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Sisters Before the Fall

Heather LaNae Captain

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SISTERS BEFORE THE FALL

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Heather LaNae Captain

December 2015

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SISTERS BEFORE THE FALL

English

Missouri State University, December 2015

Master of Arts

Heather LaNae Captain

ABSTRACT

This thesis comprises the first fourteen chapters of a fiction entitled *Sisters Before the Fall*, which brings to the forefront extreme, yet, real abuses faced by women in the Middle East and the northeastern countries of Africa. Those abuses are the result of social, political, and cultural influences, and include general repression of women and girls, female genital mutilation, marriage of prepubescent girls, and the slave trade. A female American volunteer and a female Hispanic doctor meet these women in a humanitarian compound in western Sudan. As they work together to overcome challenges brought on by war, they realize they are sisters, regardless of their backgrounds, experiences, and previous prejudices. Many female writers have written nonfiction and fictional works regarding these abuses, but no one has placed these abuses together in one narrative and included the elements of an American and Hispanic persons' perspectives.

KEYWORDS: sisterhood, repression of women and girls, female genital mutilation, marriage of prepubescent girls, slave trade, effects of war on women and children, overcoming prejudice

This abstract is approved as to form and content

Dr. W. D. Blackmon
Chairperson, Advisory Committee
Missouri State University

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I dedicate this thesis to my daughter, Raven-Arden Ruth Captain. She has been my inspiration throughout our life together.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

I suppose any budding author might sit back and wonder, “How did I get here? How did I get to this story?” As with most journeys and spiritual quests, the path was not linear, and I did not know I was on it until I came to where I am now. And, like most stories, it began long ago, but this particular story began with a girl desperately seeking positive role models in any form, even if she didn’t know that was what she was looking for exactly. Being a girl of few means and living in a place of limited opportunities, she turned to books. They started as her escape and solace and ended up as her teachers and mentors. She didn’t realize that the books she preferred had strong female characters who challenged the traditional definition of hero and were heroes nonetheless. Of course, she was too young to truly understand what influence they had on her. She wouldn’t understand until much later.

The girl’s love of books grew, and she rarely read books based on their targeted age level. The books ranged from *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, by Scott O’Dell, to *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë, to the *Queen’s Arrows* series, by Mercedes Lackey, to *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*, by Clarissa Pinkola Estés. Her tastes then changed to stories of the downtrodden, Holocaust victims, Asian women. She read about how women were treated historically and slowly began to learn about how women were treated today. Stories of foot binding and geishas turned to stories of female genital mutilation and child brides. She learned of the general repression of the female sex. In each story she read, she found something she did not originally expect, women who were strong despite what happened to them: the story of the

indomitable spirit of women. Along the way, her religious and formal education helped add layers to the molding the books had started.

I am a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. I'm used to people making disparaging remarks about the female members in my church, such as they have no say in their religion, they can't be members of the priesthood, and they only do what their husbands tell them to. This frustrates me, because what is said is not what I see. I see women cherished by their husbands. I see and hear church leaders encouraging the women to share their points-of-view and be active participants in their religion. I have felt bolstering strength from both the male and females members of my church when I am discouraged by life's circumstances. I have been taught that Mother Eve was the culmination of all of God's creations, and, as such, women are very special to our Heavenly Father. They are His daughters, and He will hold accountable those who mistreat them. This is what I have been taught and what I believe, but I know others don't share these beliefs, and a lot of suffering has been the result.

My undergraduate studies consisted of course work in Earth environmental science and public relations. I first learned of female genital mutilation in a sociology class at that time. I was shocked that such things were being done in the 21st century. My environmental studies helped me begin to look far beyond the borders of my own experience and see in greater detail the complex connectedness of life. My worldview broadened.

In my graduate studies, I learned about life in Mexico and other Hispanic countries and the women in them. I learned about the sacrifices early female writers made to send their words out into the world, while trying to support their families. My

knowledge and view expanded even further studying for the story contained within this thesis. I hold a debt of gratitude to the following works which helped inform this work: *The Good Lie* movie, directed by Philippe Falardeau; *A Long Walk to Water*, by Linda Sue Park; *The Hidden Face of Eve*, by Nawal El Saadawi; *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, by Alice Walker; *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out*, written by multiple U.S. Muslim women and edited by Fawzia Afzal-khan; and *I am Malala*, by Malala Yousafi (with Christian Lamb). I set out to be educated about the experiences of others and was fundamentally changed.

This story, *Sisters Before the Fall*, is the culmination of what I have learned, felt and thought about the treatment of women up to this point in my life. Its intent is to help remind women of their inherent value, regardless of how others treat them. Hopefully, it will provide strength and inspiration to those who read it, like so many books have done for me. I did not always feel I had the strength to act, but I knew that if others could overcome, so could I. People might ask how characters (fictional and nonfictional) could affect me so profoundly, and I think the answer lies in the universal message they share: women are strong. No matter how many times they get beaten down, some woman stands back up and then goes and helps another, and the chain of sisterhood grows from them. It is true that people have been trying to keep women down for millennia and have never completely succeeded. I think everyday life tends to make us forget such basic inequalities. We're distracted by rushing here and there, generally for things that don't matter.

Sisters Before the Fall takes a diverse group of women with disparate backgrounds and sloughs off all the fluff. Their primary purpose is to survive, and, along

the way, they see what they have in common. They see that they are sisters. They see that their sisterhood existed long before countries were divided by borders and religions were divided by dogma.

Given that sisterhood is a primary theme in *Sisters Before the Fall*, it behooves me to see what scholars have said regarding sisterhood. Interestingly enough, sisterhood does not come up as a primary topic for many of the works of fiction I've considered. Actually, this is one of the principal motivating factors for my writing *Sisters Before the Fall*. The problems women have faced are always front and center in such works, but solutions tend to be in short supply, except in terms of mutual support in times of hardship. A cursory search for scholarship focusing on *The Secret Life of Bees*, by Sue Monk Kidd; *The Help*, by Kathryn Stockett; *The Color Purple*, by Alice Walker; and *Paradise*, by Toni Morrison, leads to discussions of relationships between men and women, blacks and whites, and homoerotic relationships between women. These relationships are frequently discussed for their metaphorical meanings in politics and economics. Sisterhood is not considered a major theme for most of these works, except in a sense in *The Color Purple*. In *The Color Purple*, Celie and her sister Nettie live on two different continents and have very different life experiences. Adam Gussow, in his written review of *The Color Purple*, shows that Celie's relationships with other women and those women's relationships with each other are often discussed as "about the myriad unsung ways in which beaten women bear up each other's life" (125). Here I turn to the online version of the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*:

Sisterhood: the close relationship among women (also the solidarity of women) based on shared (conditions), experiences, concerns, etc. A community or society of sisters; especially; a society of women in a religious order.

Sister: a girl or woman who has one or both of the same parents as you; a woman of a religious community of women.

The online *Oxford Dictionary* indicates that a sister can also be “a close friend or associate, especially a female fellow member of a labor union or other organization.” The *Oxford Dictionary* defines sisterhood as “the feeling of kinship with and closeness to a group of women or all women.”

In my research, I’ve found two primary areas that frequently focus on sisterhood in art and in life: discussions of works in the Victorian Era and discussions of feminism. One outlier is a discussion of epistolary novels set around the American Revolution. Interestingly, the later time periods find roots in preceding time periods; however, the explicit discussions of sisterhood tend to taper off to nonexistence outside of these topics. I will review my findings in a chronological order beginning with views of sisterhood during the American Revolution and in the Victorian Era (combined for thematic reasons), moving to views of sisterhood among various feminists, and finally looking at how these findings can apply to sisterhood in *Sisters Before the Fall*.

Even though the American Revolution predates the Victorian Era by over fifty years, conditions calling for sisterhood were similar in both time periods. In each, women felt disconnected from each other by both social structures and physical realities. Women in America were often separated from family by political ideals and the physical

boundary of the Atlantic Ocean. As settlers spread across the continent, families became even more divided from each other. Women during both eras were often regulated to the domestic sphere and given little opportunity to socialize because of familial responsibilities. Letter writing became a way of staying connected with friends and family. Claire C. Pettengill, in her article “Sisterhood in a Separate Sphere: Female Friendship in Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette* and the *Boarding School*,” indicates the ties created a tightly knit circle of women who could support, encourage, protect, provide for, and admonish each other (186). Pettengill shows that women could “turn to their sisters for a ‘sense of shared values, for understanding of their particular experience, for clarification of expectations about the future, and for recognition and support in attaining their goals’” (187). At times, sisterhood could be a transitional state between girlhood and womanhood, between more carefree days to lives of responsibility (Pettengill 188). Pettengill notes that social and domestic rituals could be the glue that held the female circle together (187 and 190). These rituals allowed the women to be open with each other, even to the point of providing constructive criticism of a person’s behavior. Other rituals would include getting together to paint, read books, or to sew. The rituals provided women space to come together and solidify the bonds of interdependence (social, emotional, and psychological) that would be otherwise be stretched by distance and absence. In these settings, the women could also exercise self-discipline and tenderness toward themselves and each other even when speaking in the modest conventions of the day (Pettengill 190-91 and 193). We will see that as sisterhood is discussed through time, of necessity, its portrayal and definition becomes more complicated.

During the Victorian Era, sisterhood was explored through the portrayal of differences or similarities among women. A spectrum of sisterly relations was presented. This spectrum began with depictions of blood sisters often being seen as each other's opposites. It ended with utopian-like societies of women who lived equitably without men. As is typical of spectrums, the middle regions consisted of various combinations of women (blood related or not) working toward a form of utopia, either exclusively with other women or together with men. Often women came together to take on causes such as women's rights, educational reform, and charitable work. Janet Galligani Casey, in her article "The Potential of Sisterhood: Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market,'" states that Victorian women found models in the sisterhoods of nuns, nurses and teachers of their day (65 and 71-2). Alexandra Wettlaufer reiterates these same models of sisterhoods in her "The Politics and Poetics of Sisterhood: Anna Mary Howitt's 'The Sisters in Art'" (129-30). Wettlaufer indicates that parallel models were found in guilds and brotherhoods held by men (130).

The benefits of sisterhood are often seen as profound, as is illustrated in the following quote from Dinah Craik (who was quoted in Wettlaufer 129), "Sisterhood ... would have saved many a woman from a lunatic asylum." Sisterhood symbolized independence and industrial productivity for women when they banded together to support each other or for the sake of a good cause (Casey 63). Wettlaufer writes that the strength of sisterhood, or women's collective endeavor, is found through mutual education, empathy, and shared labor (139). One cause included fighting the stereotypical mentality that women were either pure or fallen, light or dark, that they weren't just "angels of the house" (Casey 63-4). Helena Michie, in her book *Sororophobia*, indicates

that the differences between sisters (and other women) could also include the dichotomies of healthy versus sick women and blind versus seeing women (17). Casey and Michie both explore the dichotomies between the pure virginal sister and the fallen sexual sister. Both scholars conclude that sisterhood can be created by accepting that neither version of a woman is superior to the other (Casey 68; Michie 21). In fact, Casey claims that “true ‘sisterhood’” can only be attained in “realizing that strength is derived from the interaction, rather than isolation, of opposite states” (69). Michie states that accepting differences adds a “dimension of dignity and choice to friendships between and among women” (21). Rather than be superior, sisters become protective and develop interdependence (a sense that the strong and weak are equally necessary) and equity (Casey 70). Sisterhood becomes a group of women with their “own aims, talents, and capacities” who redemptively elevate each other to achieve a new dignity (Casey 72 and 75).

It should be noted that just as women’s differences were exploited for the didacticism of the fictional works of the various time periods, women’s similarities were also utilized the same way. Those perceived similarities included familial ties, societal class, education, and virtues of nurturing and charity. Michie points out that female characters, like their realistic counterparts, could and would also switch roles: the “dark” sister became the virtuous one, the “light” sister became fallen one who later redeemed the “dark” sister, for example (29). We have seen that as the world of women expanded over time, so, too, did the boundaries of sisterhood. Those boundaries extended even further in the late 1900s during the rise of feminism. It is interesting to note, however, that some themes did not change.

In much feminist rhetoric, sisterhood is synonymous with solidarity. In “Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women,” Bell Hooks defines solidarity as being women coming together to advance feminist social and/or political change (125). Please know that it is not the purpose of this paper to define feminism or to review its many variations. Feminism herein is utilized in the broadest sense as a movement to effect positive change for women across the world. It is also in feminist rhetoric that we find frank commentary on the animosity between women (Hooks 125; Michie 4). Hooks states that women are divided by prejudices of victimization, sexism, racism, language differences, cultural codes, and class divisions. These prejudices keep women from seeing sisterhood “as a revolutionary accomplishment [to] work and struggle to obtain” (Hooks 127). Women see other women as “the other” (Michie 3 and 198). “Sustained woman bonding” will only be accomplished when these prejudices are removed (Hooks 127). Essentially, women must lead by example and show society that the only way we can achieve positive change is to overcome our differences and work together. One kink in the process is that women have been known to “exploit and oppress other women,” including mothers acting against their own daughters (Hooks 128). In Maxine Sample’s commentary on Alice Walker’s *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Sample indicates that at times “women act in complicity with the status quo” to oppress other women and that they deny the pain “passed from generation to generation” (169 and 171).

For women who are regularly abused, victimization can be utilized as a reason to band together. However, for other women, it can segregate women who do not see themselves as victims. Hooks claims that the “suspicious, defensive, competitive behavior” women exhibit toward each other is derived from the sexism of “male

supremacist values” that pit women against each other for economic and relationship resources (129). Cliques develop in response to women’s treatment of each other and further help to segregate women. These conflicts are expanded when women consider themselves vastly different from each other and when racism is exhibited. These conflicts are combined when social class is combined with race, for example, when a woman of color works for a white woman. Women don’t typically take the time to learn about the cultures of other women and take the time to work to find common ground. One example is learning another’s “cultural code” (Hooks 134). Hooks lists several examples: in a group setting, an Asian woman desired time to contemplate what was being discussed and to respond but was not given time by the others in the discussion. Some white participants felt the black participants were aggressive because of their loud and direct ways of communicating. Once these cultural differences were discussed, the group worked together to shape their communication with each other. Hooks reminds us “that by learning one another’s cultural codes and respecting our differences, we [feel] a sense of community, of Sisterhood. Respecting diversity does not mean uniformity or sameness” (135). To become sisters, women must accept that prejudices can stand in the way of forming such a bond and that differences are not necessarily negative. Women must look at other women with new eyes, find their commonalities (shared goals, beliefs, and/or interests), and make them the bedrock for continued solidarity.

Clearly, forming sisterhoods between women who share no blood ties requires clearing many hurdles. That has to be considered in developing sisterhood in *Sisters Before the Fall*. The circumstances that bring the female characters together are unique. Most of the women come to the compound as victims of slave traders. Some were victims

of abuse before the slave traders captured them. Bitá has scars on her face from acid burning. Lily was a child bride. Zuwená was genitally mutilated when she was a girl and had an abusive relationship with her mother. We have yet to see what the past held for the other women. Anna and Erica are workers at the compound when the other women are brought in. Anna is plagued with self-doubt, and her interactions with the other women remind Anna of her younger self: a self Anna prefers to forget. The reasons aren't explained in detail yet, but they are hinted at by the occasional voice of Anna's mother inside her head. This voice is not a disconnected schizophrenic voice--although that might make things easier--no, it is the mother's voice that most people have in their heads. Only this voice is heavily tinted by past reality, and it is stuck like a broken record in Anna's sense of self. Erica is perhaps the most well-rounded of the women. She was raised in rural Mexico, but was able to obtain an exceptional education in medicine in the United States. Erica uses her knowledge to help others in less-developed countries. Each woman could potentially consider herself a victim; however, the women do not. They rise above their circumstances and focus on finding safety. This provides them with a common goal, but even that is not enough. Each woman brings with her a different background. Most of them are from the Middle East and Muslim. Chava is a Jewish woman. Zuwená, Erica, and Anna are Christians. Most of the females are adults; Lily is approximately ten years old.

Their personalities will of necessity conflict as they spend more time together and as their best laid plans go wrong. Anna is a bullish leader who is sometimes more focused on their survival than building friendships. When things go wrong, she has to slow down and re-evaluate their circumstances. This helps her see the women as more than a task to

take care of. Erica, who has worked with Anna before and is her long-time friend, helps soften Anna's more abrasive behavior. Anna makes a concerted effort to keep track of Lily, and this, too, helps soften Anna. Three of the women, Akilah, Ara, and Baysan, will chose to separate from the group, and that will help the others truly decide if they will stick together for the long haul. The challenge for this story will be painting each woman as three dimensional and showing that after a point survival fades into the background and the women bond to create meaning in their lives. The challenge is to show that they are sisters at the deepest level despite all of the divisions the world has tried to set between them. The women will need to work through and past their prejudices when things go wrong and they must work together for solutions. The dialogue will have to show disagreements and resolutions. Additional hurdles to overcome will be education and language barriers. Half of the women can speak English, and the other half cannot. One woman, Hayat, a Palestinian woman, translates English into Arabic for those who don't speak English. Educational levels among the women vary based on their backgrounds. Erica is the most educated, but her education is highly specialized. Anna's education is not discussed, but we know she is American with an agricultural science background. Chava and Hayat are multi-lingual and become substitute teachers at the compound's school. Zuvena was educated first by listening to others and then by missionaries. Bitu apprentices herself to Erica. Lily is the youngest, and so her education is not complete. Akilah, Ara, and Baysan were provided educations in Saudi Arabia, but this is not demonstrated since they prefer to isolate themselves in a group within the group.

There is plenty of material to show that these women can be sisters. It may even become more apparent toward the end of the story, when we are able to see how they have overcome their victimization and the threats they face fleeing for their lives when the compound is closed and see where they stand afterwards. We will see how they helped each other face the emotional baggage they individually carry. This thesis is only the beginning of *Sisters Before the Fall*, and it will take many permutations before the novel is complete. I hope that regardless of how it matures, the message will remain the same and be clear: Women are too strong to be kept down for long, especially when they work together as sisters.

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CHAPTER 1

Anna Allen pressed the back of her hand to the airplane window. *Yep, it's definitely getting hotter.* The plane was descending to land at the new Sabera Geneina Airport in Al Junaynah, Sudan, the West Darfur Region. *At least this time landing will be smoother... Ah, this cool air.* Previous flights into the older Al Junaynah Airport were made in hot cargo planes. That airport was basically an area of flat soil with marked-off runways and warehouses. The government built it for military purposes and piggybacked humanitarian supply deliveries onto it. They built the newer airport for passenger planes and larger cargo planes that needed asphalt runways. This time around, her flight was in relative comfort. *I need to soak in as much of this lovely air as possible.* She loved working for Healing Hands Philanthropies (HHP) in the summer as one of their agricultural specialists, but had to acclimate to the lack of air conditioning. She found pleasure in coaxing food out of the southwestern Sudanese soil and experimenting with gardening and watering techniques. This would be her third summer in Sudan. When she wasn't spending her summers in one HHP compound or another, she was a rancher in the west-central portion of Missouri. She enjoyed wide expanses of land, animals, and, in general, just helping out. The captain's voice came on overhead and told everyone they would be landing soon.

Anna began gathering her things. She made sure to mark her place in her book, *40 Chances: Finding Hope in a Hungry World*, and put everything in her bag. She pulled out the scarf. The light brown fabric was dotted with purple flowers. She had been told two summers ago to have something to cover her head with for traveling to and from the

compound. It was best for a woman to be covered and not travel alone. The Sudanese government was at war with its own people, wanting to displace its Sub-Saharan African citizens with those of Arab descent. Extremism had ushered in these changes. The country was war-torn, and the southern portion of the country had already seceded. The western portion of the country, West Darfur, was the most dangerous region of Sudan. Anna heard that the government and other factions attacked whole villages; soldiers often used rape as a weapon. The airplane's contact with asphalt jostled Anna as she looked at the scarf in her hands. She rubbed her hand over the soft fabric. It was not ostentatious, and she liked the purple, but, overall, she didn't like having to cover her head. She liked feeling the wind in her hair. She liked how the natural red highlights of her brown hair shined in the sunlight. Those highlights warned every one of her temper and mischievous side. More importantly, Anna did not like feeling that she had to hide herself.

