Oh God, so close."

"Soon, baby."

Alex slid her fingers into Regina's silky depths, the wet and the warmth driving her wild, feeling muscles clench around her fingers as she stroked harder and faster timing her rhythm to the thrusting of Regina's hips. She felt Regina's fingers dig into her shoulders and her body convulse as she drove her close to the edge, holding her there until she screamed with release, heard the strangled cries of mindless pleasure and her name half sobbed as her body went lax.

SHE COULD HAVE floated away into oblivion until she heard Alex through a haze as if the circuits of her brain were just reconnecting, “Are you sleeping?”

“Huh? No. I’m floating somewhere out in space.”

Regina heard a throaty chuckle and gasped as Alex withdrew her fingers and circled her still sensitive clitoris, causing tremors to erupt again from deep inside her.

“Oh God, you’re making me come again,” Regina gasped as her hips lifted following and seeking Alex’s exquisite touch. She held onto Alex as she crested the intensely pleasurable wave of another orgasm.

Alex curled her body around Regina, pulling her close, both blissfully sated as they drifted around the edges of sleep.

When Regina opened her eyes, she was aware of the chilled air filling the bedroom. Orange fire spilled in through the windows from the setting sun, casting the room in light and shadow. She could smell a hint of wood smoke filtering in on the breeze. Alex lay beside her sleeping, her dark hair spilling across the pillow. Regina brushed the few errant strands from her cheek.

She examined the scars from the bullet wound and thoracotomy. It had taken her months to work past the vivid memories from that day and for both of them to feel comfortable again with the intimate physical aspect of their relationship. She traced a finger along the scar running the length of Alex’s sternum and followed the curve that transected the cartilage between two of her ribs.

Alex’s lips twitched into a smile and Regina found herself gazing into blue eyes. “It’s freezing in here.” She pulled the comforter up and shivered as she tucked herself against Alex’s body.

Alex stroked Regina’s bare skin. She kissed her neck, her ears, nipped at her ear lobe and felt her shiver. “I forgot to close the window.” Alex darted across the room to the hallway.

Regina heard a muttered curse as the window was slammed shut. Alex ran back across the room and slid into the bed. She stretched languidly, catlike.

“You look quite pleased with yourself.” Regina felt her cheeks color in response to Alex’s eye roaming down the length of her body before coming to rest on her eyes.

“Do I?” she asked with an innocent smile. “Everything okay in there?”

Regina nodded and Alex propped on an elbow. Using her other hand she brushed back Regina’s hair, leaned closer, meeting her gaze, and kissed her, tender and undemanding.

“Mmm. Everything’s just fine.” Regina sat, pushed Alex onto her back and straddled her hips. She ran her hands down the long lean lines of her torso. She clasped Alex’s hands, lifted her arms overhead and pressed them down onto the mattress to either side of Alex’s head. She dipped her body lower and rubbed her breasts over Alex’s belly, watching her pupils dilate in reaction as she moved higher, pulling away before Alex could take her in her mouth.

Alex gasped, lifting her hips, trying to keep contact with Regina’s body. “Ah God, touch me...please.”

“I *am* touching you.” Regina slid her knee in between Alex’s thighs. She dipped her head and sucked on an ear lobe. Alex groaned and arched against her. She nipped and teased, grazing her teeth along Alex’s neck, down to her collarbone and chest until she gathered a nipple between her lips, swirling her tongue over the raised nub. She wanted to taste all of her—her mouth, her breasts, her throat.

“You’re killing me,” Alex said as Regina drew her nails down the middle of her body and teased through the curls between her legs. She arched her hips into Regina’s hand. Regina felt the pulsing arousal between her legs.

“Hardly,” Regina breathed and Alex’s hands were in her hair urging her down between her thighs. Alex was swollen and hard when Regina drew her gently into her mouth, feeling her clitoris twitch and pulse beneath her tongue.

Regina stroked her tongue over her, dipped into her and felt her arousal flood her. Her gasps and moans were like a drug and they set her blood on fire.

“Oh, you’re making me...burn.”

Regina slipped a hand between Alex’s thighs finding her wet heat and gliding inside with one fluid motion. Alex arched her hips urging her deeper and writhed on the bed, clutching at the sheets desperate for more.

“Oh God...please.”

Regina felt her muscles spasm around her fingers, withdrawing almost completely and adding another, claimed her again, savoring the exquisite sensation of being this intimately joined with the woman she loved. Alex grasped her shoulders her breath coming in short gasps. A ragged cry ripped from Alex’s lips as her thighs tensed and her body jerked convulsively. Regina held onto her willing her head to clear so she could feel every moment of her orgasm.

As the last of the tremors ebbed from Alex’s body, Regina lay with her eyes closed, head resting on Alex’s hip and an arm wrapped possessively around her. Her lover stretched out an arm, reaching for her hand.

“Come here and lie with me.”

Regina lay down next to Alex. She pressed her lips against the pulse point in Alex’s neck before she nestled closer, their legs entangled, bodies pressed together. She could hear the thundering beat of Alex’s heart beneath her ear and smiled at the sound of it slowing as it recovered to its normal rhythm.

THE SOUND OF a phone ringing jerked Alex from her slumber. She felt Regina stir in the bed behind her as she fumbled across her night table. The light filtering in through the blinds was muted and she realized the blue sky from the day before was replaced with somber gray clouds. A damp chill was in the air and she shivered as she climbed out of the bed.

“What’s wrong?”

“My cell phone...I can’t find it.”

“Check the pocket of your scrub pants.”

“Shit.” Alex stumbled around the bed.

“Your pants are in the bathroom,” Regina said.

The phone stopped ringing by the time she yanked it from her pocket. She listened to the message as she returned and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Their flight just started boarding.” She thumbed the call back button and waited while the phone rang several times.

“Hi Sister, it’s Alex.” After a pause she asked, “Are you on the plane yet? Good.” She wrapped an arm around Regina as she moved her body closer, warm and soft against Alex’s side. “How’s Alicia?” Alex lowered her head and listened. “It’s almost finished. You’ll both have

somewhere safe to sleep tonight. We'll be at the airport when you get there. Try and get some sleep."

She ended the call and typed a message to David. "If they're on time they'll be taking off in about thirty minutes." The phone chimed as the communication was sent.

"That's it," Regina said. "There's no turning back now."

Alex set the phone down and leaned back against the headboard. "There was no turning back from this days ago." Shivering, she pulled the comforter up. "We've got a list of things to do before we drive to the airport."

"I can't remember the last time either one of us ate a decent meal. Before we get started on this list I suggest we get some food in our stomachs."

REGINA AND ALEX strolled hand in hand along the sidewalk. They traveled over the footpath meandering along the edge of the lake, nestled at the eastern edge of the reservation. The trail was a cut through from a local establishment called The Boat Slip and the rear of the condos where Alex lived.

Regina couldn't remember if they had ever displayed affection in public before. They passed a woman jogging on the trail in the misty drizzle, but she was too busy running and listening to her headphones to care.

They walked without talking and Regina thought of her family in Massachusetts. She would have to call her mother before the end of the day. She was not looking forward to that conversation. Her mother was unhappy with her because she had not bent to her will and abandoned her relationship with Alex. It made her furious and the conflict caused her to want to divorce herself from them but they were after all family and her reward for not rejecting them would be her mother's relentless criticisms about her life. She wondered if her mother would ever change.

She worried about Jeff who was cut off from her parents and lived with his lover on the west coast. She barely had a relationship with Michael since he had gotten married. He threw all his energy into the real estate office he was working for. Family. The notion brought an ache in her chest and she sighed.

"What are you thinking?"

Regina slipped her arm around Alex's elbow. "How incredibly irritating my family can be."

"Let me see if I can do something about stopping your train of thought." Alex pulled her closer as Regina pressed against her. They stopped on the path and Alex lowered her head possessing Regina's mouth and curling her fingers in her hair.

