

They would only be gone a few hours. The helicopter set down easily in the courtyard of the Compound they had vacated. They would take one last check of their mostly empty house.

“Cat, you get started checking through the house.” He saw a stepladder on the portal. “I’m going to use that ladder to look at the nose, see if there is any damage from that flock of birds that flew across our path. We hit a few.”

Standing on the ladder, examining the wide nose for dents, he heard the roar of a military helicopter. As he looked toward the oncoming helicopter, he was aware that it did not angle its course to the landing strip area, but seemed headed to The Compound.

Franco had gone through the front gate, using an abandoned cart, and was on the asphalt path leading to town. He turned at the now deafening racket, saw the giant machine flying defensive zigzag over The Compound as if they were expecting to be fired at. He shouted, “Get down!”

Four automatic weapons targeted the helicopter on the ground. Two lines of fire struck across the body standing on the top step of the ladder.

Inside the house Cat put her back against the wall, frightened by the roll of thunder, steady booms it produced. Then, an eerie calm made her run outside, see the horrifying scene. She knelt, put his head in her lap, murmured, “The light has left my life, I will live in darkness forever.”

A steady voice next to her interrupted her falling into an abyss. “Cat, get up. You must help me put him in this cart. We will make a plan. You need to get back to Alex.”

From somewhere came strength. She put her arms around the lifeless, bloody man who carried her heart and had taken it with him. She helped lift him into the cart. *I am numb. My body has no feeling. I want to lie beside him in the cart, go wherever he goes.*

“Cat, listen to me.” Franco shook her shoulders. “Go in the house, get a backpack, fill it with bottles of water. Put on running shoes, dark-colored jeans, a black shawl and scarf for your head. Go quickly, we must leave, they will be back.”

*I am a mechanical being. No—I must get back to my boy.* She ran into the house. On a shelf in his room, she found an old black backpack with the white Nike swoosh. The blood-soaked tee and shorts lay on the floor as she pulled on dark denim jeans, slipped her replacement Team Phone in a back pocket, a black tee, a black hooded sweatshirt, and old running shoes. She entered the kitchen, filled the pack with small bottles of water, took one out, replaced it with a loaf of banana bread from the freezer, got a black marker to color the white swoosh on the pack and hurried outside. Franco had covered the body with a tarp, had just driven the cart close to the portal steps, she sat next to him. He released the brake and stepped on the pedal.

“Cat, you must walk to a place where Joe can pick you up. Find a hiding place where I drop you off. Listen to my directions. Walk at night, hide during the day. They will come back,

look for us. They will be asking if anyone has seen us, even pay for the right answer. The dirt path has been used for many years to get from one village to another. It follows the base of the mountain for a few miles, then it leads you over three short hills. At the bottom of the third hill is a fork, go left, stay on that trail, winding around the mountain edge. That's where you will get cell reception. Keep walking, the trail leads to a meadow. Joe will be waiting for you. I am taking my hero to be cremated as he instructed all of us many years ago. Take this pistol. You can do this, *mi hermana*. Go, hide until dark. Make no noise. Then start the journey to your boy."

It was the gun Oso taught her to shoot. It felt familiar in her hand, small, not too heavy. She sucked in her stomach, stuck it in her waistband. She breathed out, the gun was secure. Cat thought of Oso's words: *If you're going to carry a gun, it's because you need it, keep it handy.*

Franco let her off near a small well-watered mango grove, turned around and drove the cart toward town. She watched the tarp in the back of the cart until a bend in the path took them out of her sight. *I am a strong woman. I must get back to my boy and make a good life for him. Together we will survive.*

Bushes of thick foliage were growing around the bottom of a lush mango tree. Cat edged herself into the center, scratching her face, feeling cocooned by leaves. She sat on the ground, leaned back against her pack, supported by the thick tree trunk. The painful thoughts that were dammed up in the back of her mind now flooded forward. She hung her head and silently cried, tears gushing, the picture of his smile soothing the agony in her soul. Pulling her knees up to hold her crossed arms, she rested her forehead and the memories came back to life. The vacation house in Baja was built on a cliff above a small bay with a natural beach. There was no road down to the water. A walkway had been built for any hearty person willing to walk the hundred wooden steps. Every twenty steps or so, there was a platform for viewing and deciding if one wanted to go further down. It was a playground for Xander, Zack, and Nikolai, the three boys from three different countries who had grown up together, racing, jumping, running around the beach, being fish in the shoal surf, picnicking in a shallow cave carved out of the rock at high tide.

He took her to the secret cave. They huddled together, removed each other's clothes, caressing with hands, fingers, mouths. With the heat of passion they made love and she knew this would forever be their memorable place. There was something special about the cave, the beach, the surf. She remembered telling him there was sand on her body where there shouldn't be sand. He had laughed, carried her to the water, stood her in the surf, cupped his hands, scooping water to wash her body. He found a large, broken shell, wrote their names in the wet sand, stood back and said, "Everyone will know we were here, loving each other."