As soon as the plane came to a stop, she started gathering her hair into a clip to help contain it. She brushed crumbs from her long linen tunic and pants. She looked down at her characteristic cowgirl boots and smiled; they barely peeked out from the hem of her pants. *I still have to be me.* Jonathan liked to kid her that the only heels she wore were on boots. Jonathan was her boyfriend, not that she referred to him as such. He was simply Jonathan, but if anyone listened to how she said his name, they would know all they needed to know. She often said it in a whispered sigh, content and amazed that he was even a part of her life. She'd told him that she'd sacrificed time and pain to break her boots in and she would wear them wherever she wanted. They matched her "I'm here to work" mentality. It didn't matter where she was, she would find a way to be helpful. *You're my little workhorse, Anna.* The thought was so fast, Anna almost did not

recognize her mother's voice in her head. Sighing, she exhaled to clear her mind. Anna waited until most of the other passengers left the plane and went into the airplane's restroom. She smoothed her hair and looked at her face. *You have no natural beauty, Anna...* Her mother's voice again! Shaking her head to rattle the thought loose, she then wrapped the scarf around her head, hair, and neck. She secured all of it with a hijab pin. Anna stretched and walked back to her seat.

Properly covered, she grabbed her tote from her seat and descended from the airplane onto the asphalt tarmac. A blast of gritty, hot Sudanese wind sucked the air out of Anna's lungs. Sand dusted the tarmac. Puffs of dust rose from each of her footsteps. The terminal consisted of two detached, single-story buildings, glorified warehouses, really. The larger building served general passengers, the smaller SHLP passengers. The United Nations–African Union Mission in Darfur, or SHLP, was established to protect the people and facilitate humanitarian and positive political efforts in Sudan and other parts of Africa. Few people occupied the smaller terminal when Anna walked in. She checked in with Abdul and allowed him to verify her paperwork. He looked at her and smiled. "Welcome back, Anna. Back for another round of Sudanese fun?"

"You know me, Abdul. I take a licking and keep on ticking," Anna confidently responded.

"That you do." Abdul sifted through her papers and looked up with a mischievous grin. "Please remind Dr. Sanchez that I look forward to seeing her when her shift at the compound ends."

"I don't know if there is much hope for you there, Abdul," Anna said and grinned. Anna knew Abdul had a crush on Erica and mentally shook her head in sympathy for the

guy. Erica, also known as Dr. Sanchez, was just a hard one to pin down. In all the years Anna had known her, Erica only had a handful of boyfriends. She seemed too busy. Erica was the cousin of Anna's foreman, Max, and the two of them helped Anna get involved with HHP.

"One can always hope," Abdul commented as he handed Anna her papers.

"Very true. Thank you, Abdul. Take care of yourself." Anna filed the papers in her bag and walked to retrieve her luggage. On her way out, she bumped into a dark-skinned woman wrapped from head to toe in yellow fabric. Anna apologized in very broken Sudanese "*Abdi ... nyungkeun ... hapunten.*" The startled woman looked at Anna doubtfully; Anna touched the woman's shoulder to reassure her and wished her a good day, "*Wilujeng Angkat.*" The passengers' luggage was lined up in a row along the edge of the asphalt. She felt relief when she saw her green-striped duffel bag toward the end of the line. She could hear the crinkle of the butterscotch candies in the bottom of the bag as she lifted it up. Anna smiled and looked forward to Faraji's face at the compound. Faraji was the compound's director, and he liked to hand out candy to the children there. Anna was one of his sources. Anna walked through the terminal with her duffel bag slung on her shoulder, her boots kicking up little clouds of dirt as she walked to a SHLP Jeep parked at the curb, waiting to help volunteers get to their destinations. The usual driver, Benbi, wasn't sitting behind the wheel.

"*Bisa... ngajalankeun... kuring ka HHP?*" Anna hoped the driver understood her request for a ride. This HHP compound did not have a name, and it was located in an out-of-the-way place, for safety reasons. Word of mouth and Faraji's reputation had helped spread the knowledge of the compound's location to those who needed to know it.

Fortunately, it had been spared from the military attacks in the area, at least for now. The driver looked her over, and she began to question getting into the vehicle with him. However, the compound was over 200 miles south-southeast of Al Junaynah, and she couldn't walk. It would take hours just to walk into the city proper from the airport. He nodded his head and put her duffel bag in the back seat as she climbed in. Anna sent a mental prayer heavenward for protection.

The jeep sped through the sandy and debris-filled streets of the city. To Anna, it always had the look of a ghost town, which people just visited on tours and then left again. The speed of the vehicle helped throw the sandy air in her face, and it began to sting. She gripped the doorframe tighter. *At least I'll get there sooner at this rate.* The jeep curved along the highway, over plateaus and through ravines for almost two and half hours, when they both saw a line of vehicles stopped in the middle of the road ahead. Anna groaned, and the driver slowed the jeep to a stop miles away. They both looked at each other, wondering what the other would do. The driver turned toward her and pointed past her. "HHP," he said. Anna nodded her head. The driver turned back and pointed at the vehicles in front of them. "*Mariksa.*" Check, as in checkpoint. Anna nodded her head again. She was beginning to think of a plan when the man shoved her out of the jeep. "*Lalumpatan!*" Run! Anna stood in shock and briefly stared at the man. He threw her duffel bag at her and threw something else behind her. "*Lalumpatan!*" he said, waving his hands as if to push her away, as he shifted the jeep into drive and began turning the vehicle around.

"Wait...! You can't leave me here!" Anna tried to scream, but her throat was too dry from her windy, sandy drive. She looked toward the checkpoint and then again at the

receding back of the jeep. She knew better than to try and catch anyone's attention. She prayed again and slung her duffel bag over her shoulder. She also prayed in gratitude that they had stopped near the trail that led to the compound. In a vehicle this trail was barely visible and was approximately thirty miles in length. Anna shook her head and looked in both directions of the road. *I'm too far from Al Junaynah. If the wrong people are conducting the checkpoint, I might not survive the encounter-- or wish I hadn't. I'd rather take my chances heading toward camp.* Anna looked to find whatever the driver had thrown behind her. She found a full canteen under a clump of brush. At least death will come slower now, Anna thought sarcastically. Shaking her head at her situation, she started walking. She walked for a long time before she stopped for a rest. She found a large rock and carefully walked around it, making sure no snakes were curled up nearby. Safety assured, she lowered herself onto the rock, bemoaning her aching back. She wasn't in her twenties anymore, and even though she was a healthy thirty-something, some things still pinched. She rifled to the bottom of her duffel bag, grabbed bug repellent, and opened Faraji's butterscotches. The sugar would help, and she didn't have enough snacks left over from her flight to last her long. She allowed herself a good drink from the canteen and refreshed her layer of repellent before putting everything away. *How am I going to do this?* She was traveling in the dead heat of the afternoon and had no way to light her way at night. She wasn't even sure what stage the moon was in right now to hope for it to light her way. Not sure of any other option, she did what she knew to do. After a few minutes more of rest, she picked up her bag and the canteen and kept walking toward the compound, praying the whole way.

Anna walked until the sun went down. By then, she was dragging her feet and stumbling on the brush and rocks. She looked for another large rock to perch on for the night and tried not to think of what was out there with her. She did remember to be grateful that lions didn't travel that far north. The rock was uneven, but broad, and flat enough for her to lie down, curled up. She sprayed herself with more bug repellent and tucked her duffel bag under her head and held the canteen across her chest. The night sky was a rare, cloudy, blank slate, no moon, no stars. It matched the numbness she felt. *I hope it doesn't rain.* Her working for HHP had taken her to some pretty rough places in Mexico, Guatemala, and Colombia, but this night topped them all. She'd never been abandoned in the desert, hoping the light color of her tunic would not give her away in the dark night. For once, she was grateful she wore the scarf. It protected her head from bugs and kept her ears warm. She curled herself up tighter to ward off the night chill. The clatter of night sounds roughly lulled Anna to sleep. Every now and then, she would get the heebie-jeebies and sit up in the night, hoping and praying nothing was crawling on her. Hoping that snapped branch or rustled brush wasn't a large predator, or, worse, an unfriendly human. Finally, she rolled on her back, bent her knees, and looked at the blackness above. This place was nothing like Missouri. Well, the blackness kind of was. Clouds often blocked out the stars even over the big expanse of her land, back home. She admitted she would still be worried about ticks, chiggers, snakes, and spiders if she were lying in a field back home. She never could get over her distaste for them. But, here in Sudan, was the added worry of not knowing what else or who else was out there. Her eyes grew heavy, and, eventually, she fell into a deep enough sleep to stop shivering. Her hips relaxed enough to let her knees fall to the side.

Anna did not realize she had slept so deeply and was awoken by a loud and piercing birdcall nearby. Her eyes flew open, and she saw the bird circle overhead. I hope that isn't a vulture of some sort. Anna felt a tickle on her chest and looked down into the slanted eyes of a lizard. She gasped and sat up. The startled lizard tried to move north on her body, but she flung it off before it reached her face. She was afraid to look at the rest of her and jumped up and did a dance, hoping to dislodge any other hitchhikers. *Ugh, I don't think my back will ever stop crawling.* After breakfast of a granola bar and water, she started walking toward the compound. Everywhere she looked the land was orange-brown, dotted with clumps of vegetation, and rolling to the horizon. The constant and extreme heat cast a wavy sheen over everything in the distance. She might as well have been on Mars. Her hands were a little swollen, and her tongue felt thick. She rinsed her dry throat with a sip of water. She looked at her hands again, at the calluses on the top of her palms. She never learned to like the feel of gloves, and, more often than not, forgot to use them. She liked being in touch with what she was working on, and often the leather muddled her senses. Years of working with animals, leather, metal, and vegetation had left their mark. She continued to walk, wishing she had a horse right now. Anna thought back to the first day she saw her horse Zydeco.

She was invited to a friend's estate and was being given the grand tour. When they got to the paddock of the yearlings, they stopped to watch the antics of the young horses. Two colts continued to rear up and wag their forelegs at each other. The others just seemed to stand nearby and watch. One colt in particular, caught Anna's eye. He stood a little apart from the rest, and the sun shone off his black mane and reddish-brown body. He would be a magnificent bay when he was fully grown. The other colts decided

to join in the sparring practice, and one got too close to the bay. He was a hand or two taller than the other colts. He reared up and clomped the miscreant on the head. He lowered his ears and gave the whole bunch a look. Tails flew up, and the mass ran for the other side of the paddock. Anna laughed. She liked that one's spirit. Having more room for himself now, the colt raised his own tail and glided over the grass. Anna had never seen such fluid movements, like music from a stringed instrument. "Well, Frank, I didn't come to buy a horse, but I'm not leaving without him."

"Ahh, Anna, you wound me. That's my best yearling." Frank said in mock injury. He knew what that gleam in Anna's eye meant.

"Frank, don't toy with me. Will you sell him to me? I can't let someone else get him."

"Don't you think he's too pretty to be a ranch horse, Anna? What would a fancy Andalusian like him do in the middle of Missouri?"

"He'll do what any horse does in Missouri: eat, run, and poop, among other things! And you know as well as I, that Andalusians aren't just for looks."

"I don't know, maybe he's too much horse for you."

Anna's mouth dropped. She was used to Frank giving her a hard time, but he had gone too far, and, by the worried look in his eye, he knew it. She counted to ten to help her temper simmer down. "If I remember correctly, Frank Dawson, I beat your butt in a race last summer with me riding that colt's sire. If I can handle the dad, I can handle the son." She practically spat the last word at him.

Frank raised his hands up in surrender and said, "Of course, you can have him, Anna. I think you're made for each other."

“Just remember to give me the family and friends discount,” Anna said and grinned. She kicked Frank in the behind as they walked to his house for lunch.

Anna named the colt Zydeco for his spunk and musical motion. She gentled him herself, and he acted as if she was his world. If she was with him and others got too close to her, he would lower his ears and walk between the person and her. He grew into the magnificent buckskin she knew he would. His wavy black mane and tail flew long out behind him as he glided over the pastures. He was a little spoiled. Anna never expected him to do ranch work. She thought it was beneath him, and he agreed. She sure could use his company now, not that she’d want him in any danger. A horse like him would be hard to ignore in Sudan. Anna tripped over a rock, and she stumbled to regain her balance.

Anna didn’t know how long she had been walking, but her stomach told her it was time to eat. Her heat-waved surroundings gave her no indication of how far she had gone or how far she had left to go. Her clothes started sticking to her sweat hours ago. She stumbled to another place to sit, almost forgetting to check around her before plopping down. She granted herself another granola bar, but a smaller swig of water. *Please, Father, help me survive this.* At least she was still sweating. She knew that if she stopped she would either be dehydrated or suffering from heat exhaustion-- neither option was good. Anna rested longer this time. Her back kept tightening up, and she couldn’t stretch far enough to unknot it. Eventually, she got up to keep going. She plodded on and found herself finding another place to sleep at night. This time fatigue checked all of the worries she had the previous night. Her body barely gave her time to curl up before she was fast asleep.

She awoke the next morning having her headscarf tugged. She looked up into the large round nostrils of a donkey. Its velvet lips had found their way to her face and tickled her. She sat up and looked the animal over. He was too emaciated to carry her, but he would be company for her walk. She had done the math and figured it would take about two days to reach the compound. *Today, I'll get to the compound.* She shared half of her last granola bar with him and didn't delay her march toward the compound. Together they trudged on. Every now and then, she would tell him a story, but usually she was quiet. She found talking dried her mouth out more, and she wanted to conserve her water. They traveled for hours, taking turns leaning on each other. This time Anna didn't stop to rest. She was ready to be at her destination. A few more hours passed, before the orange-brown landscape appeared to go vertically into the sky. From a distance, the walls of the compound looked like an extension of the ground around it. The heat waves made the walls look like they were dancing and wiggling in excitement that Anna had finally made it. Anna was too tired to shout for joy and used her last reserve of energy to push on.

She felt like a marathon winner as she walked through the compound gates. The children had alerted the adults to the coming of a person and a donkey. Anna kind of half stood in the middle of the crowd that had gathered. The donkey leaned against her. The look of surprise on Erica's face would have been priceless, if Anna was in the mood to care. Two workers came forward and stood on both sides of her; they half carried her to the compound's hospital and sat her in an empty bed. Erica was shooing away those who had followed the trio in and began instructing one of her workers on what to bring. Anna first noticed a cold compress on her forehead, and it revived her enough to sit up. She

pulled her scarf off her head and looked at Erica. “Abdul says hi!” she half-laughed and fell back on the bed.

“Ha Ha, Anna! What on earth happened to you?” Erica began to poke and prod Anna and attempted to lift Anna’s shirt up to examine her further.

Anna shoved her hands away. “I’m fine. I was just on a walk-about down under.”

“Really?” Erica wasn’t sure if Anna was lucid or not.

“I’ll tell you later, Mom.” Anna fell asleep, and Erica used that chance to check her over and make sure she was fine. She was respectful of Anna’s privacy and waited for Anna to be more alert before conducting any invasive evaluations.

Anna slept for several more hours and woke up alert and ready to move on with her life. Erica advised her against long hours in the sun, gave her several pills to take, and disconnected the IV that had been rehydrating her friend. “Faraji wants us to meet him in his office after you eat breakfast.”

“Okay...Where’s my donkey?”

“With the other animals, eating all their food.” Erica rolled her eyes; she had her fill of donkeys and goats growing up in rural Mexico. She had no need for animals in her life now.

Anna decided to not give her friend any more of a hard time than she already had. She changed her clothes in the women’s barracks and met Erica in the cafeteria. “By the way, I’m happy to see you, my friend.” Anna gave Erica a big bear hug that not only rumbled her shirt but also caused her to crack an even wider smile.

“You, too, you, Gringa Loca.” It wasn’t the first time Erica called Anna a crazy white lady. At this point in their friendship, it was a term of endearment. Anna would

sometimes call Erica a “tora.” It wasn’t really a word in Spanish, but Anna used it to call Erica a female bull. It spoke to Erica’s own stubbornness and strength. Greetings and well wishes between Anna and the workers and visitors of the compound that she knew punctuated breakfast. Afterwards, she and Erica walked together to Faraji’s office on the eastern wall of the compound.

He welcomed them warmly and asked them to sit across from his desk. He asked Anna to tell him what happened to her, and she told her story to both him and Erica. When she was done, the wrinkles in his forehead were deeper than usual. Anna noticed the steel-black color of his skin was fading a little, and he had more wrinkles on his hands and face. His curly hair was thick as ever, and his dark eyes were still brilliant with intelligence and kindness, but an aura of fatigue draped across his shoulders. She knew he would never leave the people of the compound and that retirement was not part of his vocabulary. She was sad that her experience had caused him more worry. “I’ll be sure to report this to HHP and SHLP. We will have to think about how to keep this from happening again in the future.”

“I’m sorry, Faraji.”

“It’s certainly not your fault, Anna.”

“I know, but I’m the bearer of the news.”

“Well, don’t worry about it. You take care of yourself and get to work. I’d give you a candy, but I’ve run out.”

“I can fix that.” Anna ambled to her barracks and brought back the candies. The gold-colored cellophanes with the darker yellow candies inside them looked like little suns on Faraji’s desk. He grabbed one out and handed it to her.

“Here you go.”

Anna smiled and took the proffered gift. Things were getting back to normal already.

CHAPTER 2

“Bring the urine over here!” Anna had quickly gotten back into her routine at the compound, and weeks had passed in peace. She continued to direct the workers in the garden as she turned her head for fresh air. The acrid smell of ammonia had filled her nostrils for too long. She hoed a new section of garden, waiting for the workers to arrive with more of the liquid. She used to shake her head at the idea that urine was one of the more consistent sources of water in the desert. The workers collected it from humans and animals alike and poured their bottles into drums, waiting to dispense the liquid into the Taiwanese apparatus. The National Taiwan University discovered a way to obtain potable water from urine by exposing the urine to zinc oxide grown on old compact discs. The water then collected into clean barrels attached to the solar-powered equipment. Anna didn’t understand the science behind the process, but she appreciated the potential. HHP sought out the opportunity to test the discovery in the arid Sudanese climate to obtain a secondary water source for their compound’s garden, livestock, and toilets. The compound already received water from a rainwater collection system and a water well. Anna liked that HHP put their money where their mouths were and that they earnestly sought long-term solutions to problems, even if it meant trying new ideas. HHP treated each compound individually and recognized that what worked at one location might not work at another.

After her ordeal in the desert, Anna was trying to decide if she should come back next summer. She loved the people at the compound and being able to help, but she felt like she was pushing her luck. The summer months were a little slower on her ranch, and

Max kept things going for her, but she wondered if she shouldn't just learn to slow down. May learn to enjoy life and not work so much. Anna started working for HHP because she wanted to help others and she had the work ethic to do so. She wanted to help with the larger world, especially because there was so much need beyond the boundaries of her property and the local charities she already worked with. Originally, she hadn't wanted to just spend her days watching the wild flowers sway in the breeze. She wanted to put her own time and effort into something that really mattered. Even so, right now, wild flowers would be a good distraction from the sand-colored walls of the HHP compound. Anna tried to not think of home too much and to focus on the work, but sometimes she would daydream about painting a mural on the inside of the walls. Today, she envisioned a field of sunflowers extending into a very clear blue sky. The view of the mural would be level with the height of the sunflowers' heads and swallows would flit above them. She might add a tree-lined creek in the background. *A dip in a creek sounds good right now.* Or maybe she would add the back of Jonathan's brown-haired head, as if he was looking at it with her. She sighed and chopped harder into a clump of dirt. Her practical nature recognized that the required resources for a mural would be better used elsewhere. Anna's thoughts wandered as she thought about how different Sudan was from the U.S.