They broke apart, breathless. Regina said, "I think you just fried the synapses in my brain."

"Glad to be of service," Alex said bumping her with her hip. "So, you're staying with me while Sister Juanita and Alicia are at your place?"

"That's what we talked about before we came back."

"And afterwards?"

"I..." and Regina realized with an intuitive appreciation what was troubling Alex.

"I need you to know something, and no..." Alex raised her hand to forestall Regina's words, "let me finish. You wanted to know that we were making the right choice for the right reasons."

"Alex..."

“Please, just let me say this because I’ve been thinking about it since we left yesterday and I’ll lose the words if I don’t say them right now.”

“All right, I’m listening,” Regina said, clasping her hands around Alex’s waist and tilted her head to look at her.

“You’re the only one I want to fall asleep with and wake alongside of, to share a sunrise with. You’ve been there with me through one of the worst experiences of my life. I know I want to be there to share the pain and the happy times you’ll experience.”

Regina leaned into the gentle tracing of Alex’s fingertips across her cheek, shivered as the touch wrapped around her neck and pulled her into a gentle kiss. She was caught in Alex’s intense gaze when she pulled away. “I’ll love you for the rest of my life and when the time we have here is finished I want my heart to remember loving you. I want my memories at the end of it all to be of you and me together.”

Regina’s eyes swam with tears as she reached for Alex’s hand and clasped her fingers. She brought those strong, tapered hands to her lips and kissed them closing her eyes and holding on. “I think those are the most incredible, wonderful, heart breaking words someone has ever said to me.”

“I mean every one of them, today, tomorrow, for however long we have together.”

## Chapter Twenty-five

ALEX STEERED HER jeep negotiating through slow moving traffic at Newark International Airport and followed the signs for Terminal C Arrivals. Gone were the days of parking and waiting outside the terminal for someone to arrive.

Now police officers tasked with prohibiting any vehicles from stopping, except for passengers already outside the terminal patrolled the artificially lit underpass waving impatiently for vehicles to continue moving along. Twenty minutes ago, she had dropped Regina off and circled the airport express road waiting for her to re-emerge with Sister Juanita and Alicia.

Her cell phone rang, the old-fashioned ring tone breaking her out of her thoughts. The display lit with David’s name and she accepted the call, putting him on speakerphone.

“Hi David.”

“Did they get in?”

“We’re at the airport now. Regina’s inside waiting for them.” After a few seconds of silence she asked, “You still there?”

“I’m here. I just...since I got back I have moments where I’m not sure if it happened. Maybe it’s cause I slept twelve hours. I never sleep long. Five or six is all I need. My brain felt like it was shorted out when I got home yesterday. Today I woke and actually thought for a moment it was a dream. Crazy, right?”

“No, I don’t think it’s crazy. We’re all probably experiencing post-traumatic stress and don’t even realize it. What happened to Charles pushed us all to the edge. Are you alone?”

“No, Claire’s here. Well, not right now. She went out to buy some food. We ordered Chinese last night. There was nothing in the refrigerator. I think they put MSG in it. I have a headache.”

“Slow down and take a breath. Are you still there?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“It’s all true. You did it. You got them out.”

“*We* got them out. There was a reason you came on this trip. I’m not sure I would have made the same decision if you weren’t there. Sister Juanita would have never shared with me what she told you.”

“You don’t know that. Besides, her telling me wasn’t the only reason we made the decision we did. Charles dying cemented in my mind what we were going to do.”

“You ever get the feeling like something is just meant to be?”

“I don’t believe in fate.”

“Maybe not, but Claire and I were talking.”

“What she’d have to say?”

“One of her nursing buddies has a saying.”

“Yeah. What is it?” Alex asked, keeping an eye on the people leaving the terminal.

“There are no accidents.”

“Huh. I’m not sure how I feel about that philosophy.” She heard David laugh on the other end of the phone.

“This isn’t a conversation we should be having on the phone,” David said.

“Maybe it would go nice with a bottle of Ian’s bourbon,” Alex said.

“That might make for an interesting discussion.”

“Hang on David. I see them coming out with Regina.” Alex steered the jeep in between two limousines and parked.

Regina opened the door and Alicia climbed in first followed by Sister Juanita. Alex turned in her seat and said, “You made it.”

Sister Juanita clamped a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “We did. With a lot of help.”

“Everything was okay at the airport after we left?”

“Yes, security let us pass through and found us an office we could stay in overnight. We were fine.”

Alex handed her phone back to Sister Juanita. “Here, talk to David while I drive. I think he’ll feel better if he hears your voice.” She looked into the rearview mirror at Alicia. “Did they feed you on the plane?”

“A little. It didn’t taste like anything,” Alicia said and shivered in her borrowed shorts and tee shirt. They provided little warmth from the cool autumn air.

Alex cranked the heat and waited for Regina to climb in beside her. In the back, she heard Sister Juanita talking on the phone as she pulled back out into traffic.

When she was done, Sister Juanita handed Alex’s phone to Regina. “David’s planning on coming down next Saturday to drive us to Massachusetts.”

“He said he was going do that.” Alex glanced into the rearview mirror while she merged into traffic. Sister Juanita was slouched in her seat with her head resting against the window and Alicia was leaning against her.

After a few minutes of silence, Sister Juanita asked, “Where are you taking us?”

“You’re going to stay at my apartment,” Regina said.

“Huh. And where is it that you work?”

“Saint Xavier’s Medical Center,” Alex and Regina said in unison.

“Is it close to here?” Sister Juanita asked.

“It’s about ten minutes from here.”

Alex checked her mirrors and changed lanes, heading toward an exit ramp. The road led them through old neighborhoods where split-levels and capes were being torn down and replaced by million dollar mansions on postage sized lots.

“Who lives in these places?”

Alex glanced into the rearview mirror to see Alicia sitting and looking out the window at the passing neighborhoods.

“People, families,” Alex replied.

“Why do they need so much space?”

“I don’t know. I think people use it as a status symbol. Do you know what it means?” Alex said and wondered what Alicia must be thinking. The houses must have appeared as castles compared to where she came from.

“No, I don’t.”

“It’s about rank, position and standing in a society.”

“Like the Colonel being the most powerful man on the plantation?”

“Yes, exactly.” Alex glanced at Regina and she could see tears shimmering in her eyes. “It’s on our right, Sister.”

“My God. I never expected it to be so large.”

“What is it?” Alicia leaned forward holding onto the back of Alex and Regina’s seats.

“The hospital where we work.”

“All that is for people who are sick?”

“Not all of it. There are a lot of people who support what we do and the business having to do with patient care.”

“Like what?”

“They negotiate contracts with suppliers and insurance companies. There are whole departments that make sure the hospital is following all the rules set forth by the insurance companies.”

“Why is it so complicated?”

“It’s a business and we get paid by insurance companies—another issue altogether—which we don’t need to talk about.” Alex followed the winding road to Regina’s apartment.

“When do you go back to work?” Sister Juanita asked.

“Tomorrow,” Alex said as she pulled into Regina’s driveway and parked the jeep.

They climbed out and Regina led the way inside. “There’s food in the refrigerator. We weren’t sure what you liked to eat so we just...”

“Bought a little bit of everything,” Alex finished for Regina, waiting for Alicia and Sister Juanita to enter, before she shut the door. It felt awkward standing there as Sister Juanita set her carry-on bag down and took in her surroundings.

“Make yourself at home,” Regina said. “The bathroom is straight through the door if you want to take a shower. Alicia, I probably have some sweats you can wear.”

“Are you going to stay here?” Alicia asked, following Regina into the bedroom.

“Well, no.”

“Where will you stay?”

“With Alex.” A phone rang and Regina called out, “Alex can you get that?”