The sun set behind the mountains and it was like someone closed the drapes. No street lamps, no porch lights, only dull glows from small squares in the matchbox houses of the outskirts village. The half-moon barely outlined the path. She could feel the cold water from the backpack cooling her warm body. At first, she walked carefully, feeling the uneven dirt path, some ruts where something had been dragged or maybe a bicycle rider taking a bag of big purple onions to sell at a market. As she became accustomed to the trodden path that made the world a little bigger for the village people, she started to run, sometimes stumbling, catching herself, thinking, *I'm on my way, Alex.*

Cat noticed the trail had changed to rocky and led her up a slope, not too steep, but she kept tripping. There would be no running, especially in the dark with no help from the moon.

Going down the slope was slower and more difficult, the rocks sliding under her feet. She fell backward, scraping elbows, bruising her hands, side of her hip.

Up and down the second hill she felt the rocks through her worn shoes. Her legs were achy and tired. *I will not cry, I am a strong woman.* Above her the light was changing, the sun ready to come up over the mountain. The rocky hills had no foliage. Cat looked for a hiding place off the trail, going up, then back and forth, finally three short bushes growing close together. She nudged, crawling into the center, making room for herself and her pack. Hungry, she sat numbly, breaking off bites of banana bread, sipping water. She closed her eyes and saw Alex, a baby. It was deep into the night, she brought him to bed, sitting up to give him his midnight feeding. They kissed the baby's head. He kissed her shoulder, neck, chin. When she put Alex in the bassinet next to her bed, she held on to it, as if she thought it might roll away.

She didn't know if she had slept and dreamed or daydreamed, awake with closed eyes. The memories were so real, she would open her eyes and look for him.

Just at darkness, she emerged, did some stretches, looked around for the trail. She remembered walking further off the trail, looking for bushes or a boulder. From her bush hide-out, she walked in one direction, returned, walked in another. *I am not lost, I will find that rocky path. Stop, breathe, think. The sun was rising behind me, so I will walk toward the sunset. The trail will be on my right, keep walking, you will find it.*

Cat stepped onto the trail and followed it, facing the hills where the sun had disappeared. She felt bruises on the bottoms of her feet, her left hip sent messages of pain as she walked, her hands were scraped from catching herself when she fell, and scratched from pushing into the dry bushes. *One more hill, then a path to the meadow where Joe will be waiting. Eat some banana bread, drink water, stay hydrated, I'm strong, I'm coming, Joe.*

She walked as though in a trance, staring at the path ahead of her, thinking of her goal. *Are those voices?* She looked ahead, she was near the bottom of the third hill. *A fork, go left.*

The voices and flashlights were coming toward her from the fork on the right. *Step off the trail, hide.* A few yards away, she knelt on hands and knees, pulled her black shawl out of her pack, covered herself, hoping to look like a rock in the darkness. The voices were male, slurred words, laughter, erratic light beams. Cat waited until long after they had passed, the laughter seeming far behind her, shook off the dirt, left the stole hanging around her neck, stepped on the trail, taking the left fork. *Franco said I will get reception when I get around this hill.* She put her Team Phone in the pocket of the hooded sweatshirt, waiting for it to vibrate.

The trail was the same as when she began, a rutted dirt path, not the rocky trail. *Maybe I can run. No, I'll walk fast.* As Cat came around the mountain edge, she felt a vibration in her sweatshirt pocket. *Is that my cell?* She pressed Receive and heard Joe's voice.

"Cat, can you hear me?"

A quiet whisper, "Yes." *Is it really Joe, am I dreaming?*

"Are you on the path at the base of the mountain?"

"Yes."

"Keep walking. Three students are coming to meet you. Oso and I are waiting for you in the helicopter. Do you hear me?"

"Yes." *I can't cry yet, I have to wait until I see Oso.*

The students knew the trail, they had run it many times from The Compound, part of Geoff's training program. They exchanged thoughts. *The trail is difficult in the day, at night, impossible. And we wear sturdy hiking boots.*

Two made a chair for her, clasping each other's upper arms. The third lifted her up on their forearms, put her hands across their shoulders, walked behind her, his hand flat against her back to keep her from falling.

Oso was in the doorway of the big helicopter. He reached under her arms, pulled her inside, she collapsed onto his wide chest. He whispered, "You're safe now, *mi hermana.*"

He felt the gun, gently removed it, handed it to a student. Finally she had the luxury of crying out loud. The sound came out of her body like a wounded animal, the release of pain, moaning, sobbing, wailing, a low, steady groan. Oso sobbed with her, mournful sounds of suffering.

The students removed her shoes to rub her feet, found the tops of her socks embedded with small insects, her feet had blue-black bruises and puffy blisters. Another student picked the live bugs out of her tangled hair.

As a student closed the door, Joe, at the controls, murmured, "Okay, *White Falcon*, take us home, girl."