HHP built this compound for agricultural research and humanitarian assistance. Its surplus produce was shared with local villages and travelers. The compound consisted of several acres of rocky, sandy soil. The walls protected the assets of the compound, including its workers and visitors. The main entrance was located in the northeast wall, and it allowed direct access to the office building. The majority of the buildings were

located west of the office. Along the north wall was the hospital, a school with cafeteria, and a barracks for the men. Along the south wall was a barracks for the women, a warehouse, and the garden. The garden consisted of several aboveground frames filled with a combination of native soil, manure, and compost. The frames built the soil up to give the plants a head start. She bred earthworms in one box and distributed them to the others. The hope was that they would use the rich soil to flourish and then move deeper into the natural soil to break it up and make it softer for plant roots to grow and take hold. Developing and maintaining soil and cultivating the right plants had been a time-consuming process. Their harvest typically consisted of cucumbers, beets, eggplant, garlic, soybeans, peppers, and other beans. Now they were researching the effectiveness of the “new” water.

The western portion of the compound was fenced for the livestock: goats, chickens, the occasional camel or two, and now her donkey. He was already looking better than when he found her. Camels and donkeys were common modes of transportation in the area. The compound’s donkey might be used to help deliver supplies outside the compound, once he got healthy. The camels were previously wounded and abandoned by their owners. Fully healed, the compound used one for travel and the other for milk for cooking and helping mothers feed their babies. HHP segregated the barracks by gender to help encourage peace and safety for all. In a country where rape was a weapon, AIDS could spread, and in the compound sex was generally discouraged. There was also no privacy. But, on occasion Anna might see a couple slip out of the compound together and come back later.

Everyone knew that leaving the compound was dangerous, so those who did either left for some distant village or stayed close to the walls. So far, none of the fighting had made its way to the compound, but its victims had. Many of the women who came to the compound sought medical help. The men who worked in the compound had sought asylum and were generally too old to fight. Any younger male visitors would come for supplies and leave. The Sudanese people were often displaced and unemployed. Resources like food and adequate shelter were scarce, and humanitarian aid was hard to distribute because of warfare and thievery. So even though it was not safe to leave the compound alone, inside the walls was a relative refuge.

While everything was constructed either of wood or of mud with thatched roofs, the compound's structures were sturdier than those of the villages that the compound served. Inside the walls, children could be heard laughing and playing in the somewhat shaded open areas between the buildings. Most of the nearby villagers lived in tents or crude lean-to's that were more wood than mud; some of their walls, if they had walls, were even made of thatch. Their roofs were often made of plastic tarps. The vegetation of the area had been sacrificed for building materials, leaving a barren orange-brown landscape behind. In the villages, people huddled in any shade their structures could provide. Their children seemed to prefer shade to play space. Many villages were nomadic, so their homes needed to be portable, and they would travel to find forage for their sheep and/or goats. Many caravans on camelback could also be seen to stop at the compound for water or to pass it by on their way to cities near and far to sell their wares.

The school was the most underutilized portion of the compound. Many village families needed their children to help with chores or to serve the adults. Even if the

villages could afford to let the children go to school, the traditional idea was that only boys should be educated. Parents expected girls to stay home and learn how to be wives and mothers. Their training also included their preparation for female circumcision. In some parts of the country and neighboring countries, clay dolls were utilized to teach the girls that their exterior genitalia would be cut off to purify the girl and make her more fit for marriage. In other parts of the land, the girls were given little education of what would be done to them and why it was done. In Egypt, girls could be surprised in the night and put through the procedure. The extent of the circumcision varied by geographic region and ranged from either the removal of the clitoris to the complete removal of all exterior parts. Complete removal was followed by sewing shut the wound and barely leaving room for a woman's bodily functions to work properly. The belief was that by doing this, girls would grow up chaste and not be ruled by sexual desire. Unfortunately, the wounds often got infected from the use of crude tools and a lack of sanitary conditions. Some girls died immediately from excessive bleeding or subsequent infection. The practice was often conducted on girls younger than ten years of age and was known to leave mental and emotional scars. Anna's back crawled in response to her thoughts. Knowing these practices were conducted made it hard for Anna to work in the Sudanese compound at first. She was torn between wanting to help and not wanting to condone the acts done to the girls by their own peoples' traditions. In the end, she chose to stay and do what she could for the women and children of the area. She found hope in producing more vegetables to share with them and to help in the classrooms and hospital when needed. She found strength in the smiles of those who were able to come to the compound and find healing.

Anna's rumination was brought to a halt when her hoe hit wood. She looked to see that she had absentmindedly hoed to the end of the raised garden box. Anna stood up from her work and stretched while brushing sweat from her forehead. *Oh...a cool breeze would feel so good right now.* Her skin was itchy from accumulated dirt and sweat. It would take a strong breeze to reach her in the compound's maze of buildings. Anna took a swig from her canteen and went back to work hoeing the garden, which would receive the "new" water, her sweat depositing additional water onto the thirsty plants beneath her.

Later that day, she gathered with the other workers and visitors in the cafeteria for dinner. *A peppery steak would be so good right now.* The food was simple and vegetable based. Chicken was served on Sundays after worship services. Many of the African workers and visitors were either Muslims or Christians. A few had no religious preferences. Those who desired met in their various groups and worshiped according to their consciences. Muslim members had their prayers five times every day, not just on Sundays, according to their religion. The Muslims typically worshipped on Fridays, but they were willing to accommodate the compound's schedules. During Anna's first summer at the compound, she asked a worker why he left during work at specific times of the day. He explained to her his religion's prayer practices. Now they helped set a rhythm to her day, and she understood that they helped the workers come back to work refreshed and renewed. She found renewal in getting the day's work done. *To each their own.* After everyone finished their oblations on Sundays, they all met back in the cafeteria for board games and visiting. Today, Anna inched her way through the food line and looked across the room for Faraji. Faraji's name meant *solace*, and he was just that to

the people in his world. HHP asked him to direct their Sudanese location because he had lived in many parts of the country and understood some of the nuances that helped people survive in the Sudan. Faraji had earned everyone's respect, and he possessed the rare influence of a peacekeeper in a war-torn land. Anna needed to report to him on the new water and garden. As usual, she found him in the far corner surrounded by children. She smiled and nodded hello to Erica on her way across the room. Faraji was sliding three cups around in circles on the table. A little boy watched, enthralled with one cup as they came to a stop. He pointed to his cup. As Faraji lifted it, the little boy peeked under, hoping to see the rock. No rock there, the boy's face fell in disappointment. The other kids laughed and asked Faraji to do it again. "How about we eat first and play again later?" He gave each a butterscotch candy, and they dispersed. Anna smiled at how fast the crowd disappeared, and she sat across from Faraji.

"Is there a candy for me?" He chuckled and handed her one. Anna laughed in response. Faraji and Anna smiled at each other and ate before talking any further. They patiently waited for each to finish their meal.

Faraji looked at Anna expectantly. "How are the plants doing?"

"Great, they're doing really well. We've harvested a lot, and the plants are still sprouting. We'll continue to have the usual vegetables."

"How about the water from the Taiwanese experiment?"

"Well, it looks good enough to drink, but I leave that to the plants and animals. There is no odor from it, so it doesn't hurt the nose to be around it. I'm glad to have the extra water since it alleviates some of the worry for the plants."

“I’m glad we will have healthy food to share with our guests and workers and that we have a source for extra water. I have heard that the pumping system for the water well in the Dulu village is acting up. I plan to make a circuit of the villages, including Dulu, to assess how things are going. I will leave you in charge of the women’s barracks, the garden, and the animals. I have already spoken to Erica and left her in charge of the hospital, school, and cafeteria. Sanji will keep track of the men for me. I plan to be gone about a week.”

“When will you leave? Who will you travel with? You know it’s not safe to travel alone, even on camel.” Anna was understandably concerned. Even a simple day trip that someone intended to take took careful planning. If a person traveled too close to some of the villages, they could find themselves in the middle of a skirmish. Whenever anyone left the compound, she worried; it was a very realistic fear that they might not return. She knew she had been fortunate and didn’t want anyone close to her to take any chances.

Faraji put his hand on Anna’s. He knew that for all of her strength and rough edges, she had a big heart, and she easily and quickly cared about other people. “Anna, a local leader told me a few caravans will be traveling in the directions I need. He thinks I will have no problem joining them. I will leave the day after tomorrow.”

Anna sighed, somewhat relieved. Typically, a caravan could be a moving target, but she knew Faraji would work to be as inconspicuous as possible and that changing caravans would help him cover more land with other people. Faraji collected his eating utensils and prepared to leave. “Please excuse me, Anna. I want to get some more things organized and catch up on my rest.” Anna smiled and nodded. She was staring off in space when Erica dropped down in Faraji’s place.

“Sounds like you and I will be watching over most of the camp in a few days. I have already ordered margaritas and fajitas for everyone!”

Anna chuckled at Erica’s joke. “Can I have my fajitas all meat--hold the veggies?” Erica knew that Anna missed red meat in their summer months in Sudan. Erica also knew that Anna did not drink alcohol. Anna didn’t like what it did to people. She lovingly shook her head at her friend. She was always amazed at how positive and calm Erica could be. Maybe it was Erica’s experience as a doctor and her natural flair for life. Even though Erica grew up in rural Mexico, she excelled in school and later trained at John Hopkins University School of Medicine. On top of all of this, Erica chose to take her knowledge to less-developed countries, and split most of her time in Mexico and other Hispanic countries. For variety, she spent her summers in one humanitarian camp or another. She had yet to take Anna’s offer for a vacation on her ranch.

“Faraji could have left you in charge of the whole compound, and everything would go just fine. How are your patients?”

“They are doing as well as can be expected.”

“How is the school?”

Erica’s eyes got bigger and began to glisten. Anna could tell she was excited. “We started teaching a little girl the English alphabet today. She is supposed to watch her baby brother while her mother is in the hospital, but I have a worker sit by her to help with the baby. The mother did not mind as long as the baby was not ignored.” Anna and Erica valued education, especially for those generally denied it. She and Anna shared a love of books and knowledge, which were additional foundation stones for their friendship.

“I am very happy for you and the little girl.” Anna yawned and tried to stretch the kinks out of her shoulders. A hot bath would be nice right now, but a cool shower would suffice. “Well, my friend, I think I will be off to my room now. I’m beat, and it sounds like we will both need our rest for when Faraji is gone.” They hugged, and Anna collected her dinner things.

Two days later, Faraji placed his baggage on the camel’s saddle. He looked at the semi-circle of people gathered to see him off. He said, “Let us have a prayer,” and asked Sanji to offer it. Sanji spoke in his native tongue, and, when he was done, the children all came up to Faraji and patted his arms goodbye. The other workers waved to him, and he hugged several of them, including Erica and Anna. Anna tried not to worry about Faraji. She took comfort in the fact that he had lived a long time and had survived many of the challenges this country brought to its people. She wouldn’t let him see her cry and turned around to wipe her eyes. Faraji climbed into the saddle, and the noble camel rose to its feet. The crowd waved until Faraji was lost within the caravan traveling past the compound.

“Alright, everyone! Let’s get back to work. The sooner we stop watching, the sooner he can come home!” Anna clapped her hands as if she were rounding up cattle and shouted at the group to get things back in order. Erica laughed at her friend’s need for organization and stability.

“Who’s being a bull now?” Erica asked, mockingly meek and batting her eyelashes. Anna knew these shortcomings in herself and just shrugged her shoulders at Erica. They walked together the short distance to the hospital, taking turns to shove each other sideways, and then Anna continued on to the garden.

CHAPTER 3

The week passed fairly smoothly for the compound in Faraji's absence. Anna overheard a couple of male workers getting into a scuffle over one of the female visitors, but Sanji was able to settle the dispute after pointing out that she was the wife of a chief and was, therefore, unavailable to woo. Faraji had not yet returned. Everyone decided to allow three additional days before sending out for information. Anna continued to work the garden soil and alternately weed and water the plants. She oversaw the rotation of the purified water and collection of additional urine. Her days became pretty routine as summer waned. Each year when she arrived at a compound, she would inventory what work had been done and what work was needed. She reviewed the notes of previous workers and made thorough notes for those who would follow after her. This process relieved some of the pressure from Faraji's shoulders in needing to know the details of their activities and it left him time to supervise and hold others accountable for their work. By the end of the summer, Anna had things running like a well-oiled machine, and monotony set in.

This morning as she fed the chickens she noticed how cracked her calloused hands were. She had worn through her old work gloves, and the duct-taped gloves had worn rough patches onto her palms. She kept putting off bringing new gloves because she didn't really like them. She also had a callus where her ring wiggled against her finger while she worked. The ring was a simple gold Irish Claddagh ring and had two hands clasping a crowned heart. Jonathan gave it to her on her birthday. She wore it on her right hand to symbolize she was in a relationship.

She went to sneak the donkey a carrot and continued her chores, her thoughts still on things back home. She met Jonathan when he was a guest at her ranch. A few years back, she was struggling financially and thought she would open the ranch to guests. It worked long enough to get her out of debt, and then she closed the ranch again, because she liked her privacy. Jonathan was a repeat customer at that time and vacationed at her ranch every year since. He arrived at the ranch early that first day, while she was out for a morning ride. She stopped at a stream and was reading a book, with her leg around the saddle horn. She was so engrossed in her book she didn't hear anyone approach or notice Zydeco respond to a visitor.

“Hello, ma'am.”

Anna flinched so hard Zydeco turned, and she ended up in the stream. The next thing she knew, strong hands were helping her up, and blue-green eyes were smiling at her. He gave her time to compose herself by bending down to fish her book out of the water. She immediately straightened her hair and noticed how tall he was, just over six feet with no help from his boots.

“I'll get you a new copy. I'm sorry I startled you so. I'm Jonathan Abney.”

Anna took his proffered hand and introduced herself.

“Well, I hope my accidentally dunking you doesn't mean I will be sleeping in the barn tonight.”

“No, but I might have you help Max, my foreman, to earn your board and keep.”

They both chuckled, and he said some manual labor would be a nice break from working in an office. He held her reins for safe measure as she mounted her horse; for once Zydeco did not lower his ears at the stranger. On the way back to the ranch,

Jonathan and Anna talked about the ranch and his work. He owned several offices involved in business consulting, but his pet project was a woodshop. He was at Anna's ranch to take an overdue break. She had told him that the ranch had started with a hundred acres, and she slowly added to it over time. They both agreed the middle of Missouri was not a well-known place for a ranch of its size, but she admitted that being off the radar had its charms. Plus, the gently rolling land was well watered, and the cattle and horses were healthy from the grasses.

In the evenings, they teamed up when they and the other guests played games, and their conversations continued after the other guests had gone to bed. Every morning they met in the barn and went for a morning ride, viewing the ranch through different trails each time. It wasn't until Jonathan ordered a picnic with all of her favorite foods from the kitchen staff during his third stay that Anna realized she was falling for him. In time, she recognized his patience. He never raised his voice at her, even though she did to him. He never threatened to slap her when she got mouthy, but once he did threaten to spank her like John Wayne in *McClintock*. He gave her time and space. She appreciated not being rushed, and when she had to take a step back, he let her. She knew her confidence was shaky. Nevertheless, even for him, it wasn't easy to keep her walls down all the time.

She didn't know that his hope was kept alive by the fact that she wore her Claddagh ring on her right hand with the heart turned toward her body. She had explained the meaning behind the ring and how it was worn during one of their many talks. She taught him that how a person wears a Claddagh ring could tell people what kind of relationship the wearer is in. On the right hand with the heart away from the body meant that the wearer was single. On the right hand with the heart toward the body meant the

person was in a relationship. On the left hand with the heart away from the body meant the person was engaged, and if the ring was on the left hand and turned toward the body, the person was married. Anna wore her ring according to tradition.

All this thinking of Jonathan was making Anna homesick. She had a job to do, and so she walked into the warehouse to inventory the garden supplies and empty drums. They had a good supply of drums that they rotated, keeping clean water drums separate from the urine drums. However, the ammonia and Sudanese heat could break the urine drums down over time. The seed packets for fall had recently arrived from HHP. The compound had to be very self-reliant, since big shipments were often hijacked between the compound and the two airports were located approximately 230 miles away to the northwest. Often workers and trusted caravans would carry the supplies in smaller batches over the hazardous terrain. A supply of disposable medical supplies, paper products, and backpacks recently arrived. Anna thought the later was a mistake, as backpacks were not a normal item on their requisition forms. She packed them away in a box and put it in the back of a cargo truck kept in the warehouse. The truck was kept fueled but not used, since it made an obvious target in the barren landscape.

Anna made her notes and walked to the door of the men's barracks. The men on break usually sat in the shaded doorway. She wanted to give Sanji the list of work needed for the rest of the week. As she approached, she heard the children all start to yell in the eastern portion of the compound. She and the nearby men ran to see what the commotion was about. There in the middle of the circle was Faraji and his camel. The children were all shouting and jumping and laughing. Faraji was overwhelmed by the welcome. Erica pushed past to give him a hug. Anna noticed how tired he looked. She was glad Erica was

always the observant one and that she quickly got to Faraji to help him in any way she could. The welcome had been so boisterous that no one initially noticed the other camel and its rider behind Faraji's. The rider dismounted, and, when he did, recognition flared in Anna. She walked closer to the visitor as he unwrapped the keffiyeh headdress that looked like a turban from his head. "Jonathan!"

He turned, and the crowd parted. She ran to him, and they held each other for what didn't feel long enough. She stretched to her full height to match his. His strong arms were like a warm shower after a hard day of work. Too quickly she realized how sweaty and probably stinky she was and tried to pull away from him. He briefly held her longer before letting her go.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, dumbfounded.

"Well, I needed another vacation and couldn't let you have all of the fun on the other side of the world."

She was so happy to see him and yet slightly uneasy. This place always had an undertone of danger, and she didn't want him anywhere near it. She was brought out of her alarm by Erica tugging her sleeve. Her expectant face reminded Anna that Jonathan and Erica had never met in person.

"Sorry ... Jonathan, this is Erica."

"Erica, this is..."

Erica interrupted by calling Jonathan a tall drink of cool horchata, a spicy Mexican drink sometimes made from corn. They all laughed and turned to face the approaching Faraji.

“I found this wanderer on my way back and thought he might belong here. Fortunately, he was already on a camel and not wandering around like Moses.” He nudged Anna, and his smiling eyes revealed that he knew who Jonathan was, and what he meant to her.

Faraji and Erica then left the couple alone and walked to the cafeteria. Jonathan grabbed Anna’s arm, spun her around, and kissed her. Her lungs gasped for air as he released her and grabbed his duffel bag. They walked to the men’s barracks with their arms around each other’s waists.

“How long are you staying?”

“I plan to stay long enough for us to fly home together.”

His response reminded Anna that she had approximately five more weeks left before her shift was up for the summer. While they walked, he caught her up on how the ranch was doing and how his work was going. The compound didn’t have consistent communication connections to be able to call or email across the Atlantic. He had talked to Max for her, knowing she would like the update. This year they were trying some new practices at the ranch, and, even though she knew Max had it covered, she was curious about the results.

She and Jonathan spent the rest of the day touring the compound and discussing the various work conducted there. They discreetly stole kisses behind the corners of the buildings and walked hand-in-hand along the way. Jonathan offered to help Anna with her chores the next day, and she said he was a very welcome sight. That night after dinner, they sat in a corner of the cafeteria, and he told her about the things the news media in the U.S. had been reporting. He didn’t want to ruin their time together, but

Sudan was not far from where terrible events were unfolding. He told her that the United States had decided to radically increase its involvement in the wars in the Middle East and Central Asia. Apparently, the new president was tired of talking and having sanctions be ignored. Militant Americans, some of whom supported factions in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Northern Africa, had been targeting political buildings in some of the states back home. The National Guard in many states had been called out to combat those Americans on American soil. Rumor had it that air travel to and from the areas of concern, globally, was going to be stopped in a few weeks. Anyone with passport information showing travel in those areas could be turned away at the airports. It was good that Anna's shift at the compound would end just before that time. Anna realized that one of the reasons Jonathan had flown so far was to keep her safe and help her get back home. They shared their information with Faraji before going to bed. It seemed as if he already knew, and he mentioned that HHP would be sending a last shipment to see the compound through for six months. No new workers were being allowed to come to the compound. The year-round workers would have to take up the slack.