Alex answered, “Hello, Dr. Kingston’s residence.”

“Alex!” Regina poked her head out of the room and Alex laughed at her outraged look. Her expression changed and she said, “It’s Dr. Margulies and yes, she’s standing right here.” She mouthed “your brother” to Regina as she held the phone out to her take.

“Mike or Jeff?” Regina whispered taking the phone from Alex.

“Mike.”

“Can you look for a pair of sweats for Alicia? She’s going to freeze in those shorts tonight,” Regina said as she disappeared into the kitchen.

“Come on Alicia, let’s find you something to wear. Sister, you might as well bring your bag in here,” Alex said as she disappeared into the bedroom. She heard Regina’s muffled voice from the kitchen as she opened a dresser drawer and pulled out well-worn pair of sweats with UMASS running down the leg. “They might be loose but they’ll do for now. I’ll show you how to use the shower. You can get cleaned and relax.”

“I’ll do it,” Sister Juanita said and led Alicia into the bathroom.

Alex heard the sound of running water and memories of the first few nights she spent with Regina flooded her mind. Long hours spent in passionate exploration. Teaching the other the tender nuances of making love, giving and receiving the intimate joy of bonding so closely with each other every cell of their being seemed to respond to the others touch.

She couldn’t hear Regina’s voice above the sound of the shower. She moved past the bathroom door and stood at the entryway of the kitchen. Regina’s back was to her and by the rigid set of her shoulders and the downward tilt of her head she suspected the conversation was not going well. She retreated to the couch and sat with her head tilted back against the cushion, waiting for Regina to finish. She wanted to go home and share their last few hours together before going back to work, where their lives were not their own.

Sylvi’s delicate face flashed into her mind and her throat constricted as she recalled the girl and wondered what she was doing now. Alex hoped she was sleeping somewhere safe.

Footsteps drew her attention and she was instantly alert, observing Regina’s concerned expression. “What’s the matter?”

“That was Michael. My mother’s in the hospital.” Regina sunk down on the couch beside Alex.

“What happened?”

“She was having abdominal pain the past few days and it just continued to get worse. They’re still running tests.”

“When did she go in?”

“Late last night. My father called 9-1-1 and the squad brought her to the emergency department.”

“What hospital is she at?” The bathroom door opened and Sister Juanita came out closing it behind her.

“She’s at Saint Vincent’s in Worcester, but Michael wants to transfer her to UMASS.”

“Why?”

“He thinks Saint Vincent’s is too small. Her doctor hasn’t come to see her. I tried to tell him they use hospitalists so her doctor won’t see her while she’s there.”

“If that’s the only problem, moving her won’t solve it. It’ll slow down getting a diagnosis.”

“He thinks the doctors don’t know what they’re doing. Knowing Michael, he’s probably told them all as much.”

Sister Juanita sat down in a chair opposite Alex and Regina. “She’s almost finished in the shower.”



“That’s fine, Sister,” Regina said. “I’m going to call Jeff. Can you believe nobody’s called him yet?”

“Oh, I have to give you your cell phone. It’s in my bag.” Sister Juanita stood and retreated into the bedroom.

“I’m sorry, Reg.” Wrapping an arm around her shoulder Alex hugged her.

“It’s hard not to go to the worst case scenario knowing what we know.”

“Try not to. I know it’s difficult to avoid doing but try.” Alex pressed her lips to the side of her temple, pulled away and said, “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Regina said before Sister Juanita handed the cell phone to her. “Thanks, Sister.” She glanced at Alex before she stood. “California’s three hours behind us so it’s two o’clock there.”

“Go ahead.” Alex released Regina and watched her walk into the kitchen. She looked at Sister Juanita who was regarding her from the chair.

“I couldn’t help overhearing. I’m sorry. Was her mother ill?”

“As far as we know she was fine prior to our trip to The Dominican Republic.” Alex said and held her gaze. “There’s nothing to apologize for. We’re here and life continues whether we like it or not.”

“I hope you won’t take offense, but I need to speak with you.”

Alex leaned back and waited for what, she wasn’t sure, but her heart beat faster while she kept her expression casually neutral.

“I wasn’t sure what you were about the morning I came into the church and saw you kneeling there in front of Regina.”

Alex sat straighter and kept her eyes on Sister Juanita, anger rising in her gut. “It was a private moment between the two of us.”

“Yes, I came to realize that. I understand love when I see it.” Sister Juanita stood and crossed the room to sit on the couch beside Alex. “I think it’s time we had the conversation you told me would be better left unsaid.”

“I know very well how the church feels about homosexuals. I’ve made my peace with who I am a long time ago, Sister.”

“Yet I hear anger in your voice.”

Alex felt her face grow hot and she averted her eyes. “When I was a kid my mother would bring us to church. Every Sunday the altar boy had to get up in the middle of Mass and go wake the priest so he could read from the bible and give his sermon. It wasn’t until I was older I realized the reason he had to wake the priest was the man was an alcoholic and drunk most of the time. Under all the fancy robes, the pomp and circumstance, was just a lonely old man who was as human and fallible as the rest of us. Somehow, that’s acceptable, but the church will condemn two people who love and care for each other.”

“We’re all human and none of us are perfect. I understand your anger. Especially when I think about a church that picks and chooses where in the world it sends money and help based on how many people they can convert and what can be contributed to its coffers, the same church which turned a blind eye for decades to the abuses some of its priests were inflicting on young, vulnerable children. Some would consider it tacit approval because the bishops did not hold the priests accountable when they learned of what was happening and in many instances covered the trail with money and lies running all the way back to the Vatican. Priests are bound by obedience to the Pope and under canon law the Vatican is accountable. So, yes I know all about the church and its hypocrisy. Have you read the bible?”

Alex stared across the room, a long forgotten recollection nudging at the periphery of her memories. “No, my mother used to have one in the house but...I don’t know what happened to it. I haven’t looked at a bible in years.”

“One day maybe you will. In the book of Matthew, when Jesus was asked, ‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’ he responded by saying, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.’ It’s all he asks of us.” Sister Juanita grasped Alex’s forearm and continued, “Don’t give up on your faith. You need something to draw strength from when life tests us and it will.”

Alex shook her head. “I don’t think I’ve ever been very good at believing in something I can’t see.”

“Our faith is always evolving and changing. Don’t doubt that it’s there. You are one of God’s children, just like I am.”

“I’ve strayed pretty far off the ranch and done things that I’m ashamed to admit I did.”

“To a lesser or greater degree we all have. Sometimes the hardest thing is forgiving ourselves and letting go of something that we can’t undo. Regardless, you’re both special to me. We shared experiences that ripped away barriers and brought us together in ways I wouldn’t have expected or believed if someone had told me any of this would happen.

No matter what happens after today I will never forget this time and what we shared.”

Alex glanced to the kitchen watching Regina pace as she talked on the phone. “They’re memories that’ll follow me to my grave.”

Sister Juanita frowned. “I’ve been thinking of something I learned a long time ago. You are familiar with Carl Jung?”

“He was a psychiatrist and psychotherapist.”

“Yes, he spoke of a ‘collective unconscious.’”

“That brings me back to not so fond memories of general psychology in undergrad,” Alex said and Sister Juanita laughed at the look of consternation on her face.

“Jung talked about individual experiences existing at the fringe of our unconscious. The collective unconscious organizes those personal experiences with each member of that particular species.”

“As if it becomes part of our genetic code as humans.”

“What I find fascinating was that he described a divine quality of these experiences, that energy has no beginning and no end.”

“That’s the first law of thermodynamics, that energy is neither created nor destroyed,” Alex said.

“So it is the unconscious energy that lives forever and is released to travel where it may when the body that holds our soul dies.”

Alex stared at Sister Juanita. “If you have faith in what you believe, why are you even considering what a psychologist wrote.”