Anna kissed Jonathan good night and went to her barracks. She was so happy to see him, and yet she couldn't shake the shadow of fear crawling up her spine.

CHAPTER 4

A week passed in happiness. Jonathan helped around the compound and shared in Anna's chores. They spent time together at mealtime, often joined by Erica and Faraji, and they enjoyed worship services and games with the whole compound on Sundays. Jonathan helped take the pressure of entertaining the children from Faraji's shoulders. He told them stories and did magic tricks, just as Faraji did, but with his own flair. He would also whittle small toys for the kids from small bits of wood they brought to him. However, he always sent the children to Faraji for their candy. That was one tradition Jonathan did not want to interfere with.

They were eating lunch when a loud boom echoed across the land, and the thatch roof vibrated above their heads. Dust and debris drifted down onto their heads and plates. Immediately, everyone ran out of the building to the main entrance. A smoke cloud rose in the distance to the northeast. This was the first bomb to ever come so close to the compound, and most of the women and children ran to their barracks. Erica instantly yelled that they needed to go see if anyone was alive, but Faraji said it was too dangerous. Anna was stunned, torn between agreeing with both of her friends. Jonathan was already rounding up the men to go and bring back any wounded. When Faraji saw the determination on Jonathan's face, he nodded his head and reminded him to wear his keffiyeh. Erica ran back to the hospital for medical supplies and handed them over to Sanji. The men also gathered what weapons were stored at the compound for emergencies.

“Please be careful and don’t do anything stupid,” Anna pleaded as she quickly kissed Jonathan goodbye.

“It’s just like walking across one of your pastures back home,” he said, smiling. His downplaying the situation didn’t calm her nerves.

Faraji said a prayer for the men. Anna kept her arms crossed tightly around herself as she watched the men headed out on foot toward the rising smoke.

The hours since the men left on the rescue mission were painful for everyone at the compound. Anna spent the first few hours pacing back and forth and eventually, unconsciously, sought distractions. She started rearranging the warehouse to keep her mind busy, but most of her time was spent throwing things around and crying. She hadn’t slept well the night before because she’d had bad dreams, and now her stomach was a knotted mess. The children kept look out for the men. The last child on watch yelled out as soon as he saw the line of men coming back to the compound. He could tell it was them by the color of Sanji’s keffiyeh. Anna ran to the gate and saw Jonathan’s height over the other men. He carried a child in his arms. Anna ran to tell Erica that the men were back and had others with them, including children. Erica was still in the hospital double-checking her supplies. As the men filed into the compound, Anna could see the anguish on their faces. She was shocked to find blood running down Jonathan’s face, and the child in his arms, a little girl, was limp. She immediately followed them into the hospital and started helping Erica and her workers inventory and patch the injuries. Most of the men were lightly wounded. The people they brought back with them were women and a few children. The men who had been with the women and children were either killed in the blast or ran away after fighting with the men from the compound. Anna was

happy to see that Jonathan just had a scratch on his forehead. He laid the little girl on a cot across the room. Sanji told them that from a distance it looked like the bomb had hit a caravan, which turned out to be a slave train. No wares of value were among the belongings, and the women were from various parts of the world. When the men were sent off to the cafeteria, Erica started looking over the women and children. The little girl who Jonathan had carried was revived with smelling salts and given time to become more alert. All seemed well enough to be sent to eat and rest before being examined more thoroughly. Erica's workers and Anna were also dismissed. Anna found Jonathan sitting in their corner of the cafeteria.

“Anna, it's hard to say what it looked like when we got there,” he said with deep sadness. “At first it just looked like a clothes closet had exploded, because there were clumps of fabric everywhere, but then ... we got close enough to see that the clumps were people! And not just any group of people, but women and children!” He paused, trying to settle his breathing. Anna held his hand and stroked her thumb across his knuckles. Jonathan's voice alternately slowed and rushed as he spoke.

“The closer we got... the more jumbled everything looked. And then some figures started to stand up... They were men, and one fired at us. Sanji and the other men from the compound returned fire. I was shocked they shot at us. It was so surreal. One of the men was killed, and the rest ran away. I can't tell you what it felt like to be fired at by a stranger. Someone I had never met and had no animosity for; at first, I thought he was just another guy... Sanji later told me they were slave traders. With the men gone, we were better able to get closer to the women and children. There was blood in different places, but we couldn't tell where it came from, and we weren't going to stay around long

enough to learn more. We quickly went to each person and gathered the living. The women's eyes were so full of fear. It was as if they thought we ...were just like those who held them as slaves. And, the little girl ... Anna. She just sat there, against a camel carcass, and stared at us as we came to the group. Her eyes weren't as afraid as the others were; it was like she knew we were there to help. I picked her up and carried her. She fainted half way back to the compound." His eyes had watered during the telling, and her eyes watered in response. She cleared his plate and utensils and kissed his forehead as she gently stroked his hair. She loved him so much and was so grateful that he was the kind of man who could show compassion to others, but this seemed too much to ask. Faraji came up to the table and gave Jonathan a butterscotch candy. Jonathan smiled at the gift, and together the two men walked to the compound office. Anna knew that Faraji's wisdom would help bolster Jonathan. She turned and joined Erica at her table.

Erica was her usual calm self and was heartily eating her food. It wasn't that Erica was immune to what was going on around her; she learned long ago that she couldn't help anyone on an empty stomach and no sleep. Anna sipped a drink and waited for Erica to finish.

"Have you seen a slave train before?" Anna asked her more-experienced friend.

"No, I have heard of them and am surprised they were crossing near here. I thought they stuck to the more metropolitan areas, where the clientele would be."

"Those women were held against their will, right?"

"Usually. They are often kidnapped or captured runaways, but some are sold by their families for bride prices. The little girl seems really young, though. I am curious about her story."

Anna's stomach turned. She couldn't fathom what those women had been through or how they could have made it this far. She couldn't imagine the betrayal of being sold by your family for money, only to end up in a slave train instead of a respectable marriage. Her stomach wrenched even more to think of what the children had experienced. Before she knew it, bile was rising in her throat and she was running for the door. She made it just in time to avoid messing up the cafeteria floor. She was kicking dirt onto the puke when Erica brought her a peppermint. They quietly walked to the livestock pen so Anna could stroke the donkey's soft ears and calm down.

"I'm sorry, Erica, I thought I would be tougher by now, but life keeps surprising me."

"Well, you are a pushover, my friend."

That made them both laugh. The first summer they served together was at HHP's compound in Mexico, Seguridad. Anna came in as a major greenie with very rusty Spanish and no patience for herself. She tried not to offend anyone, but when she saw some big kids threatening a smaller kid, she threatened to spank them. Some of the parents were angry at her, but Erica was able to explain that Anna was just looking out for the little ones. Later, Anna defended the big kids against some people who were accusing them of stealing. They had been in the compound all morning and could not have done the crime they were accused of. Anna was fiercely protective of all the kids, even though the bigger kids had originally picked on the younger ones. Everyone learned that she had her limits and that it was best not to test them. In the end, she made friends with all the local kids and their parents, and she taught the bigger kids to look out for the little ones.

“At least I can count on you to keep me grounded. You should rub this donkey’s ears--they’re really soft, and maybe it will bring you good luck.” Anna smirked, and Erica frowned. Anna knew Erica didn’t like animals.

They walked to the east part of the compound together and said goodnight at the hospital door. Erica wanted to check on her patients one more time before going to bed. Anna could see Faraji’s and Jonathan’s shadows in the window of the compound office and decided they would be up a while longer. She went to her room and started to reorganize her belongings. Every now and then, she needed to clean to keep herself distracted. Luckily, fatigue cut the cleaning session short, and she slept a deep sleep.

CHAPTER 5

“Mornin’, gorgeous.” Anna turned to the sound of Jonathan’s voice. She didn’t feel gorgeous, but knew he meant what he said. She started in the garden early that morning to beat some of the heat. She was going to repeat his greeting to her, but she stopped at the sight of the bags under his eyes and the bruise on his head from yesterday. She hurriedly walked over and gave him a hug and a kiss. “You’re just in time for lunch,” she told him as they walked arm-in-arm toward the cafeteria. They decided to stop at the hospital for ibuprofen for Jonathan’s head and to check on the patient’s.

The beds in the hospital were full with either women or children. The original patients had been moved to the back of the hospital to make room for the newcomers. Those patients who were able to move around and just needed a few more rounds of medicine were sent to the barracks according to their gender. The newcomers comprised approximately a dozen persons. The women were rescued from the slave train were primarily of African and Middle Eastern origins. Two lay on their beds not facing each other, and it was evident that each one was pregnant, tight round bellies visible under their clothing. The other women seemed to have settled into groups and were chatting in their various languages. The children were not subdued and played in their beds or on the floor nearby. The little girl Jonathan carried in sat up in her bed and watched the other children. After being checked over by Erica, Jonathan made a beeline to the little girl. She cautiously watched him approach and cringed as he came near her bed. He noticed this and subtly sat on a bed opposite to her’s. Anna stood nearby and watched. He smiled at the girl and offered her one of Faraji’s butterscotch candies, talking to her in a soft

voice the whole time. She didn't smile back or touch the candy. Her bright and intelligent brown eyes watched Jonathan as he placed it on the foot of her bed. Anna rubbed Jonathan's back and looked back at the girl. Something about the girl made Anna uncomfortable. Something about the girl's eyes-- a mix of defiance and fear. Jonathan stood and put his arm around Anna. "She is like a little foal ready to bolt. In a way, she reminds me of you."

Anna flinched. "Well, she can't be blamed for being wary. Who knows what she has been through." Anna gave the girl an awkward smile and waved goodbye as she and Jonathan left the hospital.

Erica joined them at their table a few minutes later, and they ate lunch in silence peppered with small talk. They were all tired, and this summer was taking its toll on Erica and Anna. Each tried to avoid the thought that their term at the compound was almost up, or what they might do once they returned to their respective homes. Erica looked up from the bite she was taking. "Anna, Faraji says he is going to be making another tour of the villages in a few days. He wants me to bring you up-to-date on the women and children brought in from the slave train. He says he hasn't relieved us of our previous responsibilities for the compound, so you are still in charge of the women." Anna sighed -- part of her dreaded to hear what happened to them. Even after her many summers at humanitarian compounds, there were parts of life on Earth she wish she didn't know, and she was sure there were parts she didn't want to learn.

"Okay, Erica, should we meet after dinner tonight?"

"Yes, how about 8:00? We can meet in Faraji's office if you want."

Anna sighed again and nodded her head.

“That’s good timing--you and I can go for a walk after and look at the stars,” Jonathan interjected with a dose of cheerfulness obvious in his voice. Anna couldn’t help smiling and bumped into him with her shoulder. Erica laughed at both of them and cleared away the meal things.

The rest of the day passed working with the Taiwanese water purification system and other chores. She ended her work racing Jonathan to see who could hoe their garden rows the fastest. The loser had to feed the animals by themselves. Anna shook her head as she dumped hay into the trough for the camels and donkey. How did that suit learn to hoe so fast? She thought he cheated, or maybe it was his longer arms. She was still shaking her head when he came up behind her with the grain bucket for the chickens. “You think this is going to help your case?” she asked him in a mock-firm voice. He raised his eyebrows as if he was innocent and started scattering the grain for the birds. She smiled and shook her head as she walked over to the water barrel and filled her bucket up. His long shadow fell on her as he turned to feed more of the chickens.

It was a good way to finish up the day before her upcoming meeting with Erica. Dinner went quickly, and she went to Faraji’s office early to finish some paperwork. He and Jonathan were entertaining the children in the cafeteria. Anna could hear Erica’s determined footsteps on the rocky soil and again as she stomped the soil from her shoes on the wood walk in front of the office building. Both women could see the trepidation in each other’s eyes as Erica walked in. It’s never easy getting reports about what others had gone through, and, even with their years at various compounds, they still needed to brace themselves at times. Anna needed this more than Erica did, because she wasn’t around these situations year-round.

“Well, Erica, give it to me straight.”

Anna could see Erica’s apprehension. They both knew this could be hard on Anna. Despite how tough she could be about working hard and doing what needed to be done, but she couldn’t be tough when it involved the afflictions of people and animals.

Erica turned on her doctor voice. “Yes, well, most of the ladies are good, despite what they have been through. The children are generally just dehydrated and malnourished, so I have instructed the cooks how to help them get better. Some of the group knows English, and that helped us learn about them. Others were able to speak in a language we could interpret. Some we just had to examine and deduce from there. One Sudanese woman, Zuvena, is fighting an infection. She has the usual complications that arise from genital mutilation, even though she was younger when the procedure happened. I did some minor surgery to help her for the future, and we are doing everything we can to fight the infection and reduce the chances of future issues. One of the women, Bitu, is from Afghanistan, and has scars on her face, likely from acid burning. However, they are old wounds, and she is being treated for dehydration. She doesn’t speak English, but we were at least able to get her name. Two women, one Israeli named Chava, and one Palestinian named Hayat, are pregnant. They will both be due about the same time. Apparently, they were pregnant before they were kidnapped.”

Somewhere in the middle of Erica’s report, Anna had gotten up and started to pace. Anna wasn’t good at sitting still for very long. She paused briefly enough to ask, “What about the girl Jonathan brought in?”

Erica sighed. She knew this one would upset Anna the most, because not only was the girl the youngest, probably about ten years of age, but Jonathan and Anna made an

extra effort to keep track of her. “She is from Yemen and had been a child bride. One of the other women was in the group when they added the girl to it, and she heard the traders talking. The little girl won’t speak; as far as I can tell, she is able to, though--” Erica ended the sentence abruptly and tried to act natural.

Anna noticed Erica stalling. “And?”

“It seems that when her husband consummated their marriage, he destroyed any hope of her ever having children,” Erica said hurriedly, almost as if to cover up what she was saying, and get the job done.

Erica held her breath. Anna stopped pacing and looked at Erica with steely eyes. Erica knew it wasn’t personal and that Anna was trying to keep her temper in check.

“Does she need any medical attention now?” Anna asked in a whisper.

“No, her body has done what it could. I think that with more food and time in the school with the other kids she will acclimate.”

“Thank you ... Erica.” Anna spoke a little louder this time and then sunk into Faraji’s chair. Before Erica crossed the doorway, Anna asked, “How are you, Tora?”

Erica smiled at the endearment. “Oh, you know me. I could use a bubble bath and a week-long nap, but I’m good.”

Anna smiled and nodded her head in sympathy. “You know you can always take a vacation at my ranch. I won’t make you work, and we will treat you like the Queen of Sheba. Besides, your cousin Max will talk enough for both of us.”

Erica nodded her head as a goodbye to Anna as she left the building and walked to the barracks to take a shower.

Anna swung around in Faraji's chair. She tried to straighten her papers, but her hands shook from anger and shock. How could these kinds of things happen to people? Why did it always seem to be women and children who paid the price for bad choices? *Oh, Anna you think you are so special, but you are nothing... but My little workhorse.* Anna shook her head to clear the memory away and took deep breaths. She couldn't help but jump when someone knocked on the office door. She shoved her messy papers into her folder and opened the door to Jonathan. He bowed and held up a whittled rose in the palm of his hand to her. She smiled and hoped he could see the love she felt for him in her eyes. He wasn't like the people from her past, he was completely different, and she would forever be grateful to him for it. "May I escort you to your barracks to drop your things off?"

"You may, but first I need a drink of water. I'm parched," Anna said while she inspected the rose. "Thank you. I love how you followed the wood grain to create the petals." His gallant gesture helped temporarily move her worries to the back of her mind.

They swung by the cafeteria for cool drinks and then to her barracks to drop off her papers. She also took time to wash up and change into lighter clothes so she could enjoy the night air. Yes, the desert night could get chilly, but Anna always preferred to be cooler rather than hot. Together, they walked arm-in-arm around the compound and slowly ended at two chairs set up near the garden. They sat by each other and held hands as they looked at the stars. That was typically one of the best parts of being in the Sudanese compound, the stars. Back home, she could not see the stars as much as she would like. She was even beginning to think they were disappearing. However, she discovered how wrong she had been. Here the stars were so profuse and clear, but it took

Jonathan to get her to slow down long enough to enjoy them before she and he left in two weeks.

“I’m glad we can see so many stars in the sky. It reminds me that we aren’t alone and that we are part of something big and important,” Anna began. “The stars are like the Queen Anne’s Lace flowers back home. I try not to think about home until I am on the plane west, but right now I could use a big steak with all the fixings and some time spent swimming.”

Jonathan laughed. “You and your carnivorous propensities. I like a woman who can speak her mind and knows what she wants.” Anna shoved his shoulder. He continued, “Not much longer and you can be gorging on cow and dipping your toes in the creek, but we have things to finish up here. Has Faraji talked about what will happen to the group from the slave train? Is the compound able to keep them long term?”

“Faraji hasn’t talked to me about it, and as far as the compound keeping them long term, it will depend on the fall staff and supplies. Right now, we are good.”

“Anna, Faraji has asked me to go with him to the Dulu village the day after next. He says they are having problems with their water well, and he thinks I could use my tinkering skills to fix it. Apparently, the village mechanic has taken an extended trip elsewhere. Faraji and I will travel together, and then he will continue on his tour of the villages. There is a man in the Dulu village who can come back with me to the compound. I will be gone three days. When I get back, I want you and me to have a special dinner.”

Anna was silent as Jonathan talked; she didn’t like the idea of him going out of the compound again. Even with Faraji to help Jonathan on their way to the village, it

always felt like Russian roulette when someone left the compound. But she wasn't about to burden Jonathan with her fears. She squeezed his hand and leaned over to kiss his cheek. "Just don't fall in love with a village princess and forget our dinner date."

He stood up, offered her his hand and they danced. He twirled her around, dipped her, and, as he kissed her nose, before he said, "There is no fear of that, I can assure you."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him hard. It was several minutes before they walked back to their barracks.

CHAPTER 6

The next two days passed quickly, with the compound getting ready for Faraji and Jonathan's departure. Each man had a camel loaded with supplies. Jonathan also packed tools and some odd parts in the hope they would help with the village well. Anna delayed her arrival to the farewell group since she couldn't just stand and watch him pack up, and he had already told her he packed all of the things she suggested he take with him. He handed her a bag of his personal items to hold onto until he got back. She hugged the bumpy sack to her chest and didn't pay attention to what was inside. She was coming back from putting the sack in her barracks as Faraji mounted his camel. Jonathan adjusted his packs to buy time for Anna to get back. She ran up to him and hugged him tight. He returned the hug and kissed her passionately. Anna gasped and said, "I love you, you know that, right? I know I'm not good at saying it."

Jonathan looked deep into her eyes and said, "You tell me in how you act and in the way you look at me. I have never doubted it. Just remember that I love you, *too*."

Anna smiled, indicating that she *did* know, and they heard Faraji clear his throat behind them. "He will be back in a few days. It's not like he is leaving the planet," he said, chuckling at them.

Jonathan pulled her to him one more time. "You behave yourself and check in on Lily for me."

"Lily?"

"That's what I call the little girl. At least until we learn her real name."

"Of course, she and I will keep each other out of trouble."

Jonathan mounted his camel and pulled his keffiyeh over his face. Everyone paused for a prayer given by Faraji. Jonathan then nodded to her once and waved to the rest of the group as he and Faraji left the compound. Anna watched long after they were hidden by the rise in the land. She didn't notice at first that Erica was standing supportively by her. When she "came to", Erica walked her toward the cafeteria. Anna stopped walking with Erica and changed her direction to the hospital. The girl, Lily, was sitting in her bed, looking at a picture book. A pile of butterscotch candies had accumulated at the foot of her bed. Anna figured that Jonathan had been trying to befriend the girl all this time. "That is only part of the pile. She gives some away to the other children and leaves the rest. I sometimes wonder if she is trying to encourage Jonathan and is just acting like she doesn't want friends. I think it helps that he is kind to all of the patients. She doesn't have to worry as much about any hidden motives he may have." Erica followed Anna in. "She is a smart girl and is really doing well in the school. She just won't say a word. Given her age and background, she isn't likely to know English, either."