“I told you not to lose faith, yet I find my own shaken by what happened to Charles. He was a good man and I have to believe his spirit is out there and that he didn’t die in vain.”

“We make sure we don’t let that happen.”

“Who are you talking about? Charles?” Regina asked as she came into the room and sat next to Alex.

Alex nodded and asked, “How was Jeff?”

“He’s angry. I was the first one to call him.”

“Is he going to come out?”

“No. He wants me to find out what’s going on before he decides to make the trip from California.”

Alicia walked out of the bathroom dressed in sweats pants and a shirt she had tied a knot in so it hung loose around her hips. Her hair hung in wet curls about her face. She stopped a few steps away from the three of them.

“Come here,” Sister Juanita held an arm out and hugged Alicia when she leaned into her. “You should say good night to Alex and Regina. They need to go home and sleep. You both must be exhausted.”

“No, I don’t want them to go.”

Alex rested her head back on the couch and met Regina’s questioning gaze. “Your place is closer to the hospital than mine.”

“Do you mind, Sister? We can sleep on the couch,” Regina said.

“What? No, it’s up to you.”

“It’s settled. We’ll stay here tonight and I’ll make breakfast before we leave in the morning.”

## Chapter Twenty-six

THEY MUST HAVE made quite a sight to people passing by as they hiked from Regina’s apartment, Sister Juanita decided. She was dressed in her traditional blue and white religious habit. Alicia had her hair pulled back in a thick braid wearing borrowed jeans that cuffed several times and a tie dyed tee-shirt Regina had given to her at the airport. Sister Juanita wondered if Dr. Kingston realized she wasn’t going to be getting the shirt back now that Alicia had declared it her favorite shirt during breakfast. Somehow, she didn’t think Regina would mind too much.

“How much father do you think we have to walk?” Alicia paced alongside Sister Juanita as they traveled along the busy four-lane road. The sheer volume of cars and trucks speeding by in both directions separated only by a concrete divider was amazing and at times frightening. Alicia held Sister Juanita’s elbow as they traversed buckled chunks of broken sidewalks where tree roots had undermined the macadam walkway.

“Not far. The last road sign we passed indicates we turn left at this next street.”

“Do you think Dr. Alex will be mad we came to visit her?”

“You can’t call her that at the hospital,” Sister Juanita reminded Alicia.

“I know.”

“I think she’ll understand we couldn’t just stay cooped up in the apartment. Besides it’s a beautiful day to take a walk.”

It took them ten more minutes before the sprawling medical complex came into view.

“I still can’t believe they have so many sick people that they need a building this large to treat them all.” Alicia shied away from the road as a grime stained box truck rumbled past them, it’s frame banging as one of its tires rolled through a pothole. “It’s too loud here and I don’t like the smell of the air.”

“It’s the exhaust from the cars,” Sister Juanita said and stopped, allowing Alicia to walk ahead. “Come stand on the other side of me, away from the road.”

“Why haven’t we seen any children?”

“That’s because all the children are in school.” Sister Juanita glanced at Alicia as they continued to walk. “We’ll have to see about getting you enrolled in a school somewhere.”

“Where will I go to school?”

“It depends on where we live.”

THE LOCKER ROOM door opened and Alex looked to see Sandy, with her blonde curly hair pulled back into a ponytail, standing in the doorway. “Mitchard is in the department looking for you. Do you want to talk to her or should I tell her you’re not here and you’ll call her later?”

“Did she say what she wants?” Alex sighed wishing for nothing more than to be left alone to take care of her patients and avoid the ever-present bureaucracy that went along with her administrative duties.

Sandy glanced over her shoulder and slipped into the room. “There’s a rumor going around they’re using some of the video posted online for a marketing campaign.”

“Who are *they*?”

“The executive board.”

“Where’d you hear this?”

“Robert. He works in the AV department and told Alison he was working on it.”

“Alison, in the lab?”

“Yes, oh for Pete’s sakes didn’t you know they were together? Come on, Alex. Where have you been?”

“When do I ever get out of this place to hear all this gossip you’re apparently privy to?”

“All you need to do is open your ears and listen more often.”

“I rely on you to keep me updated on that kind of pertinent information,” Alex replied with a grin, because in truth she was never keenly interested in the rumor mill, but throughout the years it had served her well.

“So, do you want me to run interference for you?”

“No, let me get this done with now otherwise she’ll be hunting for me all day.”

They both looked as the door opened and Cassandra strode inside. “Can you give us the room?” she asked looking past Sandy at Alex.

“Talk to you later,” Sandy said as she passed Cassandra without so much as a glance.

Cassandra pulled the door closed behind her and said, “I’ve never liked her attitude.”

“I sincerely doubt she cares much for yours either.” Alex asked lifting a leg onto the bench to tie her shoelaces. “What do you want, Cassandra?”

“Can we pretend for five minutes you don’t hate me?”

“I don’t hate you. I simply don’t trust you. You showed your true colors when you were willing to let me and the rest of the staff hang in the breeze for what Jameson did last year,” Alex said and took pleasure in seeing her eyes dart away in acute embarrassment.

“I didn’t have all the facts at the time. It was nothing personal.”

“Seems to me that should have been your first priority. Instead you were busy protecting your own hide.” Alex shrugged into her lab coat. “You didn’t come down here to have some heart to heart chat with me so get on with whatever it is you came to say. I have work to do.”

“I saw the videos posted from your trip.”

“How did you even find them?”

“I was doing some background research for the article Beverly wanted to put into our newsletter and stumbled across them. They were riveting. I would go so far as to say shocking.”

“And?”

“I asked the AV department to put together a video. We’re going to use it to for a marketing campaign. The donors will be eating out of our hands after they see the work we did there.”

“We?” Folding her arms across her chest, Alex faced Cassandra. “You weren’t there. This was not some hospital-sanctioned trip. You don’t get to take any of the credit for anything we did there. How arrogant can you be?”

“Alex you’re going to be the face of the campaign.”

Alex slung her stethoscope around her neck. She thought about what she was doing this time last week. It was paradoxical. In a world where so much technology existed and seemingly endless resources were at hand so many people lived on the outer edges of society, some well beyond the fringe, where inhumanity and marginalization were commonplace. “Like hell I am.”

“I don’t think you entirely appreciate what this kind of publicity can do for the hospital. It will play very well with our donors when it’s time to pitch to them what our needs are going to be as we continue to serve this community. I need you in the boardroom at two o’clock this afternoon. I expect your full cooperation with this.”

“You’re going to exploit people’s predicament to advance the hospital’s agenda?”

“You’ll profit from it as well. You’ll get your five bed unit if you play your cards right.”

“Not off the backs of people who are in desperate need and suffering.” The slamming of the locker door sounded like a gunshot.

“This is bigger than you, Alex.”

“You’re right and it’s bigger than your damn agenda as well.”

“I can count on you to be there?”

Alex felt the thudding of her pulse in her neck and said, “I’ll be there.” Brushing past Cassandra she yanked the door open and stormed out of the locker room. “Opportunistic bastards.” Alex plowed into Sandy and grabbed hold of her shoulders to keep her from losing her balance. “Sorry, sorry.”

“What’s wrong? What did she say to you?”

“You were right about the video. Can you call Robert? See if he’ll let me look at it. It has to be before noon today.”

“Sure, I’ll call him right now,” Sandy said.

The locker room door opened and closed and Alex heard the distinctive click of Cassandra’s heels as she marched away.

Sandy motioned to Alex. “Thanks Rob. Yeah she is. I’ll make sure she does.”

“What did he say?”

“He’s got a meeting in fifteen minutes. Go now and he can show it to you.”

ALEX TOOK THE stairs two at a time, anger and adrenaline driving her to the fifth floor. She strode down the empty corridor, the rumble of the HVAC system filling the hallway from behind multiple sets of double doors. She knocked and stepped inside.

“Hi Dr. Margulies,” Rob said.

Rob was tall and lanky with dark wavy hair and deep-set blue eyes that peered at her from behind round glasses. His office hadn't seen new paint since the seventies, when everything was painted in hospital beige. In the corner, was the dark room where the processing of light sensitive photographic materials, including film and paper, used to be done. Technology had made all that obsolete. "Thanks for letting me look at this on short notice."

"No problem. I've never seen so much interest in getting a video produced in this short a period of time. I spent the last twelve hours working non-stop on this. Everything else that was a priority got ditched until this project was completed."

"How long is it?"

"Three minutes."

"Jesus." Alex was incredulous at the thought of ten days condensed into a three-minute segment of video. "Let me see what you put together."

"Pull out a stool." With a few clicks of the mouse he found the video. "Here it is," he said.

Alex watched as the compound came into view and the camera zoomed in on the line of women and children waiting to be seen the very first day they had arrived.

"Who's the nun?" Rob asked as the scene faded and Alex watched herself holding Roberto, the little boy she treated with the intestinal obstruction.

"Sister Juanita. She r...runs the orphanage," she said stumbling on the present tense of the word as an idea crept into her mind.

The scene faded and Regina was in the clinic sitting next to Claire vaccinating children. Sean was next to them fitting a child with eyeglasses.

"There are some good soccer players out there and I don't mean the adults," Robert said casting a grin in Alex's direction

"Those kids ran circles around us," Alex said watching Alicia steal the ball from David. "Made me feel old."

"Who's the girl with the ball?"

"Her name's Alicia. She speaks English, Creole and Spanish." She felt Rob studying her.

"If those kids lived here their parents would have had to sign photograph and video consents to be in this film."

"What would have happened if that was the case and the hospital didn't get the consents?"

"Poof." He motioned with his hand. "Their marketing campaign would be up in smoke. Legal would have a heart attack if something like that got out and they didn't have the paperwork in order."

"Seems like they were awfully hot to get this in front of their donors."

Rob leaned forward and Alex met his gaze, a flicker of something in his eyes alerting her to tread carefully until she knew more about his allegiances. "You know how this place works."

"Never pass an opportunity to capitalize on something," she said smiling at him.

"They're exploiting people because they can."

"When did they come to you?"

"Yesterday morning. Said they needed it today and to do whatever it took to get it done."

"Of course they don't have to pay you overtime."

"They're bastards, all of them. What happened to the man lying on the ground?" Robert pointed at the screen.

"He was attacked and died from his injuries." She felt her throat tighten at the vivid memory of it all. "Why is it in there?"

“I left it out, but Cassandra demanded I put it in. I don’t like it. I like it even less knowing he died.”

“Do you have a copy? One without the hospital’s logo on it?”

“I sent a rough draft to myself to work on at home last night. I can send you a copy. What’s your email?”

Alex gave it to him and a few minutes later after the video downloaded. She had a copy of it on her phone. “Thanks for letting me look at this.”

“No problem. Not sure what good it’ll do you.”

Alex gave a non-committal shrug. “At least I know what I’m walking into this afternoon.”

ALEX’S CELL PHONE chirped as a message dropped into it while she trotted down the four flights of gunmetal grey stairs to the first floor. She pulled it out of her scrub pocket and read the words, “Call me when you get a free minute,” from Regina. She tapped Regina’s number, hit call and waited as she opened the door and paced toward the Emergency Department.

“What’s the matter?” she asked when Regina answered.

“Mike just called me. Mom has colon cancer.”

Her heart sank for Regina and Alex said, “I’m sorry, Reg. Where are you?” she asked wanting to go to her and knowing she couldn’t.

“Fourth floor. I just finished rounds with the residents.”

“When did he call you?”

“About forty-five minutes ago.”

“Did he know if they staged it yet?”

“He wasn’t there when the doctor talked to my parents. My mom gave consent for me to talk to the oncologist so I’m going to call there later and talk to him.”

“Can I do anything?”

“No, I just needed to hear your voice,” and Alex heard the sadness seeping through Regina’s words. “You must be busy.”

“No worse than usual. I have a meeting with the board later today.”

“About your proposal?”

“Oh no.” Alex glanced around to make sure she was alone. She spotted a man with close-cropped salt and pepper hair, wearing a long brown trench coat, walking toward her. His arms were around a classy looking grey haired woman she suspected was his wife. “Hang on Reg.” She lowered her phone and caught the man’s anxious gaze. “Can I help you find something?”

“We’re looking for the ICU.”

“This way,” Alex said and led them back the way they came, made two left turns, and pointed ahead of her. “Go to the end of this hallway and follow the signs hanging from the ceiling.”

“Thank you,” he said with the look of someone whose world had just been inexplicably turned upside down.

Alex watched them follow the signs and disappear around the corner. “You still there?”

“I’m here.”

“Cassandra had the AV department put together a marketing video of our trip to the plantation.”

“So nice of her to ask. They have no idea what went on there.”

“I was just coming from Rob’s office when you texted me.”

“You watched it?”

“Yeah.”

“What did you think?”

“They condensed ten days into three minutes. It’s hospital propaganda at its best. I’m going to get Alicia and Sister Juanita and bring them here.”

“Why?”

“Cassandra thinks she’s free and clear to use the film to benefit the hospital.”

“She needs consent.”

“Yes she does and I’m going to try to convince Sister Juanita not to give it unless they agree to give a donation to the plantation—enough to get their infrastructure started.”

“You think you can get Sister Juanita agree?”

“I know she feels guilty for leaving. I saw it in her eyes when she got on the bus. I heard it when she said she hoped what we all did there meant something and Charles’ death wasn’t in vain.”

“What about Cassandra and the board?”

“I’ll push them on it, as far as I possibly can. I asked Rob for a copy of the video.”

“Did he give it to you?”

“He emailed me a copy from his personal email.”

“Why did you ask for it?”

“I’m not sure. It pissed me off they made it in the first place.”

“Knowing you the way I do, there has to be another reason than you simply being angry about it.” There was and the idea gained clarity as Alex listened to Regina. “Be careful. You have a history with Cassandra and she’s certainly not your friend.”

“She never was. Do you think I’m crazy trying to do this?”

“No, not at all—well maybe a little,” Regina said and laughter came through the phone.

“What time is your meeting?”

“Two o’clock.”

“Good luck. I’ll come find you afterwards,” Regina said.

“I’ll give you a hug when I see you,” Alex said and heard Regina say goodbye before the operator announced on the overhead paging system, “Dr. Alex Margulies please call extension two five eight three six.” She picked up a wall phone and punched in the extension.

“Triage, Janet speaking.”

“Dr. Margulies here, someone paged me.”

“I did. There’s a Sister Juanita here. She asked me to find you.”

Alex felt a surge of anxiety and asked. “Is she all right?”

“She appears to be.”

“I’ll be right there,” Alex hung up and moved through the corridor. She swiped her badge through the electronic card reader and strode into the crowded triage area. At least a dozen heads turned in her direction, adults and children, waiting to be seen in the emergency department but not with dire enough symptoms to be fast tracked. They would wait hours before a doctor could examine them.

“Are you all right?” Alex asked Sister Juanita as she approached the desk.

“I’m fine. We decided to take a walk and came here. I hope it’s not a problem.”

“No it’s not,” Alex said smiling at the tie-dyed shirt Alicia insisted on wearing again. “I was going to bring both of you here this afternoon.” Alex motioned them to follow her through the



door. "Thanks, Janet." The nurse smiled, a curious expression on her face Alex couldn't quite place.

"Let's go inside."

"Why were you going to bring us here?" Alicia asked.

"I have a meeting to attend at two o'clock this afternoon and I want you both to come with me." Alex led them down a corridor lined with equipment, towards the nurse's station.