Anna simply nodded her head and tried to not think about the fact that this little girl needed to worry about the motives of grown men. She knew Jonathan would hurt anyone who tried to hurt these people. She cautiously sat on the bed across from the girl's and smiled at her. The girl looked at Anna over the edge of her book. Anna smiled again and put her hands out to see the book. The girl hesitated and then handed the book over. It was an English alphabet book with pictures of animals for each letter. Anna turned to the letter "D" and saw a dog and donkey illustrated there. She turned to the letter "C" and saw a cat on one page and a camel on the other. Anna pointed to the donkey and camel

and tried to tell the girl that there was a donkey and camels at the compound. The girl's eyes got bright, but when Anna offered the girl her hand, she recoiled. "It's okay. We can try again another day. Maybe Erica can bring you to see the animals with me," Anna tried to mime as she spoke. She smiled at the girl and gave her back the book. *You should never become a mother, Anna.* Anna slowly nodded her head to dislodge the thought and to say hello to the other patients as she walked out of the hospital. She and Erica walked together to the cafeteria for lunch. Anna felt better after seeing the girl was improving and knowing that they had some good things in common, things that they could share.

The two women were laughing when they saw Sanji storm toward them. Sanji was coming from the office and held a paper in his hands. "What's wrong?" they asked in unison.

"I just received a broken message from HHP. I think it says that things are getting worse in the area and they may close the compound down." The women could tell that Sanji was worried, because his voice registered higher pitched than usual and sweat was beading on his forehead. Usually, Sanji liked to keep the business of women and men separate, but until Faraji got back, they would have to work together for everyone in the compound. It wasn't so much that he was sexist, per se; he just didn't know how to deal with women over the long term. Anna gasped at Sanji's revelation, and they both looked at Erica. As far as Anna knew, HHP had never closed a compound. Erica was more experienced with HHP and would know what the procedures are.

"That would be a last resort and worst-case scenario, Sanji. Please respond to HHP and tell them their message was broken and to resend. We can't do anything until we know the facts and have them down concrete."

“I have already responded to them, and I’m waiting to hear back.”

“Anna, go ahead and double check the inventory of water, garden supplies, and supplies for the water equipment and the animals. I will ask the cafeteria staff to re-inventory their food, and I will double-check the hospital. That way we know what we have to work with. HHP has never closed a compound in all the years I have been with them.”

Lunch forgotten, everyone departed to do their work. Anna was glad that Jonathan would be back soon. She could handle herself and her responsibilities without problems; he would just be a welcome comfort and help in a crisis, and she could feel a crisis coming.

The hours passed quickly, and Anna was glad to see that many of the patients were now eating in the cafeteria instead of the hospital. The slave train women and children divided themselves up again. The majority of the women had their heads covered, and Anna wondered what their hair would look like and why each woman wore her veil. Depending on the country, the covers had different names, but veil was a sufficient name. Anna knew there were a variety of reasons the women would choose the veil. Some did so as a demonstration of their Islamic faith. Some did it because of societal pressures. The reasons weren’t often black and white. For many, it could be a protection from male harassment.

The cafeteria looked like a map of the world based on ethnicities. Chava, the pregnant woman from Israel, sat a little apart from most of the women with Arabic backgrounds. Anna could see Chava and Hayat, the two pregnant women, sitting slightly closer to each other. The hardships they had been through may have brought the women

together, but they weren't fully bonded yet. Lily sat equidistant from everyone. She was her own little country. Her picture book was carefully tucked under her meal tray. Anna caught her eye and smiled at her. She beckoned the girl over to sit with her; the girl looked for a minute and then turned her head. Anna smiled at the look of stubbornness she noticed just before the girl turned her head away. Anna decided to sit by the Sudanese woman, Zuwena, for dinner. She felt that in this microcosm of the world they called a cafeteria she needed to be as diplomatic as possible and hoped her ignorance wouldn't offend anyone. "Hi, Zuwena, do you mind if I join you?"

"No, go ahead."

"Thank you. How are you doing?"

"I am feeling better than I have in a long time. Dr. Erica has been good to me and helped me get over some things that have bothered me for a while."

"Yeah, she is a bit of miracle worker. Even after knowing her this long, I still get amazed that she is the way she is and isn't living it up somewhere else in the world. I don't know if anyone has told you this, but you exude inner strength."

Zuwena looked at her with her head tilted to the side, her eyes trying to decide between confusion and amusement. She decided on amusement and laughed at Anna's comment. "Are you always this ... forward?"

Anna smiled big. "Thank you for taking it so well. I used to get into a lot of trouble for it. Tell me what kind of things do you like." The two women finished their meals quietly and companionably.

"I like the color pink," Zuwena said. Her face brightened at the thought.

Anna smiled at Zuwena's confidence. "I'm partial to purple and yellow."

The women continued talking about the compound, what Anna knew about it and about Anna's home in the U.S. as the groups of people thinned out. They both smiled warmly as they stood to empty their things. "Thank you for talking with me, Zuwena. I hope we can be friends."

"I think so."

They waved goodbye as Zuwena returned to the hospital and Anna went to her barracks. Anna was glad that she talked with Zuwena and hoped she would be able to get to know her and the other women from the slave train, too. The original patients previously left the compound to go back to their homes, and the slave train women were the only ones left for Anna to talk to besides Erica, Sanji, and their helpers.

CHAPTER 7

Anna spent the next three days counting down Jonathan's return and helping Erica in the hospital, inventorying supplies and visiting with the patients. Anna also helped Lily with her schooling and encouraged the girl to write the letters from her book in the sand with a stick. She also encouraged the girl to mouth the sounds and write out the smaller words in the book. She made progress in getting Lily to leave the hospital with her, and, later today, they were going to meet the animals. She asked Erica to join them to create additional security for Lily, so she would feel safe.

Hours later, Erica and Lily were walking toward Anna near the garden. She directed some workers to move some of the water barrels. She turned her head in time to see Erica and Lily approaching, gave her last instructions to the workers, and met up with the other two on the path to the animals. Taking a carrot from her back pocket, Anna handed it to Lily. "You are going to need this for the donkey." Flat palmed, she demonstrated how to let the donkey grab the carrot with its lips. Anna and Lily stepped forward to look at the chickens first; Erica hung back. Anna shook her head at Erica and pointed out a late-arrival chick to Lily. Lily's eyes grew big as she looked at the downy puff on two legs. Anna swung through the fence to grab the chick up so Lily could see it closer. She said the words "chicken" and "chick" slowly so Lily could understand and handed the chick toward Lily so she could pet its head. Lily's smile broadened as she rubbed the fuzzy orb. She laughed at its little squeaks and at the hen pecking at Anna's shoe. Anna set the chick down to join its mom. After guiding the donkey toward Lily, Anna demonstrated rubbing its ears and urged the animal closer for Lily to reach. The

donkey made funny faces of contentment as Lily and Anna rubbed its ears. Afterwards, Anna suggested Lily give it the carrot. They both giggled as the donkey's soft but wet lips grabbed the proffered carrot. It was at that time that the camels were getting wise to what was going on and lumbered over for their share. Anna produced another carrot, broke it in half and gave one-half to each camel. She wanted to save Lily that slobbery experience this first go round.

She had just climbed back through the fence rails when they heard a commotion near the compound gate. She wiped her hands on her jeans, and they all ran toward the commotion and stopped as a throng of people filled the open space in front of the office. A caravan was pulling in, and several people carried two makeshift stretchers between them. Anna could tell that a person lay under the fabric the on each of the stretchers. Her heart stopped mid-beat. It wasn't possible. She ran forward but couldn't get close enough. She searched the crowd, looking for a man who stood a head taller than most. She couldn't see Jonathan. She pushed closer to the first stretcher. The bearers must have tripped, because an arm on the body rolled forward. Its faded steel-black coloring was familiar. "Faraji!" Everyone parted for this stretcher to be laid down. Erica and Sanji and the other workers formed the first ring of the circle around the stretcher. Anna was dizzy and felt like the earth was going to slip out from under her. She turned back to the second stretcher as it was carried into the circle. She tore back the sheet and stared at the face of the one she loved so hard and so long. His eyes had lost their luster; his tan skin had lost its glow. Anna screamed and collapsed onto her knees beside the bed. She pushed away all the hands that reached for her. They meant to help, but, at that moment, they felt like seaweed pulling her deeper into the abyss. She couldn't bring herself to look below his

shoulders; something told her that was where he was wounded. All she could feel was anger and loss. Anger at whoever did this and loss that her and Jonathan's time together was cut short. Not that any time would have been long enough, but this shocking and unexpected loss ripped her breath away. The last thing she remembered was the world tilting upward and her head feeling like it was in a spiral. She was dizzy, and then everything went blank.

She woke up in the hospital, sweating profusely from the blanket wrapped around her. "Jonathan!?" was the first thing she said as she tried to sit up. Erica turned toward her, and her eyes reminded Anna of what she momentarily forgot. Anna moaned, and she sank back into the bed. Her pillow was already wet, and she didn't care about making it worse. "Faraji, too?" She looked at Erica expectantly, as if nothing would ever make sense again. Erica simply nodded her head, and Anna moaned again. "How? ... And how long have I been in here?"

"An attack on a village ... and a day." Erica hesitated to say this next thing, but time was getting short. "Anna, we've been waiting for you to wake up. We need to finalize things for Faraji and Jonathan and didn't want to do it until you could join us."

Anna looked at Erica as if she had spoken in an alien language, but slowly the message solidified in her mind. She shook her head in disbelief that they had to do this to their loved ones-their loved ones were supposed to be alive and well, not waiting for them to "finalize things." She slowly nodded her head in understanding.

"I want you to drink this. You will need your strength these next few hours."

Anna sat up in the bed to drink the liquid. She stayed in bed in a daze until they came and got her and helped her walk outside to the south of the office. There two

parallel holes waited. Gaping in the shadow from the wounds dug into the earth. In each, a shroud-wrapped shape lay. One, slightly longer than the other, lay in the wound to the left. She couldn't bring herself to call them bodies or persons. She couldn't think about their former vitality. She couldn't think of their previous warmth and animation. She turned to a worker and mumbled instructions for him to go to her barracks and bring her something back.

Soon, the worker skidded gravel as he raced up to her and placed the object in her hand. The rites were completed, and, slowly, the last corner of shroud was covered by Sudanese soil. She stood silently and stared at the mound on the left as the people slowly dispersed. She faintly felt Erica touch her shoulder. She vaguely noticed the change in shadows as the sun went down and the full moon rose.

Eventually, her legs could hold her up no longer, and she sank to the earth. She crawled to the mound on the right and took a butterscotch candy from her pocket. She buried it where Faraji's hand should be. She turned to the left and dug a small hole approximately where the chest would be. She placed the delicate wooden rose in the hole, but, before she could cover it up, a small shadow broke the moonlight over the mound. Anna looked up to see Lily standing there. The little girl quickly stooped to place a butterscotch candy at the foot of the mound and ran off. Anna was so touched that she fell forward and cried. Mud from the mound began to cake her arms as her tears mixed with the soil beneath. She slowly patted the soil over the rose and wiped mud streaks on her face as she tried to stop her tears. Too exhausted, she lay next to the mound. She didn't care about anything at that moment; she just wanted to go where he was.

CHAPTER 8

Anna woke up in her bed in the barracks. She had been cleaned up, but she could see the dirt under her nails. Her body ached as if she had been meat tenderized with a boat oar. Erica stood beside her again, and a drawing of a donkey sat next to her bed. As she rose, Erica pushed her back down again. “You need to take it slow. You have been out for a while. Sanji has the men covering your chores. Are you ready to eat something?” Anna’s stomach growled in response, and she frowned at its traitorous nature. Erica offered her some bread to start with. “A lot has happened in such a short period of time; you really need to stock up on food and energy. Last night, Sanji got word back from HHP. He told them what happened, and they said that a full-scale war had broken out in all of the Middle East, not just in Sudan. They *are* closing the compound.” Erica gasped for breath from her monologue. Anna’s mind wasn’t processing as fast as it used to.

There was a long silence before Anna blurted out, “What are we going to do about the women? They can’t go home. War is between them and home!” Anna’s mind slowly, though haphazardly, was catching up and spitting out extrapolations. *They couldn’t stay at the compound forever---the food would run out. And who would protect them? They couldn’t go as a large group to the south because war was already underway along the Sudan-South Sudan border. They couldn’t go immediately west since that would send them into war-torn Chad, Niger, and Mali. They couldn’t go east or northeast because that would take them deeper into Sudan and into Egypt. Their only option as a group would be to go northwest to the airport and fly to safety.*

Erica interrupted her thoughts to get Anna to eat some more food. “We can’t plan anything until you are back on your feet, and then we can meet with Sanji and everyone and discuss our options.”

Anna found herself wishing Jonathan were there; he was always good at sorting out complicated issues in an organized way. Anna was more likely to rush in, nostrils blazing, like a bull at a matador. Her eyes watered as she thought of him. The wounds were still too raw, and now she would have to deal with the fact that he would be staying behind. It was too much to handle, and she collapsed back onto the bed. Erica handed her a tissue and told her that everyone was ready to see Anna when she was ready to see them.

Anna nodded her head and turned away from Erica as she left the room, her hand dropping her tissue as she adjusted her pillow. She leaned over to retrieve it and noticed a bumpy sack of things under the bed. It was Jonathan’s sack. She had forgotten all about it. She yanked it forward and held it to her nose. Very faintly, she could smell his cologne beneath the layers of sweat and dirt smells. Her vision blurred as she sat up and opened the bag to see what was inside. She first found his passport, but she couldn’t bring herself to look at his picture or be reminded of the stamps of places they had been together or that he had told her about. She set the book next to her on the bed. She found a small wooden box that contained his whittling tools. She tried not to think of the rose that he gave her or of where it was now located. She dug deeper into the sack, past extra clothes that also smelled like him, to an odd shape at the bottom of the sack. It was wrapped in newspaper and rattled when she shook it. She gingerly moved the sack to the bed and crossed her legs beneath her. She unstuck the masking tape that held the paper closed.

The smell of wood and lacquer rose from the paper as she gently unwrapped the object inside, and then she gasped. There in her hands was a perfect replica of her horse, Zydeco, running with his mane and tail in the air out behind him. The wood grain matched his bay coloring. Her eyes filled with tears again as she thought of Jonathan stealthily carving that horse to give to her. When she turned it around to see it from the other side, something again rattled inside. She flipped the statue over and saw a small door in its stomach; using her fingernail, she pried the door open and shook the horse to eject its object into her hand. She didn't see it at first. Just a glint of green light as the object fell into her lap. She carefully placed the horse on her bed and lifted the object to her eyes. There in her blurry vision she held the most beautiful emerald ring she had ever seen. It was emerald-cut and edged in diamonds. A wave of blue swam in the green depths and reminded her of Jonathan's eyes.

And that is when it all hit her anew, his not being able to wait for her to get back to America, his telling her to prepare for a special dinner, his never being able to put his plan into action. The reminder hit her as if it was an iron skillet; she didn't have the voice to scream out loud, but that didn't stop her soul from rushing out of her. She couldn't breathe, she couldn't move, she was frozen as she quickly searched for a bucket to throw up in. She continued to heave long after her body had nothing else to throw up. Luckily, Erica had put a large glass of water next to her bed. Her body shook as she reached for the glass. She put everything back into Jonathan's sack, except the ring. She put that on a leather cord around her neck and hid it in her clothes. She slowly took her Claddagh ring off her right hand and stared at the hands holding the crowned heart. She would always love Jonathan and be loyal to his memory. She carefully put the ring on her right hand

with the heart facing away from the hand. To the world, this would signify that she was engaged, but to Anna it meant her heart was gone and that the man who had given her the ring had taken her heart with him.

Anna felt the temptation to shrivel up and hide inside, to close herself up and keep her heart to herself. Instead, she acknowledged the new chink in her armor. Ironically, it would help fortify her through the coming days and help her get home, but still allow light in for hope. She put the sack back under the bed and walked out of the barracks. It was time to leave Sudan once and for all.

CHAPTER 9

Anna walked into a huddled group in the cafeteria. Sanji and Erica were looking down toward a table as workers stood around them. Everyone talked at once, and the squabble of voices hurt her tender head. Anna pushed through and saw a map of Sudan on the table in front of them. They were trying to decide what she tried to figure out earlier--what to do with the people in the compound and where would they all go? She wanted to go home, but not before everyone was settled. She worried about what would happen to them.

“We should all go south to South Sudan!” Sanji shouted over the noise.

Everyone quieted down as they waited either for him to say more or for someone else to speak up.

“I admit that South Sudan is the closest refuge, as far as land goes, but there are no facilities there able to handle an influx of over two dozen people.” Erica’s reasonable voice deflated Sanji’s suggestion.

“Then where do you suggest we go? East and north take us further toward the war,” Sanji retorted.

“Then that only leaves west.” Everyone turned to face Anna as she spoke. She knew that west was the last thing on everyone’s mind, because no one would want to cross through the Darfur region. “I know the Darfur region is worse than the rest, but it is also the shortest distance to escape. We could fly the slave train women out at the airport at Al Junaynah with flight miles that HHP has left over to help volunteers. We could send them to Europe to wait out the war. The major airports aren’t supposed to be closed to

outsiders yet. Going west won't trap us in a corner." Anna sighed deeply; she tried not to think of those who wouldn't be flying out with them.

"You just want to take the easy route to get yourself home," Sanji accused.

Anna was shocked. "Well, it's true my only way home is by airplane, which I would have to take regardless of the situation, but I wouldn't leave the women and children on their own in even more unfamiliar circumstances. You should know better, Sanji." The other workers did not say anything. She glared at him until he acknowledged his mistake.

He looked at her somewhat apologetically, but still persisted, "Going further through the Darfur region would be suicide."

Erica was quiet and seemed lost in thought.

"Let's have everyone decide for themselves. You can take those willing to go to South Sudan, and I will take those willing to go to the airport. I'll take them as far as I have to," Anna snapped, no longer in the mood for bickering. Nothing was ever accomplished that way.

Sanji agreed that they would present the question to everyone at lunch, and they dispersed to their various chores. The compound would be closing, but they still needed to function at a close-to-normal level until they left.

Anna went to the hospital to see Lily and the others. The women were all better, but the hospital had the room for them that the barracks lacked because they had been built to only hold workers. A worker informed her that the women were in the school. Anna walked into the school, glad at how full it was. Some of the women, like Bitu, joined the children as students, which were divided into groups based on educational

level. Some of the women, like Chava and Hayat, became teachers to help with the groups. It had been decided when the compound was opened that English would be the primary language taught so that the students could participate in the global world. Basic math would also be taught. They would offer science with a focus on the environment in the location of the school, so the students could learn to better utilize and protect their local environment; geography was added to help them know the other parts of the world. HHP intended the compound to be a medical and educational triage unit and not for long-term care and schooling. The rest of the women sat in circles or along the walls and worked on handiwork; Zuwena was in this group. Anna could tell that they, too, were listening to the classes because every now and then they would look up at the blackboards. Anna scanned the smaller heads for Lily and found her in the center front of her class, engrossed in listening to her teacher as the teacher explained the letters of the alphabet. Anna decided she wasn't needed there, so she moved onto the animals to remind them that she was still alive.

The donkey immediately trotted over for ear rubs, and Anna sighed, content for a moment, to be doing something so calming and familiar, but she still felt the hole in her center. She walked over to the camels to check on them and the chickens, too, to make sure they had been fed. She hoped the animals could go with those who would go to South Sudan. She walked to the garden and inspected several of the vegetables; they would have a good harvest soon, hopefully before they left. She spent the rest of her time watering and weeding the plants. The methodical work lulled her into a mindless state, a welcome relief at that point. At lunchtime, Sanji called for everyone to come to the cafeteria.

Anna saw the children giggling and pushing on each other as they crowded into the cafeteria. Erica offered to be the main speaker for the meeting, and she first made sure translators were distributed among the group. Anna would try to communicate with hand signals and drawings to those few who would not have a translator available; Bitu and Lily were in this group. She tried not to listen to the growling of her stomach or notice the smell of fresh-baked bread in the air. Erica began by saying that HHP decided to close the compound because full-blown war was happening in the Middle East, and it was likely to trickle into northeastern Africa through Egypt and Sudan.

“Because of this, many of our newest compound members will not be able to go home, and we need to find a place for them and us to go until the war is over or until they can get back to their homes. It has been suggested by some that we go south into Southern Sudan. Another has suggested we send them west to the airport to fly into Europe. There are dangers in both options, and everyone must decide for themselves. There are no guarantees.”

Erica quieted and allowed the translators time to catch up. Anna wondered how to express these things in drawings on a chalkboard and hand signals. She started by drawing some of the members in the group and then by trying to draw what their homes might look like with family members nearby. She showed the group members going home and put a skull and tank in their pathway and a big “X” across their homes. From there, she drew the members going to a crossroad, where they either went to an airplane on the left or an African village on the right. She hoped her crude drawings were enough to get the messages across to them. She stood back for a moment to give them time to digest the picture on the board. Their faces told her that they understood the gist and that

they weren't happy with their options. Erica walked up to see Anna's drawings and saw their faces, too. She and Anna tried to show their sympathy in their faces, so that the group knew they understood.

Erica rolled the chalkboard to the front of the cafeteria and yelled for quiet to get everyone's attention. She suggested they all try to eat lunch and think about their options. The cafeteria had never been as quiet as when Erica broke up the meeting and everyone waited for the food to be brought to the service line. The kitchen staff began to clatter pots, pans, and dinnerware as they readied the food for distribution. Slowly, the group lined up, got their food, and then sat down again to fill their stomachs; the noise level increased as hunger subsided. So many voices at once sounded like a discordant orchestra. Many were trying to convince themselves and their friends of what option to choose, while others argued the pros and cons of the different options. Most sounded like they were for going to South Sudan; too many unanswered questions existed regarding the airplane option. In addition, many had relatives and/or friends to the south. The noise began to die down as people finished eating and made their decisions. The majority of the children seemed distracted from the talk of the adults, but Anna could tell that Lily watched and listened.

She hadn't eaten much and she seemed to stare at Anna's drawings on the chalkboard. Anna knew that if Lily tried to get home, she would likely be married off again. Maybe she wanted to see her friends again, but many of them would likely have been married off, too. Her family couldn't take care of her anymore. Anna hoped that Lily would choose to go with her group.

Erica walked back to the front of the cafeteria. She erased everything on the chalkboard except the airplane and the African village. She asked that those who chose the African village move to the right side of the cafeteria. She then asked that those who chose the airplane move to the left of the cafeteria. Noisily, everyone stood up and looked at the two sides of the room and the people standing there. Anna stood in the back of the cafeteria directly across from Erica. Neither moved; they stood as the poles of the little world comprised there in the cafeteria. Sanji moved to the right of the room. The majority of the compound workers and long-time citizens moved to the right side too. The long-time visitors of the compound went to the right side of the room. They knew South Sudan and some other parts of Africa, and they felt safer there. The slave train women stood longer in middle of the room. They were the ones whose choice was hardest. They were the ones most cut off from their homes and families, and either option held so many questions for them. No one spoke as they finalized their decisions. Several walked with their children to the right side of the room. Chava, Hayat, Bitu and Zuweni moved to the left side. Three other women followed their examples: Akilah, Ara, and Baysan. Anna did not know these women very well. Lily was the last to move. Instead of looking to the right and left, she looked at the chalkboard and then turned to face Anna. Anna simply smiled at her. They looked at each other for a long time, coming to an unspoken agreement. Lily briefly turned to Erica, who smiled at her, too. Then, with her head held high, Lily walked to the left side of the room and joined the women there.

CHAPTER 10

Everyone agreed that they would leave within two weeks. They needed not only to accumulate supplies, but to try to prepare the compound to be closed. They all hoped that the compound would be safe in their absence and that they could return to it sooner rather than later. One of the first steps was to figure out what the two groups would take and box up the nonperishable supplies that couldn't be carried with them or used up before they left. Anna knew that most of her supplies were those connected to the earth and animals, so she focused on collected surplus tools and tying them together to make them easier to tote to storage and to find later. She had already prepared many things because she knew her term at the compound was coming up. Now she went back through to make sure there wasn't something more to do. She also collected debris. Generally, the compound tried to minimize waste, but things accumulate when several humans live together in one place for a long time. She recommended to Sanji that they make a small landfill in the southwest corner of the compound. They would line it with plastic, like cities did in their landfills, to keep chemicals from leaking into the environment. First, they would continue to compost as much as possible.

Anna tied ropes to the donkey and camels and walked them outside the compound. Sanji said his group would take the animals, but not spoil them. The animals had been living the lush life in the compound, and now she wanted to remind them they could still forage. If there had been thick forage around, she would have tried to tether them to keep them close to the compound, but no lush vegetation was easy to access that close to the area. She let them loose, hoping and praying they would be safe and not go

any farther than they needed to. She would ask one of the boys in the compound to intermittently look out for them. The boy she had in mind was a bit of a monkey and liked to climb the compound walls near the men's barracks. He didn't seem to care that the barrack roof wasn't built to be walked on. She would make sure he had spotters to help him.

She returned to the compound to look in the warehouse for cage material for the chickens. As many of the chickens as possible would go with the people heading south, and she needed to find a way for them to cart them. Looking through the warehouse, Anna found the plastic they would need for the landfill. She looked in the back of the cargo truck to see if they had any chicken wire; instead, she found wood slats to use to make crates for the chickens and the unordered backpacks. She hadn't had a chance to return them, so she stuffed them back there. Twenty backpacks in all; they would help both groups carry supplies on their journeys. She grabbed them up and shook them out before taking them from the back of the truck; no hitchhiking bugs would be welcome. Before she took the backpacks to the hospital, she stopped to look at the fuel gauge of the truck. It was full, but hadn't been started in a while, and she worried it wouldn't start at all. She would ask Sanji if she could borrow one of the batteries he stashed somewhere, just in case she needed it.

Most of the women and children were out around the compound when Anna got to the hospital. She nodded to Erica to get her attention as Erica talked to one of the male workers about a cut on his hand. Anna knew that most of the women from the slave train did not have many belongings, but that the backpacks could help them carry supplies.

Erica walked over to her with a quizzical look on her face about the black clump in Anna's arms.

"They are backpacks that were sent to the compound by mistake. I put them in the back of the cargo truck because I couldn't send them back. I thought we could give them to the women taking the airplane and the rest to Sanji's group."

Erica picked one of the bags and held it up. It was bigger than a school pack, but not as big as one a soldier might use. "May I have two? I want to make medical kits for each group."

"Of course, do you want me to help? I have the garden and animals covered for today."

"Thanks, Anna, that would be great. I have the workers separating our supplies into necessities and non-necessities."

Erica directed Anna what to grab and how many to grab of the supplies for the medical kits. They laid them out on a counter and stood across from each other to pack the two backpacks.

"Who would have thought that we would end up in circumstances like this?" Anna asked. She and Erica had not really talked as friends in a while. They always worked well as colleagues, but work tended to get in the way of their being just friends, and, even on the slow days, the heat didn't help people throw any parties or anything.

"Definitely," Erica sighed, "I feel like I have lived more years in the last few months than I ever did before this summer."

Anna could see the fatigue in her friend's face, and she nodded her head in agreement. "It's hard to prepare for the unexpected and be ready for whatever comes

your way. I am thankful to have friends around to help us through this.” Erica looked into Anna’s eyes and smiled her gratitude. “Then again, it can’t be as bad as that time we got stuck in the jungle...” Anna said.

Erica’s smile widened. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Of course you do. It’s that time you got us lost--”

“If I remember correctly, you got us lost.”

“I never get lost...just turned around,” Anna retorted in mock seriousness.

It happened in Anna’s second summer with HHP. She and Erica were working together at HHP’s Vanguardia Compound in Guatemala. They were using a jeep to travel around giving medical assistance to some remote villages. Anna heard that they were near some Mayan ruins and begged Erica to let them drive to them on their way back to the compound. Anna drove the jeep so that Erica could be their navigator. Anna wrote down the directions she received from the villager and gave them to Erica. They were chugging along very happily for many miles when they came to a fork in the trail. The only indication it was a trail was the wagon wheels ruts left in the mud. Anna pulled up to the fork and asked Erica which way to go. Erica tilted the paper to try to read the penciled writing in a beam of sunlight. “It says go right.” Anna turned the wheel to the right, and the Jeep drove down the hillside. They drove for several more minutes until the trail died entirely. They had not seen ruts for a long time and now a lush wall of vines and trees stood immobile in front of them. Anna put the jeep in neutral and let the motor idle. “What did the paper say again?” she asked as she looked at the walls of jungle that also stood on the left and right of them.

“*Doblas derecho*. Turn right.” Erica held up the paper to Anna as proof.

“‘*Derecho*’?... I thought *derecho* meant ‘left,’” Anna said, her voice getting lower as she realized her mistake.

Erica was clearly amused. “‘*Izquierdo*’ means ‘left,’” and, to Anna’s dismay, Erica started laughing so hard the jeep rocked a little.

Anna looked down in disgust and saw the water pooling around the vehicle’s tires. “Um, Erica. We need to cut this comedy fest short, or we’ll be stuck.” She looked back to prepare to drive backwards. Erica stopped laughing and looked behind the vehicle, too. Anna shifted the jeep and pushed the accelerator. The engine roared to life, and the wheels spun water out behind the jeep. They didn’t move otherwise. Anna loudly groaned. She wasn’t afraid to four-wheel when she needed to, but she never found the fun in it that some people back home did, and she hated being stuck. She jumped out, trying to reach drier land and grabbed the machete out of the back of the vehicle. Erica watched what she planned to do and jumped out of the vehicle, too. Anna started to chop some branches from the nearby vegetation to make a rough mat to put as close to underneath the back tires as possible. Together they shoved the branches under the tires. Anna pushed the shifter into neutral, and, together, she and Erica shoved on the front of the jeep to try to roll it back on the vegetation. Then they hopped into the jeep, and Anna shifted into reverse. One of the branches shot forward from the tires, but, slowly, they caught traction, and the vehicle began to back up. Once they were on firmer ground, Anna gunned it, and the Jeep started to fly backward until her rearview mirror tangled in a nearby vine and a tree came toppling behind the jeep. Boom! They backed right into it.

“I think I have whiplash,” Erica said, wincing and rubbing her neck.

“You and me both. I could say some other things, but I really don’t want to jinx us any more than we already are,” Anna said, commiserating. Once again, she jumped out of the jeep. She chopped off the vine and surveyed the tree; luckily, only the upper portion of the tree fell into their path. Still it would take some chopping to get through it. They first got some water from their canteens and ate some granola bars to help prepare them for the work ahead. Anna took the first shift and hacked her way through the branches. She stopped only once when a snake startled her. She jumped back and let it pass into the vegetation to the right. She wanted to hack a lot more since it was her fault they were there in the first place. She would have succeeded, too, if the blade of the machete had not separated from the wooden handle in the middle of one of her swings. “Really! Son of a...” She shut her mouth tight before she said anything worse that might make things even more unlucky. She looked at the wood pieces in her hand in disbelief, and when Erica asked what was wrong, she held them up. Erica bent over laughing as Anna searched for the blade. She found it quicker than she expected and wrapped the handle end of the blade with duct tape she found in the back of the jeep. She doubled her efforts to cut through the brush. It was going to be dark soon, and they needed to get to civilization. Besides the usual safety considerations in the jungle, the jeep didn’t have doors and they wouldn’t be fully covered in it overnight. Eventually, she cut through the branches and prayed in gratitude that it wasn’t a bigger tree. Erica helped her move the vegetation out of the way, and they tried to budge the trunk to the side. They didn’t move it very much, but Anna felt they could get past, anyway.

They both jumped in, and Anna drove the jeep forward slightly. She then shifted into reverse and told Erica to duck down. She gunned the engine for all she could and

swung the vehicle through the jungle to the right and the path not blocked by the tree trunk. As soon as they made it to the fork, Anna turned the Jeep around so she could drive forward back to the compound. They made it back just as the compound lights were coming on and the gates were about to be closed for the night. Everyone cheered to see the two women back safe and sound. It wasn't until they gathered in the well-lit cafeteria that Anna noticed the burning sensation in her hands. She looked down to see she tore through her palms hacking at the branches. Erica fixed her up, and Anna said, "Sorry about today. If I hadn't been so gung-ho about seeing the ruins, and if I had involved you in my conversation with the villager, we wouldn't have had so much bad luck."

"Well, I certainly laughed harder today than I have in a while, so thank you for that. Besides, maybe those ruins weren't meant to be found." They hugged and parted that night as even stronger friends.

"At least your Spanish got better that summer. That is when I first learned you were a *gringa loca*," Erica said, laughing, bringing them back from their reveries to the present and the Sudanese heat.

Anna nodded and continued to stuff supplies into the backpack in front of her. She made sure the heavier stuff was in the bottom with the lighter stuff on top. She stuffed a rolled-up bed sheet into each side of the pack. They could be used to make a stretcher, bandages, or something. Each pack would be as identical as possible, though Erica might add some items to the one that went with the airplane group, since she would be with that group and would know how to use some of the more advanced medical supplies.

Anna and Erica left an empty backpack on the bed of each woman. A backpack was put on Lily's bed, too. Even if she wasn't an adult, she bore adult tribulations and seemed self-sufficient because of them. Before the sun went down, Anna made sure the animals were back safe in the compound. She and the others ended up in the cafeteria. Erica shared some of her stories with the others. Everyone laughed and enjoyed each other's company. The unspoken lines between bosses and workers and visitors were breaking down, and they began to see each other more as peers. Others began sharing some of their stories, and they stayed up far into the night.

CHAPTER 11

The days passed quickly as the compound's activities shrunk to the bare necessities in preparation for leaving. Anna harvested all of the available produce and gave it to the cafeteria. The plants would hopefully survive without a supervising hand for the future workers of the compound. No one thought it was possible that they would never see the compound again. The war in the Middle East would be like a lot of the previous wars, diminished to catch phrases on the news stations and in politicians' mouths. Life would resume. After all, they had been living in Sudan, where the government regularly fought against its own people, and the people fought against each other. They had learned to live in these conditions.

The animals were ready to go with Sanji's group, and the cafeteria took a few chickens for one last Sunday dinner. Anna tinkered with the cargo truck in the warehouse. The bed was cleaned out. The oil and oil filter were changed. She found supplies in a cabinet hidden in a corner of the warehouse. One of Sanji's workers brought a new battery. She found the keys in a wooden box on Faraji's desk earlier that week. Erica, Sanji, and Anna were scheduled to clean his office that night, and she definitely did not look forward to it. Since losing Jonathan and Faraji, she avoided that part of the compound as much as possible. She preferred to focus on her memories of them rather than the physical markers of their existence in that corner of the compound.

Anna took the truck keys out of her pocket and prayed the truck would start. She couldn't recall the last time she was so nervous. The airport was about a six-hour drive from the compound, and they were not prepared to walk the distance, nor was there time.

She pushed the key into the ignition and was happy to see the indicator lights come on the dashboard; at least the battery could do its part. She prayed again and turned the key; the engine grumbled and went back to sleep. Anna pumped the gas pedal three times and turned the key again. This time when the engine grumbled, she gave it more gas, but just enough to try and avoid flooding the engine. It took two more tries, with long pauses in between, and the engine finally turned completely over. Anna said a quick prayer of gratitude and let the engine idle for a few minutes. She opened the warehouse doors wide to allow for airflow. She wanted to park the truck outside but didn't want to have it noticed if the wrong kind of aircraft happened to fly over the compound. Flyovers were very rare, but she wasn't going to risk it. She set a timer on her watch to turn the truck off in few minutes and warned the children to stay out of the warehouse.

She spent the rest of the afternoon finishing the last crates for the chickens that would go with Sanji's group and moving the fence north in the donkey and camel paddock. The now unfenced section would hold the landfill, and she had several workers help her start the digging. She planned to have all of her work done quickly so she could help the others and then pack. She wanted to leave packing to the very end, because she wasn't ready to go back through Jonathan's things. The digging was slow, but a welcome distraction from her worries for the coming days. It took two days to get the hole dug and lined with plastic; the compost pile burst at the seams, and the workers helped turn it every now and again to get everything mixed. It would provide rich nutrients for the soil when they needed it again. The Taiwanese water purification system was being dismantled and stored in the warehouse. They had plenty of water to take with them and

for before they left. They did not want the equipment to tempt thieves, though they might not have known what it did. Slowly, their world was shrinking even more.

Anna greatly appreciated a shower that night and the fresh water revived her enough for the task that lay before her, Erica, and Sanji. They agreed to meet at Faraji's office right after dinner. Each had several boxes in their arms to help sort and pack up items as needed. First, they prayed for comfort and for the wisdom to do the job correctly. Two sections divided the office building: office space with file storage and a bedroom for Faraji. They divided the areas among themselves: Sanji took Faraji's bedroom, Erica took his desk, and Anna took the file systems. They worked quickly and quietly, the only sounds being the rustle of paper and the clatter of objects intermixed with the shuffle of boxes. Their jobs were to collect his personal belongings and organize the paperwork for the next batch of volunteers. Since no one was sure when they would return, HHP has asked that any confidential paperwork be hidden or destroyed according to future need. Anna took a manila folder and marked the back of the tab with the head of donkey. This folder would hold important information but not look obviously different from other folders. In the folder, she wrote a note, telling where the documents would be hidden and where the landfill was so future workers could use it or avoid it as necessary. She would hide the folder and later tell HHP where the workers could find the folder.

As their boxes filled, they placed them in the middle of the room. Before Sanji closed two of the boxes, Anna could see various gifts that children gave Faraji over the years. The gifts were simple and made from any materials the kids could find. Her eyes watered, and tears began to drop as Sanji brought out a bag of butterscotch candies. Anna's sniffles brought Erica's head up from the papers she was reading, and she, too,

looked sad when she saw the candies. Anna walked forward and grabbed some of the candies out of the bag, she gave one each to Erica and Sanji, and they sucked on their candies as they remembered Faraji, his stories and magic tricks. They decided to give the last of the candy to the children in the compound. Sanji and Anna finished their work and stood in front of the desk. Because the papers there were the most pertinent, it took Erica longer to get them sorted and packed. She got down to the last few pages and continued to sift through as the others helped move her boxes to the middle of the room. They would store Faraji's things in the warehouse, since they were not aware of any family members to give them to and did not have the time to do so now. They would hide the documents where Anna's note said they would and burn the remaining documents in the kitchen ovens. Smoke was a double-edged sword in the desert; in one way, it could signal that someone needed help, in another, it could be a signal for sitting ducks. They didn't need either. They looked around and sighed in sadness for the life that had filled those walls and the knowledge that Faraji would never walk through those doors again.

Erica made sure to lock the door behind them as they left the office for their much-desired beds. Sanji walked away faster than the two women did, and they used that time to see how the other was doing. Erica looked up at the night sky and said, "One of my favorite things about this compound is seeing the stars. You know they aren't so easy to see back home."

"I know exactly what you mean. One of the great injustices of having open land back home is that the sky is so often filled with clouds at night. But, then again, the clouds serve their purpose."

“I also enjoy the laughter of the children; even when things aren’t great in the hospital, I can hear them laughing outside. Sometimes it annoys me, but, ultimately, it is why we do what we do.”

“You are absolutely right, my wizened friend.”

“Did you just call me old!” Erica snorted.

“Of course not, I meant that you were smarter than the rest of us.”