"Why would you want us at a hospital meeting?" Sister Juanita asked.

"Sandy."

After a brief moment of confusion her eyes went wide with shock. "Oh my God. I saw you both in the video."

"What video are you talking about?"

Alex leaned against the desk and introduced the three of them to each other and explained, "The hospital made a video using some of the footage Danny filmed at the plantation. They want to use it to raise funding for some projects here at the hospital."

"I don't understand what the plantation has to do with the hospital," her voice trailed off as she made an educated guess and asked, "They're using you and Regina."

"We're in it yes, but so are you and Alicia."

"I don't understand," Sister Juanita said.

"Under ordinary circumstances they would need consents for anyone who appears in the video. I think they assumed since this took place in some distant place with nameless individuals they could use it as they see fit. You're Alicia's guardian and they need your consent to use her in the film."

"I'll certainly give my consent if it will help what you do here."

Alex shook her head. "You're missing the point and I'm not being clear about it. Your consent comes with a price and that's the hospital donating enough money to fund the infrastructure projects the plantation sorely needs."

"Isn't that extortion?" Sandy asked leaning across the desk.

Alex glared at her. "Whose side are you on here anyway?"

"Just asking," Sandy said raising her hands defensively.

"I didn't say I was going to resort to violence or intimidation. I'm just going to firmly lead them in the direction of making a decision that benefits more than their own self-centered interests."

"Couldn't they just turn around and decide to scrap the whole thing?" Sandy asked.

"I suppose they could, but Robert said they've suspended a whole host of other projects to give this one priority. If that's the case, Cassandra has staked her reputation with the board on this video being part of a successful marketing campaign. Her ego is too big to let this fail."

"Are you sure you want to risk doing this?" Sandy asked.

"What do you think Sister? This is largely up to you. I know it's short notice and I'm putting you on the spot. I think it's worth at least a generator or two to pump water out of the well. Imagine having an electrical line run from where they process the sugarcane to the school? Sister Rose told us the lack of infrastructure was why the plantation couldn't attract larger medical missions with more funding. Tell them your story. Fifteen years of blood, sweat and tears is worth at least trying. Don't you think?" Alex glanced between Sandy and Sister Juanita. The older woman's eyes were brimming with tears.

"This is why you were coming to get us?"

Alex nodded, sensing her discomfort. “I can guarantee you not one of the people you’re going to meet this afternoon holds a candle to the likes of what you’ve dealt with at the plantation. I’ll be there with you the entire time.”

“I will too,” Alicia said.

“You will?” Sister Juanita asked.

“Yes, I will,” Alicia insisted.

“There was a reason you decided to walk here today. You just didn’t know what the reasons was until now,” Alex said.

“Well I guess it’s settled. We’ll be going to this meeting with you today.”

The scanner squawked a voice coming through the static. Sandy went to it. “Springfield EMS this is Xavier’s ED repeat.”

“MVA with unrestrained motorist—long extrication. Blunt force trauma sustained to the chest. Fifty-three year old male intubated at the scene. ETA three minutes.”

“Three minutes? What happened to our seven minute advanced notice, Springfield?”

“NBI is diverting all trauma’s. Their ER is full.”

“Roger that, Springfield EMS, we’ll be waiting for you. Room three is open.”

Alex was already moving away from the desk and said to Sister Juanita. “I’ll come find you when we’re done. The cafeteria is on the ground floor if you’re hungry.”

“Wait. Do they have any money?” Sandy asked as she trotted after Alex.

“I have no idea. Give them this,” Alex dug into her scrub pocket and retrieved a ten dollar bill. She shoved it at Sandy as she grabbed a fluid shield mask from a box on the wall and said to one of the residents coming out of an examination room, “Dr. Martin, room three. We’ve got an MVA coming in. You’re running this trauma.”

His eyes widened in anticipation as he fell into step with her. The doors to the ambulance bay burst open as a stretcher pushed by two paramedics was wheeled through the entrance. “Where are we going with this one?”

“Three,” Dr. Martin said and helped steer the gurney through the doorway.

Alex purposely stayed on the periphery and allowed her resident to take the lead, listening and watching intently as he gave the assembled team a short list of orders and confidently managed the care of the patient. Satisfied with how her team was running the trauma she texted David a message and attached the video along with it.

## Chapter Twenty-seven

“WAIT FOR ME out here,” Alex said as Sister Juanita and Alicia stepped off the elevator with her. “In fact, sit here on the couch. If anyone asks just tell them you’re waiting for me to come out of the meeting.” Down the hall, a door from the stairwell opened and Alex was surprised to see Regina emerge and walk towards her. She could see a smile starting but it was tinged with sadness and Alex wished she could take what was hurting away. “Hey. What are you doing here?”

“Sandy told me where you were. I thought they could use some company while they wait for you,” Regina said as she approached.

“Reg...I mean, Dr. Kingston!” Alicia said hopping to her feet and wrapping her arms around Regina’s waist.

“Hi Alicia,” Regina said and squeezed her back. “Thanks, I needed a hug.”

“You did?”

“Uh huh.”

Alex stood behind Alicia and held Regina’s gaze. She made a quick gesture with her fingers. It brought a smile to Regina’s face and got the words “I love you too,” mouthed back to her.

Alicia let Regina go and stood by her side, looking between her and Alex. A lazy smile crossed Alex’s lips and she stepped forward gathering Regina into her arms and hugged her. “I did say I would give you a hug when I saw you.”

“Yes, you did,” Regina said, her lips brushing the curve of Alex’s neck and neither of them cared if anyone saw them.

“I love you,” Alex whispered in her ear. She felt her warmth and the subtle scent of sandalwood and heather from the perfume she wore and was reminded of waking on Regina’s couch. She remembered the feel of her skin beneath the blankets, the teasing, pleasurable touches until they became unbearable and silently gave into the waves of release because they were not alone in the apartment.

“I love you, too. Be careful.”

“I will.” Alex let Regina go reluctantly and stepped back. “I’ll come get you both when it’s time,” Alex said.

Inside were the same people she’d met with two weeks ago. She stood at the head of the table before she took a seat across from Cassandra and made a point of glancing at her watch before asking her, “You asked me here, Cassandra. What do you want to talk about?”

Dr. Timmons coughed and she caught an upturn of the corner of his mouth as he avoided her gaze and turned away from the table, continuing to fitfully cough into the crook of his arm.

“Are you all right, Chris?” One of the board members poured him a glass of water and passed it across the table to him.

“Fine, fine,” he said wiping his eyes. “Environmental needs to check the air ducts or the handlers in here. I must be allergic to something blowing out of them.”

“God knows how long it’s been since they’ve actually been cleaned,” one of the board members chimed in. “Look at the vent.” Alex’s eyes drifted to the strands of dust blowing out from the metal vent slats.

“Certainly, I can have engineering come take a look.” Cassandra scribbled on her yellow legal pad before setting her pen down and lifting a remote from the table. “I did a search of the medical mission for background information while you were away on your trip. I found clips online. They were posted from the mission and instead of an article I decided a video would have significantly more impact with our donors.”

“Robert has been working on this nonstop since we decided on the idea,” Beverly added and Alex didn’t miss the irritated look on her face and guessed Cassandra was taking all the credit for hatching this idea. “Let’s show it.”

Alex leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table, watching as dust drifted down in the beam of light as the screen descended from the ceiling at the front of the room. Familiar images flickered across it. The music in the background lent a heartrending emotional touch, but she

couldn't help but think about ten days being condensed into such a short clip. Ten days had changed so much and impacted her life in ways she would never have imagined possible.

A few minutes later, the images on the screen faded and the lights brightened in the room. Several of the women sitting around the table dabbed at their eyes and a couple of the men cleared their throats discreetly hiding their emotions.

"It's brilliant. Don't you think?" Beverly asked as she peered around the table at each of the board members.

"Touching."

"Really nice work."

"Well done." As if the hospital had anything to do with what went on there, Alex couldn't help thinking.

"Alex, what do you think?" Beverly asked as she flipped open a manila file folder, removed a single sheet of paper and Alex knew what it was before she handed it across to her.

"The man at the end of the film, his name is Charles," she began.

"Charles," Beverly repeated and Alex could tell she was trying to remember who she was talking about because the film was a means to an end and the people in it didn't matter to her or anyone sitting in this room.

"Yes, Charles." Alex remembered Sister Juanita singing him home and her chest tightened at the memory. "He died from his injuries because we didn't have the tools or the technology available to save him."

"What happened to him?" one of the board members obligingly asked.

"He was attacked by soldiers on the plantation. They hacked him to death with a machete." Shocked and horrified gasps came from around the table.

A dozen eyes stared at her and she held Cassandra's gaze. "Boys old enough to swing a stick and men work eighteen hours a day chopping sugar cane. They get paid in useless paper that's not worth anything outside of the plantation. The women prostitute themselves to make a living...and the children are exploited, often raped and if they are lucky... if you can call it that...reach adulthood."

"This was obviously a very emotionally charged trip for you. We're very proud of what you did. We think this video will touch many people. It's a poignant story." Beverly slid the consent form in front of Alex along with a Mont Blanc pen as if it lent significance and weight to what they were asking her to do.

"For those people," Alex continued as she lifted the pen and read the words on the paper releasing the hospital from all responsibility if she chose to sign her rights away. "It's not just a story it's their life every...single...day. It's what they wake to and go to sleep with." And she thought of what she said to Regina just the other day. Alex set the pen down and stood from the table.

"Dr. Margulies? Wait! Where are you going?" Beverly asked.

"We need you to sign the consent," Cassandra said.

"There are two people I want you to meet." Alex ignored the protests erupting behind her and opened the conference room door. Motioning for Sister Juanita and Alicia to enter, Alex said to them as they approached, "A couple of them might be a little excited and loud." She leaned closer to Sister Juanita and said, "Don't be afraid if it gets a little ugly. David is trying to get UMASS to agree to make a donation as well."

Sister Juanita grabbed Alex's arm as she stepped toward her and for a moment she worried something was wrong. She saw tears brimming and shook her head. "Hold on a little longer."

Alex let them pass and put an arm on each of their shoulders as she guided them back to the table. "Allow me to introduce Alicia and this is her legal guardian, Sister Juanita." She pulled out two empty chairs and motioned for them to sit, as she remained standing behind them.

"This is all very nice Alex, but we don't have time for this," Cassandra said. Her expression changed subtly and realization dawned on her as Beverly whispered in her ear.

"I'm sure you think you don't have the time, but you'll listen to Sister Juanita." Alex glared at Cassandra and continued before she could protest, "out of respect and because you need her consent to use Alicia in the video."

Alex pulled her cell phone out of her lab coat pocket and started drafting a text message to David. She was aware of Dr. Timmons leaning back in his chair regarding her.

She finished her text to David with a question.

**Have you shown anyone the video yet?**

Her phone made a swooshing noise as she sent the text. She returned her attention to the men and women sitting around the table watching each of them as they listened to Sister Juanita tell her story of the children, the women and the hardships they faced daily and no one at the table dared to interrupt her.

A short time later her phone chirped and she smiled as she read David's reply.

**The development office is drooling at the merethought of a marketing campaign. We should start our own medical mission.**

**What? Who do you mean?**

**You and I. What are you doing right now?**

**Sister Juanita is giving her pitch to the board right now.**

**LOL. She's a force of nature. They don't stand a chance against her.**

**She's better at leading them to that conclusion than I am. How much is UMASS willing to donate?**

**Tell Cassandra, Mike Salas approved a check for fifteen grand from the hospital's foundation and I think they're going to look to some corporate sponsors to match many employees donations. As soon as I told him Cassandra was pitching a marketing campaign he couldn't get onboard fast enough.**

Alex looked from her phone and said to Cassandra, "UMASS is starting with a donation of fifteen thousand dollars and by the way they have copies of what you pulled off the internet too and are working on their own video as we speak."

"How do you know anything about what UMASS is doing?"

"Dr. Ivez, who ran the medical mission, is on the staff with UMASS Medical Center and you're familiar with their VP of medical affairs." Alex said trying not to smirk.

“As if you think you have anything to negotiate with,” Cassandra snapped. “How do we know you’re not just bluffing?”

Alex composed another text and sent it on its way as Sister Juanita answered a question from Dr. Timmons. Her phone chirped and she read David’s reply. “Excuse me, Sister?” Alex touched her shoulder.

“Yes, Alex?” and Alex smiled as Alicia’s eyes popped open wide. “Dr. Margulies,” Sister Juanita corrected herself.

“David needs to know the name of the foundation they’re making the check out to.”

After a moment’s hesitation she said, “Tell him we’ll call it Sanctuary.”

Alex texted him back and she was rewarded with another text and an image. “Here’s your answer Cassandra. Mike Salas approved and signed the deal.” She held it out for Cassandra to read the check written by the UMASS development foundation.

“She can sign your consent or she can sign theirs. Frankly, I prefer she do both since this is ultimately for the kids who live on the plantation. If you’re smart you’ll do this as a joint effort with UMASS and you can share the publicity. They’ve ponied up fifteen grand,” Alex said looking around the table at each person and stopped at Alicia and Sister Juanita. “I don’t hear a number from you yet, so I’m thinking a bird in the hand is worth...”

“All right, dammit. Howard...” Cassandra slammed a hand on the table as she spoke to the hospital’s attorney, “Draft an agreement with Sister...”

“Juanita,” Alex supplied standing behind Sister Juanita’s chair.

“Yes, Sister Juanita,” Cassandra finished.

“Howard.” Alex leaned forward resting her hands on the back of Sister Juanita’s chair.

“There is no obligation for her to sign exclusively with Saint Xavier’s. There is no personal gain for her. This is a joint effort on the part of UMASS and our hospital to donate funds to benefit the workers and the families who live on the plantation.”

“Jesus Christ, Alex!” Cassandra launched out of her chair. “You have no authority to dictate to us.”

“I don’t, but David is free to do whatever he pleases. He’s known Sister Juanita for more than three years. You’re lucky he’s gracious enough to even suggest a joint effort and doesn’t just tell Saint Xavier’s to take a walk. The fact you were going to use a video to advance the hospital’s cause off of the backs of people who have no voice, no rights, and certainly no say in the hospital profiting from their suffering should give you pause to think for one second about your motivations. We’ll sign the consents when the check for fifteen thousand dollars is endorsed and deposited into a bank account we’ll open today. I think we’re done here. I have patients to check on.”

She waited for Sister Juanita and Alicia to stand and followed them out of the boardroom aware of the seething anger from Cassandra’s gaze on her. She didn’t care.

## Chapter Twenty-eight

DAVID LIVED OFF of North Lake Road two blocks from University of Massachusetts Medical Center in a brick faced Cape Cod style house. An overgrown host of variegated plants bordered the concrete walkway passing from the street to the front door. A giant Maple tree with its sprawling canopy of branches shaded part of the front lawn. A weathered wooden park bench sat in the grass to the right of the entryway and Alex watched Claire close a book she was reading and wave to her as she pulled the jeep into the driveway. One of the medical buildings was visible through the trees in the backyard, its glass windows glinting with the orange glow of afternoon sunlight.

Alicia bounded out of the jeep first and skipped across the grass to Claire.

"How was the ride?" Alex heard Claire ask.

"Too long," Alicia said.

"I have something for you." Claire reached down by her feet and handed Alicia a gray plastic bag.