“I still think you called me old.”

“Think what you want to think, it is one of your prerogatives as an elder.” Anna decided to use Erica’s mock insecurity against her.

Erica gasped and grabbed for Anna, but Anna was too fast, and she swerved into her barracks door as Erica kept running toward the hospital.

Everyone bustled through the last few days, packing up the things that pertained to the compound and cleaning. The landfill had been used and covered. No other big projects existed. Tomorrow would be Sunday, and they planned to make a special day of it and have a special meeting with everyone together instead of dividing into their usual groups. They would also have a big feast to use up most of the perishable foods. The two groups would leave the next day. Sanji’s group would leave before sundown. Anna’s group would leave after it was dark. She had been studying the road map of Sudan for many nights just before going to bed. She found other maps in the office and put them in the cargo truck’s glove box in case someone else would need them. She found it interesting how the roads in the North African countries, like Chad and Niger, tended to be accumulated in the southern portion of those countries. Few roads were mapped through the Saharan Desert for obvious reasons.

Anna picked the most direct route to the airport and memorized a few alternate routes, just in case they were needed. She finished her work at the compound and helped the others; there was just one more thing to do--pack ...and say goodbye, but she would focus on the first. She walked into her barracks and grabbed her duffel bag. She brought several changes of clothes with her when she arrived at the compound; now she needed to make room for other things. She recently hand washed her clothes and could smell the sun on them, as well as the ever-present sand of the desert. She selected what she would need for the next two days and a few items to tide her over until she got home. She would give the rest to the other women. She had not brought any personal items because she was a light packer and kept her memory full of nice things to recall when she needed comfort. Her toiletries would be added to her bag last. Now it was time to pack Jonathan's sack. She couldn't bring herself to go through it again. She reached in to make sure the wooden horse was safely wrapped and then quickly drew her hand out again. She touched the lump at her chest. The emerald ring had worn a callus in her skin from swinging around and being pressed into her skin as she worked. She tried not to think of the ring, but still she felt safest having it around her neck. She folded Jonathan's sack over to minimize any bulk and pushed it into the center of her duffel bag. He, too, had been a light packer and there was little left of his belongings. She pushed on her bag to get out any excess air and zipped it up. She sat down next to it with a thump. So much had happened in one summer--was it any wonder that she felt so worn out.

Sunday was indeed a day to rest for the people in the compound. The compound looked much larger with things cleaned up and stored away. There was also an echoing quality in the laughter of the children. The echo reminded the people that the compound

would stay behind on duty while they separated to the south and west. But, in the meantime, the children were enjoying the additional space and added even more speed to their races. The daytime had been spent in playing games and telling stories. Sanji had been in rare form and shared one about an adventure from when he was younger. He was separated from a hunting party after eating some bad fruit and going off in the nearby bush to help relieve himself. The others in the party did not hear him when he told them where he was going and thought that he had gone on ahead of them. So, when they were ready to depart their lunch site, they didn't wait for him. Sanji used this story to illustrate his own sense of bathroom humor and everyone rolled with laughter from his various sounds of torment. He was at the end of obtaining relief, when he heard an animal in the brush near him. He could tell the animal wasn't in a hurry as it walked through the tall grass. He knew they were in lion country, and his biggest fear was that a lion would come upon him in this condition. He crouched even lower to the ground and grabbed for his spear. The animal kept walking toward him; it was too quiet for him to be able to figure out what kind of animal it was. His fear grew as the animal approached, and he was just about to jump up and yell when the head of a warthog broke through the grass in front of him. The warthog looked just as surprised as Sanji, stuck its tail up, and ran back in the direction it came. Sanji was so relieved, in more than one way, that he quickly rejoined the hunting party. Anna thought it even more hilarious to see the stoic Sanji expressing himself in such a humorous way. She decided then and there to remember him that way, rather than as the stuffy grump he tended to come off as.

The children were called to join the adults as they prepared to eat. This would be the only meal for the day, and it was bigger than most Anna had seen at Thanksgiving

time. Everyone's eyes were big, and they heard growling stomachs around the room. Since everyone was together at the same time, Sanji asked one of the workers to give a prayer for the food. Previously, people said their prayers on their own and as they wanted. Plates were filled and refilled as they enjoyed the food and each other's company. More laughs were heard throughout the cafeteria, and Anna could see Lily laughing with some of the other children. Lily had been shy at first with them, but, luckily, she remembered that she, too, was still a kid and did not hold herself to some adult standard for her amusements. When Anna took her extra clothes to the hospital earlier that day, Lily had been packing. Lily hand signaled that she wanted to take the alphabet book with her in her backpack. Anna nodded yes and made sure Lily also packed paper, pencils, and crayons; she would send replacement supplies to the compound later, to replace what Lily took.

Anna was brought out of her reverie by the loud clatter of a dropped pan and saw Lily looking at her. They smiled at each other, and Lily went back to paying attention to the other children. Anna looked around the room and saw the many faces she had come to know over the weeks and years. She looked at the women who would be leaving with her tomorrow. Zuvena would be coming with them since she had nowhere else to go. She and Anna had not been able to visit one-on-one since that first talk in the cafeteria. She still hadn't visited with Chava, Hayat, or Bitá, and she looked forward to getting to know them. Chava and Hayta were busy with the school. Bitá and Anna had not been in contact. Anna knew that Bitá was shy. It didn't help that Bitá inadvertently startled Anna in the past when Anna turned around and found a figure dressed from head to toe in black fabric. Anna always apologized for jumping, and she could see in Bitá's lovely eyes her

own apology. Verbal communication was their biggest barrier, but Anna hoped they would be able to visit somehow on the airplane tomorrow.

The kitchen staff was grateful to have extra hands to clean up after the meal, and they were able to join the rest of the group for the meeting later that evening. Sanji and Erica selected Anna to lead the meeting, and she was nervous. What could she say to everyone, a group with so many differences and so many similarities? The meal inspired Anna to stick to a Thanksgiving theme. They folded the tables out of the way, and everyone sat in a semi-circle while she stood up in the front of the room. She licked her lips, looked at all of the expectant faces, and smiled; all she could see was what they had in common.

“I would like to start by thanking everyone for helping get the compound ready these past few weeks and for all the hands that prepared the food we just enjoyed. It isn’t often that a person gets to be a keynote speaker at what feels like the close of an era. Tomorrow we will separate, but some of us expect that we will be back when things calm down. Some of us won’t ever see each other again.” Anna looked around with blurry vision.

“I hope you will humor me when I draw on an American tradition tonight, while acknowledging that my theme is universal. The meal was my inspiration of sorts.” Here some of the group laughed.

“You see there has been some misunderstanding about the first Thanksgiving in the United States. That feast was not the culmination of several days of peace and plenty. That feast was the culmination of moving to a new land, getting along with new and different neighbors, and many failed attempts to feed themselves. That feast signified

overcoming tribulation. So, it is very fitting that we did the same tonight. One thing about that event was that it did not matter who brought what to the table; what mattered was that they sat down together. What mattered is that they thanked the Giver of all things good, God up above, for the bounty, and they shared that bounty with each other. That feast gave them additional fortitude to keep moving forward. It was a reminder that bad times don't last forever and that even in the worst times, we are still blessed. It is also a reminder that God blesses all of His children, no matter how different they think they are from each other. That feast happened almost 400 years ago, but its lessons still apply today.

“Each of us came to the compound with our differences, but as we got to know each other, we learned of our similarities. Today I see only our similarities, and I pray we can take these lessons with us into the world we will enter tomorrow. We have been safe here, but tomorrow we enter a world at war, more so than when we got here. We can still be safe. We can pray for help, and it will come. Tonight, I would like each of us to say at least one thing they are thankful for.”

“I will start by saying that even though I don't always appreciate His methods, I am grateful God keeps me humble.” Anna sat down with a smile, encouraging others to share.

Many people did share what they were grateful for that night, like life, family, friends, medical assistance, food, clean water to drink, and shelter. Many of the slave train women had their own personal responses, but they also shared gratitude for freedom. Lily hand signaled that she was happy for books. The skin around Bitá's eyes crinkled from a smile and she turned her head down. Sanji lightened the mood by

expressing gratitude for that warthog that day not being a lion. Erica was the last to speak, and she paused for a long time before she said something. Anna could tell that Erica was trying to decide if she would be serious or not; she saw the answer in Erica's smile.

“I'm grateful for beds. They give you a soft place to end the day and a firm place to heal from wounds, but they are also a good place to hide your diary.”

Everyone laughed again and recognized the cue to disperse. Zuwená closed the evening with a beautiful prayer.

CHAPTER 12

Everyone slept in the next morning. There were no chores to do, and they had long evenings ahead of them. Mid-morning greeted them with a nice breeze, and it helped keep their spirits up. The children lazed in the shade rather than play their usual games. The adults had warned them to save their energy. Everything was taken care of; now all they could do was wait, which might have been the worst thing to do. Sanji had decided to start walking out of the compound in the late afternoon when the hottest part of the day would be behind them. He recognized that many of them had not walked so far in so long and that they needed to start easy and build up from there. He planned to get as far as they could and then camp. If the moon was bright, they would travel farther and rest when the day was hottest. Anna's group did not need to go as far as Sanji's, only about 280 miles, but with the terrain and unreliable road conditions, the drive would take six hours, and, that was if there were no troubles along the way. The truck would attract notice during the daytime, so she had decided they would leave when it was dark. They would drive straight to the airport and sleep in the truck until the airport opened. She didn't know when any of the flights would be, but once they were there, they would be willing to wait.

She and the women in her group helped Sanji's group conserve their energy and do what work needed to be done until they all left that afternoon. The people were not as talkative as they had been the night before. Anna wondered if the day felt as surreal to them as it seemed to her. So much time had been spent getting them to this point, only now to sit in the shade and wait. She was never good at waiting. She had already made

her rounds more than once, checking and rechecking everything. She had even tried to take a nap but kept dreaming of storms. She woke up wondering if it was her dreams or one of the boys having a tantrum in the warehouse. She had already run the truck for a few minutes; it had gotten a break the day before. She knew she didn't need to run the engine every day, especially to conserve gas, but she feared that if she didn't, it wouldn't start. *Funny how superstition sneaks in when everything is riding on one thing.* As far as she could tell, everything was as ready as it was ever going to be. She sighed and walked down to the animals. She had not wanted to spend too much time with them because it was going to be hard to say goodbye. She noticed Lily beat her to them and was rubbing the little chick. She bravely caught it herself. Anna smiled to see the girl's initiative.

"Hi." Anna spoke so she didn't startle Lily as she walked up to her and the chick. Lily turned and held up the chick. Anna smiled at her and rubbed the little head that peered through Lily's fingers; the chick made peeping noises. Anna hand signaled that the chick would join its mom and the other chickens in the nearby crates that would go with Sanji. When Lily shook her head and held the bird closer to herself, Anna had to draw in the dirt with a stick and that little chicks don't fly on airplanes. Lily shook her head again, and so Anna resorted to the old "the mom can't do without its baby" story. Lily seemed to like that excuse a little better. When the chick cheeped, she let it return to its mom. Anna nodded "yes" to Lily and gave her a thumbs up. Together they walked over to the donkey, who met them at the fence. Anna really hoped that he would end up with a good family in whatever village he ended up in. He was a good donkey, but Sudan was hard on livestock, especially donkeys who were used as pack animals until they fell by the roadside. Or abandoned as he was before. Anna had learned her lessons about the

cycle of life on her ranch, but that didn't mean she was coldhearted about an animal's life. She let Lily rub the donkey's ears, while she gave him a back scratch. Sanji and his group knew how she felt about the animals, and they promised they would do what they could for them, even if they were just animals.

Anna left Lily with the donkey and walked toward the hospital to check in with the women who would be joining her that night. They sat in the shade along the hospital wall, fanning themselves with makeshift fans. Chava and Hayat chatted softly and motioned to their bellies; it seemed like they were beginning to feel the first movements of the life inside them. These two women seemed to have lost most of the apprehension they had toward each other. Zuwena sat next to Hayat and seemed to daydream with a serene smile on her face. Anna wondered what Zuwena was thinking about. She could not find Bitu among the women. Some of the other women sat with them and watched the children in the shade across from them.

Anna walked into the hospital and found Bitu's cloth-covered silhouette standing in front of Erica. Anna could tell that Bitu was shaking her head "yes" by the way the fabric rippled from her head down, but the fabric concealed what was held between the two women. Anna stepped to the side, and saw Erica, holding up a roll of gauze. Erica said "gauze," as if trying to teach the word and object to Bitu. Bitu shook her head "yes" again and mimed that it was used to wrap body parts. This time Erica said "yes" and nodded her own head. Anna stepped closer, and Erica spoke in her direction, "Bitu has been helping me in the hospital. She is learning quickly and could work in the medical field someday." Erica patted Bitu's arm and smiled at her. Anna could tell Bitu smiled back because the skin crinkled at the corner of her eyes. Bitu still felt most comfortable in

her traditional clothing. All anyone could see were her beautiful eyes and that portion of her face nearest them.

“Good job, Bitu,” Anna told her, looking her straight in the eyes, hoping to encourage her. She also gave Bitu a thumbs up, but Bitu had lowered her eyes. This made Anna sad and momentarily angry, not at Bitu, but at the circumstances that caused a woman to hang her head down and look away. It hurt her to see a woman who couldn’t see her own value. Anna had been there and was willing to help any woman who needed it. Anna softly patted and rubbed Bitu’s shoulder; slowly Bitu looked up, and Anna smiled at her again. She could see the slightest crinkle in the corner of Bitu’s eyes. “Well, I guess I’ll leave you two to your lessons.” Anna walked out, not sure of what to do with herself. She stopped near the door and looked around. Everyone seemed to be where she saw them last, with the addition of Lily sitting next to Zuwen and looking at her books. She could tell time had in fact slowly ticked by because the shadows were now at different angles. She headed to her barracks to triple check her pack.

She still couldn’t look long at Jonathan’s bag without her eyes watering. At least now, it was snuggled safely in the middle of her duffel bag between her clothes and extra rolls of toilet paper. Anna liked to be prepared for as many contingencies as possible. She had everyone pack extra toilet paper and what provisions they could carry. She would also carry a separate provision bag for her group, and Erica would carry their medical supply bag. If they didn’t need it, they would give it to someone who did when they got to the airport. She pressed her hand to the small lump that hung beneath her shirt. The ring still rested there. She sat down on her bed and looked around. The barracks seemed so hollow with all evidence of life cleaned and packed away. She wondered if that was

what the compound looked like when it was first built, perhaps without the worn wood and peeling paint. She worried about what condition the compound would be in when they returned. *Would I ever see it again? Would I ever see Sanji and the other workers again? What about the caravans that followed their annual routes past the compound? Time was marked by how grown the kids in the caravans were each time they visited.* Anna had no answers and knew there was nothing she could do to ensure that things would stay the same. Her job now was to get the women safely away from here.

Anna zipped her bag with finality and carried it to the warehouse. She put it behind the truck's seat and climbed into the bed of the truck to double-check the supplies she put there. One drum of water...check. Securely tied to the frame of the truck...check. Provisions and medical supply bags...check. Canteens...check. The water would help hydrate the group; the canteens would allow each woman to drink her own water and not have to share. Anna double-checked that the tarp over the back of the truck was tied securely. This tarp was the only cover the women would have, other than the sides and tailgate of the truck. Anna also gathered bedding and stacked it in the back. Six hours in the back of the truck would be bumpy and uncomfortable. Only she and Erica could drive the truck. Chava and Hayat couldn't drive sticks. The truck's seat sat three people, so they would have to rotate sitting up front. Anna made sure her map was in the glove box. To get to the highway, she would take the path that brought her to the compound. Only one highway was available to get them to the airport, but it was better to be safe than sorry. Anna looked around and sighed; there was nothing more she could do. The donkey brayed as he was lead past where she stood in the warehouse doorway. Anna was glad that he did not fight against his halter; he just seemed to say goodbye. It would have been

harder for her to watch him go if he had fought being led away. The camels placidly walked in front. They were used to going places, and this wasn't any different. Sanji's workers had already tied the chicken-filled crates to the back of one of the camels. Anna followed them toward Sanji's gathered group.

Anna could feel the nervous energy. The children were racing and bouncing up and down. They had spent enough time waiting and being still. They were ready for an adventure. The adults seemed half as excited. They were all smiling, but tinges of worry floated in and out of their eyes. Piles of packs were to the right of the group. Everyone faced the middle of their circle and watched Sanji expectantly. "There is not much to be said. I know we have already said it. I know we have already given our goodbyes. I will pray, and then we will head out." No one commented on the crack in Sanji's voice as he prayed. No one dawdled afterward. Anna and her group lined up near the gate to see them off. They hugged several as they walked out. Lily made sure to rub each animal as it passed. Sanji was right, there wasn't anything more they could do but pray and walk. Anna's group waved at Sanji's even after they stopped looking back. She and Erica watched the horizon that Sanji's group was hidden behind. No one turned back. No one returned. Anna shivered when she realized it would be hard to get news of whether or not Sanji's group made it to safety. She knew that if he could he would tell HHP, but what if he couldn't? Anna sent additional prayers toward heaven for the group.

"Don't worry, Anna. They are made for this land, and they have survived worse and longer, before outsiders and compounds ever showed up." Erica had read her mind.

“Do you have to always be so level-headed?” Anna chided. “Sometimes you sound like Spock on *Star Trek*, but without the human side.” Anna turned to hide her tears from Erica.

“Live long and prosper, my sensitive friend. You know it’s how I cope.”

Anna regretted chiding Erica. Sometimes she forgot that Erica’s beginnings were far different from her present. She also forgot that her friend wasn’t all iron and ice. “I’m sorry, Erica. I forget.” The two women hugged. “But you would look good with pointy ears!” Erica slapped Anna’s arm and shook her head. Together they turned and looked at their own little group. The compound looked even bigger with so few people in it.

“Not much longer and it will be our turn to leave,” Erica said reflectively. “I know it will be hard, but we should try to eat dinner while we have light.” Sanji had already turned off the breakers to the compound. Erica or Anna could have turned them back on, but that didn’t seem right. It would be like erasing his last service to the compound.

The women gathered in a circle with their cans of tuna outside the hospital door. Everyone was subdued, and the slightest sound eerily echoed through the compound. Lily made sure to sit close to the group. They didn’t talk except to ask for or motion for the crackers they passed around. They sat that way long after the food was gone and sunlight decreased as the sun began to slide below the western horizon. It would be a while before the moon caught up in the sky. Erica turned her lantern on and looked around. Their eyes were big from the light and from nervousness. They understood that outside of the compound was danger. A palpable and unpredictable danger. Anna was the first to stand up and brush off her pants.

“Well, ladies, we can’t put this off anymore.” She didn’t sign this time. Everyone could understand it was time to leave. “Please gather your things and meet me in the warehouse.”

Everyone began to stand and brush off their clothes. The women walked with Erica into the hospital. Anna walked to the warehouse, pressing her hand to her jeans to reassure herself the truck key was there. The dark interior of the warehouse was different from the dark outside. Anna shone her flashlight over the front of the truck. She slowly walked around it, making sure everything was still ready. She jumped when she shone her light in the back of the truck because a stack of bedding looked like a human at first. Reassured the truck was ready, she climbed into the cab, inserted the key in the ignition and prayed again. Not just for the truck to start, but for their trip to be safe. She turned the key to the first click. The glow plugs needed to warm up to help the truck start. After a few minutes wait, she turned the key fully, and the engine rumbled to life. She flipped on the headlights and found her group waiting for her at the warehouse door. Each face, blinded by the headlights, showed a mixture of hope and concern. There were no guarantees for any of them. Anna allowed the truck to idle and hopped out to help everyone get settled. Chava and Hayat would sit in the front with her. But, first, they needed a prayer. This time Hayat said it, and her soft Arabic sounded like poetry as she did so. “I’ll get the warehouse door and compound gate,” Erica said as she walked ahead of the truck.