The bag was ripped from the box containing a multi-colored soccer ball. "Thank you. Thank you." Alicia tore the packaging from the ball letting it drop to the ground by her feet. "Look what Claire got me," she said, holding the soccer ball for everyone to see.

The screen door squeaked as David pushed it open and stepped outside, dressed in green scrubs and gray tee shirt. He glanced at the torn packaging and said, "You held out all of thirty seconds before you gave it to her."

"Is that all you ever wear?" Alex teased as she closed her driver side door and stood close by while Sister Juanita climbed out of the jeep.

"It cuts down on the laundry," he said to Alex strolling past her and greeting Sister Juanita with a hug. "It's good to see you."

"Calling you aunts and uncle is apparently not working out too well," Sister Juanita said when he let go.

"We'll figure out what works," David said.

"Alicia, don't leave the trash on the ground," Sister Juanita said.

Claire held out her hand as Alicia gathered the trash and gave it to her.

"If anyone would have told me I would be standing in your front yard six months ago I would have told them they were crazy," Sister Juanita said.

David laughed. "I don't think we're crazy maybe we'll think so in six months but we'll see what happens."

"You still haven't told me how you managed to get both hospitals to donate the money they did," Sister Juanita said.

"It wasn't too hard to pull off. There's no love lost between our two Vice Presidents," David said.

"How do they know each other?" Sister Juanita asked.

"They met at medical school here at UMASS and married. They got divorced two years later," Alex said.

"When one of them learned what the other was doing they couldn't help themselves but try to outdo the other. We just added fuel to the fire playing them like we did," David said.

"I was hoping it was something far nobler," Sister Juanita said.

"It was for a noble cause," David said.

"I want to work on creating a safe drinking water supply in and around the school," Sister Juanita said and Alex could see by the look in her eyes she was back at the plantation in her mind.

“One of my friends is an engineer in critical infrastructure from MIT. I could talk to him about where a good starting point would be,” David added.

“Maybe he’d be willing to help with the planning,” Alex said.

“I’ll let you two strategize. Excuse me,” Sister Juanita said.

Alicia charged at David with the soccer ball, avoiding him with a spin move at the last second. “Hey, don’t I even get a hello?” he called after her.

She flashed a toothy grin back at him and took off running around the house dribbling the ball with her feet.

“I think you were just blown off,” Alex said aware of Claire moving to Regina and hugging her. She watched as the two of them sat on the bench and were joined by Sister Juanita.

“We’re going to have our hands full when she decides she’s more interested in boys than a soccer ball.”

“Oh, yes.”

“Hi, by the way.” David hugged Alex and she recognized the question in his eyes as he pulled away and looked at her. “Sorry to hear about Regina’s mom,”

“Thanks.”

“Do they know any more than when I talked to you last?”

“It’s stage three.”

“Shit.” David cast his eyes to where Regina is sitting. “And no symptoms. Christ.”

“She told Regina the first symptoms she had was the stomach pain last week.”

“Damn. How’s Regina doing?”

Alex shrugged. “She’s dealing with it as best she can. She’s worried about seeing her.”

“You’re still going to stay for awhile, right?”

“You did promise food and beer.”

Alicia came running from around the house and this time David caught her in his arms and scooped her across his shoulder while she screeched in delight. He spun her around and Claire watched from the bench with an amused expression, her left arm draped around Regina’s shoulder as they talked. She said something to Regina and they laughed amongst themselves.

David set Alicia down. Alex kicked the ball to David and a competitive game of keep away ensued.

“Hey, there’s no holding in soccer.” David protested as he untangled himself from Alicia’s strong arms, blocking her attempts to steal the soccer ball. He kicked it back to Alex.

Alex lifted the ball and held it high above her head in her palm, cocking an eyebrow at Alicia who was busy gauging how high she needed to jump. “You might be fast but you can’t jump that high.”

“Watch me.”

Alex waited until Alicia committed herself and tossed the ball to David bouncing it off his chest while Claire distracted him.

“Are we going to eat?” Alicia snatched her soccer ball tucking it beneath her arm but not tightly enough to prevent Alex from popping it loose as she strode past her. “Hey!”

“Alicia, that’s not polite,” Sister Juanita said.

“I’m hungry.”

“It’s okay. I’m hungry too,” David said.

Claire stood and said, “I’ll go light the grill. We have hamburgers and some salads David bought from the deli.”

“Do you need help?” Regina asked.



“No, there’s nothing to do. We’ll serve ourselves, buffet style.”

Alex sat down beside Regina.

“Sister where’s your luggage?” David asked.

“It’s in the back of the Jeep,” she said rising to her feet. “How long have you lived here,” she asked, her voice fading as she walked with him to the car.

Alex tilted her head and found herself caught in Regina’s quiet regard. “Thanks for suggesting to drive them.”

“It’s better this way. We get to spend time with them and…” Alex said, lacing her fingers in Regina’s. “You can visit with your mom.”

“I’m afraid.”

“Of what?”

“What she’s going to have to go through and that she won’t have time,” Regina said. “To see Jeff and talk with him. I hope he’ll come out. He’s still so angry at her.”

“There are still good, viable treatment options for her even at stage three.”

“I know. I’ve been reading the literature too.”

Alex was quiet as she watched Alicia bounce the soccer ball off her knees. She remembered time passing slowly when she was a child and with each successive year the seasons seemed to be more fleeting.

Everyone just went along living and doing until something happened that altered everything. “Let Jeff and your mother worry about their relationship. You have enough to deal with, without taking on their issues.”

“I’m going to miss Sister Juanita and Alicia.”

“I am, too.” Alex started a gentle massage of the sub-occipital muscles at the base of Regina’s skull. “It’ll be good for Alicia to get settled into a school and Sister Juanita can figure out what she wants to do.”

“They could have stayed at my place longer.”

“I know. I think Sister Juanita felt obligated to come because of how much David has done for her.”

“I don’t want this to be the end.”

“It doesn’t have to be. We’ll have to make the time to be involved.”

“I’d like that.” A low, guttural sound escaped Regina’s lips as Alex kept kneading the muscles. “If you keep this up you’re going to make me forget we’re sitting in David’s front yard in full view of Sister Juanita.”

“Careful, we might scandalize the neighbors.”

“I heard what you said Alex,” David chided her as he ambled towards the bench. “They’ll be no scandalizing anyone this afternoon.” He wagged a finger at Alex and their eyes met, a flicker of a smile tensed his features as he stopped in front of Regina. “Hey, I haven’t given you a hug yet.”

Regina stood and allowed herself to be gathered into his arms. “Sorry about your mom. Let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

“Thanks, David,” Regina said and stepped back.

Claire stepped out of the front door carrying a six-pack of Peroni Nastro Azzuro, an Italian pale lager, and a bottle of Coke. “You guys need to tell me how you want your burgers cooked.” She popped the caps off and handed the drinks around saving the Coke for Alicia.

“What is this?” Alicia asked.

“Soda. I thought we’d drink a toast and remember what we’ve been through and who we are because of it,” Claire said, holding her bottle.

Alex stood, joining the circle, and felt Regina thread an arm around her waist.

“Sister?” David lifted his bottle to hers.

“To my new friends for reminding me of all the good there is in this life.”

“To friends,” they all said amidst the clinking of glass bottles.

In this infinitesimal span of time there was peace around each of them and Alex remembered standing in awe of the sunset on the plantation thinking about all the experiences that created the tapestry of this fragile life. There would be time enough to give sorrow and grief there due. This time—right now—was one of those ephemeral joyous moments and she intended to hold it close to her heart.

## About the Author

Lynne Norris is the author of *Second Chances* and *One Promise*. She has worked in health care for over twenty-five years. Lynne lives in New Jersey with her partner of twenty-four years, Catherine, and their son. They share their home with a spirited Golden Retriever, an attitudinal cat, a frog and six chickens.

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