Slowly, Anna inched the truck forward. She hadn’t realized how narrow the paths were between the buildings. She didn’t stop until she was on the opposite side of the compound walls. Erica was closing the gates when Anna looked at her in the side-view

mirror. A cold feeling rushed down her back--she couldn't leave yet. She turned off the headlights and let the truck idle. "Wait!" She hopped out and stopped Erica from locking the gate. "I still ... need ... to do ... something." Erica heard the crack in Anna's voice. She dropped the chain and climbed into the bed of the truck. The other women peeked out to see what was going on. They seemed to understand and sat back to wait.

"We'll wait for you right here," Erica said.

Anna held the metal bars of the gate like a prisoner looking for freedom. Tears had already begun to fall, and her breath was playing hide and seek with her lungs. Slowly, she swung a gate wide enough to slide past. Slowly, she walked across the open space in front of the office and didn't stop until two mounds lay in front of her. They blurred, and her heart pounded against her ribs. She tried to speak to the mound on the right first. The words didn't come initially, and she ended up toying with the bottom of her shirt. She focused on the butterscotch candy wrapper that peeked from the soil. A breeze waved it like a beckoning hand, and she got her voice back. "Faraji, I know you aren't there right now. You are up above, but looking down helps me see better through the tears," Anna said, sniffing, she knew better than to wipe her face on her sleeve, but it was all she had. "Thank you so much for letting me help here. Thank you for being patient with my stubbornness. Thank you for your initial insistence that your way was right." She chuckled and sniffed at the same time.... "For being my friend ... thank you more... I'll take care of the women...but you are welcome to check in." She couldn't go further. She let her tears fall, delaying what needed to be done next. She stepped closer to the mound on the left.

This time she did look up with heartache, and her ears got wet as her tears ran along the contours of her cheeks. "Please forgive me... I can't say your name right now...It's taking all I have to just say this." Her neck began to ache from looking up, crying and talking. "I pray God can let you see into my heart, because there are some things I just can't say... I miss you so, so much." She gasped for air and knelt down. "I know it doesn't always look like it, but you know I hide behind work." She hung her head, trying to work up the strength to stand up and walk away. A strand of her hair fell forward. "I love you so...so very much. I always will...and I can't leave... without you." Her voice failed her and she bowed her head. Eventually, she stood and looked at the sky. The stars were gleaming bright. "Please come with me..." A breeze brushed the strand of hair from her face, and a star shot across the sky. Anna gasped. She had never seen a falling star in her life. She couldn't help herself and chuckled. She wiped her face dry and walked back through the gate. She looked up once more at the stars and then resolutely locked the chain. No one said anything to her as she climbed into the truck and flipped on the headlights.

CHAPTER 13

It took two long, bumpy hours for them to drive from the compound to the highway. Anna turned off the headlights and drove by moonlight once the moon was higher in the sky. She felt safer that way. That way they weren't as obvious. She could also see their surroundings better and not just what the truck's lights illuminated. She faithfully steered the truck around as many dips and bumps as possible, remembering the women sitting in the back. No one spoke, and eventually Chava and Hayat fell asleep in the seat next to her. Anna wished she could turn on the radio, like she would back home, but the truck's radio didn't work. She stopped at the highway; it looked like an asphalt strip in the middle of nowhere. If there had been more plants and rocky bluffs, the land could have passed for Arizona or New Mexico. There was no sign of life. She almost flicked the truck's turn signals on and remembered there was no point. Instead, she jumped down from the cab to check on the women in the back. Everyone was asleep except Lily. She seemed unfazed. Anna got back in and turned the steering wheel to the left. Obviously, the asphalt was much smoother to drive on, but Anna felt like a sitting duck. She increased her speed.

Three hours passed in relative quiet. The rumble of the engine kept Anna company as she sped toward the airport. She followed the road over the flats of plateaus and down into the rocky valleys. She slowed down as the road curved around the bluffs. She slowed even more when they came to a deep curve and something hit the windshield. Lines in the glass arced in every direction and cut her view in half. She slammed on the brakes, and the truck came to a sliding and reluctant stop. Fortunately, the truck slid on

gravel on the road and the tires did not screech as she stopped. She cut the engine.

Slowly, she peeked her head out her door window and looked to see what caused the break in the glass. In the distance, she could see what looked like red fireflies. Each time one lit up, a crash of thunder followed. *Gunshots*. Two groups were firing at each other around the bend of the road. The highway seemed to pass them to the left, but a stray bullet must have found the truck. Chava and Hayat looked at her from the cab. Erica was leaning out of the back of the truck. “What’s wrong?”

“Gunshot.” Anna asked Chava and Hayat to get in the back of the truck. Erica instructed them all to lie down as flat as they could. Anna looked back up the road and made sure there was no traffic. Still no sign of life. She sat on the truck’s bumper and thought. *Good thing I wasn’t using the headlights... If I leave the road, I’ll have to drive over the plateau. Who knows what’s up there. Right now I wish this wasn’t a diesel--it makes too much noise... We’d lose time backtracking to a side road.* Anna stood up and looked around the bend of the road. The groups had quieted down. She wondered if they were done for the night or just taking a break. She looked up for helicopters; the sky was clear and quiet. No thrumming of propellers. She looked forward one more time. *What else can I do?* A breeze caught some of her hair and tugged it to the left. She turned her head to get her hair out of her face and vaguely saw the outline of another plateau, past the fighting groups. If she could get there, the truck would be hidden again. She walked to the back of the truck and climbed in. “I’m going to wait and see. If they start up again, I’m going to gun it. Hopefully, their noise will cover the sound of the engine.” She didn’t say what they would do if the groups didn’t start up again.

Minutes clicked by. Eyes got heavy from laying in the back of the truck in the still night. Anna looked out of the back of the truck at the stars. She began to pray in her mind. Minutes continued to click by when the night was sliced again by the sound of thunder. No clouds were in the sky, and Anna knew the fireflies would be out again. She patted Erica's leg. Erica sat up and nodded. Anna walked to the bend in the road. Red flashes and loud booms flashed in the distance. It looked like they were moving away from the road. Anna turned the key to the first click. She watched the flashes and saw that they were coming more often. Flash to the left. Flash to the right. Each followed with a shower of booms. She turned the ignition further to fully start the truck. She didn't give the engine any gas; she just let the truck crawl forward. She watched the flashes and counted between them. They were definitely coming faster and more frequently. She gunned the engine, and it roared. She prayed and set her eyes toward the next plateau. The truck rose and raced forward. Anna kept her eyes on the flashes until she had to turn to the left. She kept her eyes on the flashes in the passenger side-view mirror, only looking at the road long enough to make sure she was on it. The flashes continued and seemed undeterred by her actions. Anna didn't stop to tell the women they were past the danger. She kept the pedal down as far as it would go. She tried to swallow and found her mouth and throat had gone dry. She reached for her canteen. It had rolled to the floor of the truck. She looked at the road once and then reached deep to grab the container. She grabbed it up, just in time to avoid a rockslide that blocked half of the road. She swerved to the right and straightened out the truck. Her nerves couldn't take anything else. She slowed the truck down so she could safely drive and drink some water. The rest of the drive was uneventful. The road followed the contours of the land over and between

plateaus and over small rivers. Anna's heart did not slow down until she could see the city of Al Junaynah in the distance. She hadn't been in that city since she came to Sudan, three long and unreal months ago.

The city lights lit up the night sky above the low-lying buildings. Few buildings had more than two levels and usually the tallest structures were the minarets of the mosques. It was late, and the sandy streets were generally deserted. Anna turned on the headlights and followed the main road to the center of the town. She felt it oddly silent, even for that time of night. She turned right to follow the road to the north side of the city, to the airport. The roads were uneven. Debris and sand piled up intermittently in the road. Anna found herself weaving the truck slowly through what should have been a straight path. As she drove closer to the north side of town, she noticed the doors of the buildings were open and the windows were broken. Not even a dog walked the street or alleys. Anna's heart began to beat. She accelerated, and the truck's engine roared to match the demand. She didn't slow down until she reached the airport gate, but instead of an airport terminal, a pile of rubble welcomed her. Anna pressed the brakes, and the metallic gate, guarding a demolished terminal, bowed as the truck nudged it. She looked around the cracks in the windshield. She looked out the passenger-side window. She turned to look out her window and jumped. She wasn't expecting Erica to be standing there with a worried look on her face. "Did you make sure it was safe to get out?" Anna snapped. She pushed Erica back by opening the truck door and getting out.

"I looked and I haven't seen anyone ... for a long time," Erica snapped back. Together they walked to the front of the truck and looked around as far as light was

available. They both shook their heads in disbelief, and their eyes turned downward with worry.

“Do you think the old airport was hit, too?”

“Probably, it was used for military and humanitarian purposes.”

Anna began to pace. “What about the SHLP offices?”

Erica stood, turning her head to follow Anna’s pacing and raised her hands up in a shrug, “They won’t be open until the sun comes up.”

“Ok, ok. That won’t be for another five or so hours.” Anna continued to exasperatedly pace. “We need a safe place to park and wait. Any ideas?”

“How about we drive to the offices and park backwards against a wall? That will block the back of the truck from view and intruders. The bumper is only so many inches wide and will prevent anyone from getting into the back and bothering the women--”

“Yeah, and you and I can keep watch in the front seat,” Anna said interrupting Erica. Erica put her hands on her hips and cocked her head. “Sorry, Erica,” Anna said.

They checked on the women in the back. All were sleeping soundly, even Lily. Erica climbed into the driver’s seat, and Anna climbed into the passenger side. It took thirty minutes to wind back through the city streets and park at the SHLP offices. They seemed unscathed. Anna helped direct Erica in backing the truck as close to the building as possible. “I’ll take first watch.” Erica could see Anna’s hesitation. “You have to sleep some time or you will be useless to everyone, including yourself.”

“Fine!” Anna said, sighing. She curled up on two-thirds of the seat and tried to sleep. Her ears strained for any sound of trouble. Erica cracked her window to allow a

cross current of air into the truck. A cool breeze caressed Anna's cheek, and, before she knew it, she was asleep.

CHAPTER 14

“Anna?”

Anna felt her shoulder being jiggled and mumbled incoherently. Her back and legs were cramped, and, when she stretched, she kicked the truck door. She immediately sat up and looked at Erica standing outside the driver’s door. “Time to wake up.”

“Oh, Erica. You didn’t wake me for my shift.”

“You needed the sleep, remember? I slept in the back while you drove to the city.”

Anna’s memory quickly reminded her of the drive, the fighting, and the bombed airport. “Is SHLP open?”

“About to be, but first we need to move the truck forward to let the women out.”

Erica climbed back in, and Anna shuffled in her seat to sit up better. The other women were glad to be in the city and to be able to stretch and walk around. They could see the worry in Anna and Erica’s faces, but the two women didn’t tell them what was bothering them. Anna and Erica asked the women to wait by the truck and then stood by the office front door. They watched time pass on Erica’s watch. Eventually, a worker arrived and unlocked the door. “Is Fattah in?” Erica asked.

“Yes, he is saying his first prayers for the day.”

“Ok, when he is done, please let him know that Erica and Anna from HHP are here to see him? We have some women with us. Do you mind if they use your facilities?”

“No, certainly, they are down the hall to the left.”

Erica returned from telling their group, and she and Anna sat and waited. Their surroundings and recent experiences seemed both vivid and unreal to Anna. Just yesterday she went from working in a humanitarian compound in rural Sudan to driving through a war zone. Only to find out her mode of getting home was now a pile of rubble. The normal appearance of the office space with its desks and chairs, telephones and potted plants, abraded Anna's senses. She couldn't even appreciate the electric fan blowing on her from the opposite corner of the room. Fortunately, they didn't have to wait long for Fattah.

"Good morning." He smelled like soap and wore clean white linen clothes. He directed them into his office, but did not shake their hands. "I would remind you ladies to cover your heads as soon as you leave these offices. The city is not your compound."

"You are absolutely right. We have been so busy and distracted lately," Erica stated.

Fattah half smiled. "What is it I can do for you?"

"Well," Anna blurted, "you can help us find a way out of Sudan. We have five refugees with us and the Sabera Geneina Airport is a pile of rock."

Fattah's raised eyebrows reminded Anna that he was not used to being talked to like that, especially by a woman. However, she wasn't about to start worrying about his sexist sensibilities. Erica looked at her sternly. Anna knew that Erica didn't agree with Fattah's behavior, but honey caught more flies. Anna shook her head.

"What Anna means is, is the old Al Junaynah Airport still active?"

“No, they bombed both airports at the same time. No one is getting in or out. Delivery of humanitarian supplies has been temporarily postponed. It seems you ladies are stuck in Sudan.”

“When did they bomb them?”

“A few days ago.” Fattah was keeping his information to himself.

“Did the bombs take out that small fuel depot in the southeast corner of the Sabera airport?” Anna asked with more honey on her tongue this time.

“No, but you need a code to get in.” Fattah seemed to enjoy needling the two women by not giving too much information at once.

“Can you give us the code?” Anna and Erica asked at the same time.

“Perhaps, but it won’t help you. There are checkpoints along the Sudan-Chad border. You might as well stay here in town.”

Something in his eye rubbed Anna the wrong way, but Erica was pushing her toward the door. “Thank you, Fattah. I’ll be sure to let HHP know how helpful you have been.”

“Do you believe that guy, Erica? He does not deserve kindness. He is basically holding our freedom in his hands and dangling it in our faces.”

“Anna, what do you expect us to do?”

“Oh, I can think of a few things. You make sure the women are settled in the back of the truck and give me a few minutes to use the facilities.” Anna walked into the restroom. As she washed her hands, she stared at her reflection in the metal paper towel holder. Her blurry image looked haggard, and dark circles were visible under her eyes. She slowly wiped her hands and stared at the metal box. Before she thought twice, more

furious than she'd ever been, she ripped it off the wall and carried it down the hall. Fattah's door was shut. She kicked it in. She could hear the receptionist yell behind her, but she didn't care. Fattah's shocked face was quickly covered by the metal box coming down on him. Blood trickled from his nose down his white linen clothes and onto his desk.

"What did you say that code was again, Fattah?" He looked at her with fire in his eyes, and the box came down again. He tried to stand, and she shoved him down.

"You see, I have had all kinds of hell in this country, and I'm not about to stay here any longer. You can tell me that code, or you can explain to SHLP why you didn't help some poor defenseless women in their time of need. Either way, your face is going to look like hamburger." Realization dawned on Fattah's face and Anna stopped her next blow in mid-air. It was just long enough for him to cover his head with his arms and sputter, "7984"

"Will it activate the pumps?"

"Yes"

She raised the box as if to hit him again, swerved, and walked out the door. She dropped the box on the receptionist's desk, looked her in the eye, and said, "You're welcome." The receptionist watched with dropped jaw as Anna left the building. Erica was walking toward the door to use the facilities when she stopped midway. She looked at the red-smeared, crumpled metal box on the receptionist's desk and the dumbstruck look on the woman's face. Erica turned and walked back to the truck. Anna already had the engine rumbling.

"You know that HHP will learn about that."

“Well, if I still care when they do, I might apologize, but not likely. They knew what they were getting. Fred in the home office knows my fuse only runs so long.”

Erica chuckled and shook her head, “I guess we are heading west, then.”

“After we stop at the gas station.”

“I hope they have clean facilities,” Erica said laughing.

Anna did not slow the truck down when she drove into the airport’s gate and took a quick turn to the left. She wove the truck around debris and made a beeline for the fuel depot. Fortunately, it hadn’t been plundered yet. She stopped at the gate and entered the code into the keypad. *Why smash the solar-powered gate when it should open so welcomingly?* She waited for the gate to slide open and walked in. She walked up to the four fuel ports in the ground; like a gas station in the U.S., the ports were color coded but not otherwise labeled. She knelt down and removed the first port’s lid. It smelled like kerosene. Likely jet fuel, she thought. She moved to the second port, and it smelled like the first. She moved to third port and it smelled like oil instead of kerosene or gasoline. *Diesel!* Anna noticed the port lid was marked blue and turned to find the blue-marked dispenser. She waved Erica in, and Erica pulled the truck up to the dispenser.

“I still need to use the facilities, but there isn’t a bush nearby.”

“Just go over there. The truck will block you from the city’s view, and we won’t look. There is paper in my bag, behind the seat.”

Anna didn’t hear what Erica grumbled as she walked behind the vehicle. She laughed at her friend and made sure to top off the truck’s tanks. Who knew how far they would have to go before they got to safety. She looked west as she pumped. She was going home. She would take the women with her and take care of them until this war

settled down. The dispenser handle clicked to signal she was done, and Erica walked up at the same time.

“We need to tell the women,” Erica declared.

“Yep, I hope they understand.”

It took several minutes to explain that both airports were bombed and they needed to move on. They had to explain that the city would not be able to keep them safe and that heading west gave them more options. In the end, the women simply shrugged. What else could they do? Anna drove the truck west of the city. She parked it under a rare tree and pulled her road map out of the glove box. Everyone got out to stretch their legs and see what the map said. Anna could tell that the highway they were on would take them straight through Chad into Niger and the other countries to the west. The road seemed to split the desert from the lush portions of those countries. Cities of various sizes were pinned along the highway. This would be good for supplies, but bad for moving undetected. She could take the smaller roads that crossed the desert, but they were winding and less direct. She also worried the desert heat would add stress to the truck’s engine. The Chad border was approximately fifteen miles to the west, but to get into Chad she chose a more remote winding desert road. She hoped it wouldn’t have a checkpoint. She told the women her plan, and they sat in the shade to eat some food. Anna cautioned them to stretch their provisions since she wasn’t sure where they would stop and didn’t know how long it would take to get there. The next big city was N’Djamena, a metropolis, about twelve hours away. If they needed to stop there, it should have supplies.

Everyone agreed they would drive as far as they could. Anna didn't want to stop, but was reasoned into seeing how far they got. The women and truck would need breaks. They stood up from eating and stretched long and hard. Chava said a prayer for their day. The two pregnant women went behind the tree to relieve themselves and climbed into the front of the truck. The seat was less jostling. Erica drove, and Anna climbed in the back with Zuwena, Bitu, Lily, Akilah, Ara, and Baysan. She smiled at each one and took her post by the tailgate. She yawned often but stayed awake. They still needed to cross into Chad.

The fifteen miles flew by. Erica was careful to take the side road and follow its winding path. A small sign indicated they were near the Chad border, and Erica slowed down. Anna leaned out of the back and looked around. No sign of a checkpoint. Erica came to a stop and waited for a small herd of goats to cross the road. When the shepherd boy came by, Hayat asked him about the road ahead. He said the checkpoint closed the day before because there wasn't much traffic. Hayat thanked him and they pulled forward. Several miles down the road, Erica brought the truck to a stop. A pile of wood lay across the road. An old shed also lay on its side in the road. The checkpoint was closed, but the road was blocked. The women got out of the truck and looked in front of them. Anna looked up the rock walls on either side of the road. Nothing moved.

"Well, those who can, help move this wood. Erica, you might need to use the truck to shove the shed out of the way."

"Alright, Chava and Hayat, please move the smaller pieces."

Slowly, they moved the wood, and when Anna heard rocks scramble down the side of the hill to their right, she stopped them. Everyone stood very still. Anna searched

the hill for the cause of the rock fall. Eventually, the thing moved again, and her eyes followed the motion. A goat looked down at her from up the hillside, its brown skin blending almost perfectly with its surroundings. “Ok, let’s hurry up. I’m getting the creeps.” The women cleared the woodpile and got back into the truck. Erica let the truck carefully creep forward, shoving the shed out of its way in the process. Anna looked back up the hillsides. She thought she saw a dark shape move from one boulder to another, but she blinked and it didn’t move again. The women remained tense until Erica pulled the truck out of the mountain pass and onto the main highway. This time more vehicles joined them, and it almost felt normal to be driving along in the back of an old cargo truck.

Anna watched as long as she could, and mentally prayed in gratitude. Finding nothing to worry about, she signed that she was going to sleep for a while. It didn’t take long for the rocking truck to lull her to sleep.