



STEPPING  
THROUGH  
SEAGRASS

A  
Novel  
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**ArcheBooks Publishing**

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# DEDICATION

To my sister, Lisa, who courageously won the battle.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It never occurred to me how many people are involved in the process of writing a book until I started writing myself. Without the help and dedication of those folks most books wouldn't exist.

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## Prologue

Willie Jumper gulped his beer and belched. Feeling dizzy after finishing a six-pack, he climbed into his red Toyota Tacoma, and headed home to Immokalee, making sure the payment from his last job sat safely in his pocket.

“Goddamn, if this doesn’t make Morlee happy, I don’t know what will,” he said aloud. The twang of Lee Ann Womack’s voice filled the cab, and he cranked the volume to full blast. Things were looking up—no more day-laborer jobs, no more worrying about rent money. He and Morlee could move into one of those fancy places in Naples, and she’d have money to buy her dresses. They could even have a kid now if she wanted.

He patted his pocket, not believing his good luck.

The truck’s engines purred in idle, the result of a recent

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tune-up. Willie looked up at a bedroom light casting shadows against the thin curtains. Morlee was still up. He shook his hair off his shoulders.

*Maybe I'll cut my hair.*

Look respectable and create less suspicion, his bosses had told him.

Willie killed the engine and took the stairs two at a time. He pushed his five-foot-seven-inch frame against the door and opened it.

“Morlee?”

When she didn't answer, he shrugged and picked up the ringing phone. The familiar voice said, “Is it there?”

“One hundred packages. All stacked and ready to go.”

“What's the combination?”

“50621.”

His caller repeated the number. “You did good, Willie.”

The phone went dead.

Willie's eyes widened slightly when he saw Morlee standing in the doorway. Her coal-black hair fell loosely around her shoulders.

*What had she just heard?*

“What was that all about, Willie?”

“Nothing, but I got something for you.”

He bent to kiss her. She jerked her head away.

“You've been drinking, and don't tell me that phone call was nothing, because I heard everything.” Her black eyes mocked him.

“You can be such a bitch!”

*Damn. Nothing pleased her.*

He pushed her aside and staggered to the bedroom where he took off his boots and Levis. Deciding to hide his treasure, he shoved the pants to the bottom of Morlee's blanket chest.

“If you think you’re sleeping here with that attitude, Willie, you can fucking forget it. Get out!”

He stared at her five-foot frame, knowing he could take her down with a single punch. “We’ll talk about this when you’re more reasonable. Now come to bed.”

Morlee stomped out.

Willie slid under the blue-and-yellow striped sheets and listened to Morlee rummaging in the kitchen. What was she doing? He closed his eyes, curled up in a comfortable position, and thought about his new-found wealth. His last job had involved bringing in a large shipment of Colombian gold, and his boss had paid him off with diamonds rather than cash. At first Willie thought it was odd, but he had had the jewels appraised, and knew what they were worth.

“Get out, you bastard, or I’ll slice you up!”

His eyes flew open.

Morlee came at him with a butcher’s knife. She lunged and tore into the pillow, barely missing his left eye. Was she crazy?

Willie gripped her arm and flipped her. He pinned her to the bed, jerking her wrist. Morlee winced, and the knife dropped.

“This is my house, too, bitch! Shut up or I’ll show you what to do with that knife.”

He grabbed hold of her tee shirt and slammed her hard into the mattress. Then, as if to show some mercy, he let her go.

She fled. He heard her pick up the phone.

“Goddamn you! Get off the fucking phone!” He raced to the kitchen, jerked the cord from the wall and pushed her against the refrigerator. “I told you to come to bed.”

“Leave me alone!” She squirmed, freeing herself.

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Willie exploded like an overheated pressure cooker and threw a punch that sent her to her knees.

Morlee shook her head trying to get her bearings. Her eyes bulged with fury. "Get out! Get out!"

Willie knew that if she kept screaming, one of his pain-in-the ass neighbors would call the cops. Hurrying back to their bedroom, he pulled on a pair of cords that lay on the closet floor.

"Okay, bitch! I'm leaving, but you can bet your sweet ass I'll be back."

He rushed downstairs and leaped into his truck, burning rubber as he tore out onto the main drag.

A mile down the road, he remembered the diamonds tucked in the pocket of his Levi jeans, at the bottom of Morlee's blanket chest.

## Chapter 1

Out the aircraft's window, clouds resembled wispy flat pancakes as Flight 235, which had originated in Boston, headed to the Southwest Florida International Airport. Kate Anderson shifted restlessly in her seat. In just a little over an hour, she would be ushered to Immokalee, a small town thirty miles away from the city of Fort Myers where she would be landing. In researching the town, she had discovered that a group of Seminole Indians still resided there and relished the fact that they defined the word "Immokalee" as "my home" in their native language. After having sold her house in Durham, New Hampshire, she no longer had a place to call her own. But she wanted and needed more than a house. She wanted a

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home, a family, and a place to be herself again. She hadn't had that in a very long time.

Her long legs didn't fit well under the seat in front of her. The blue-covered *Alcoholics Anonymous* handbook, her new bible, slid from her lap and landed on the floor. She tried to pick it up, but the snoring, overweight woman next to her had sprawled out. She sighed and continued writing in her journal.

*As I start over, I remember what my grandmother said to me on my twelfth birthday. "Il est comfortable dans sa peau."*

*I had to look up the words in the French/English dictionary.*

*He is comfortable in his skin. Lately, I don't feel comfortable in my skin.*

*Now, I'm on a journey and, like all journeys, this one begins with questions. What will it be like? Who will I meet there? I want to feel comfortable in my skin once more. I want to feel.*

Kate put away her journal in her carry-on bag and saw that she had packed a picture of her adopted parents, Mitchell and Rebecca Johnson. Their smiling faces brought solace. Mitchell had guided her toward medical school and Rebecca had taught her an appreciation of music. Right now she needed them, but they seemed as far away as Jupiter.

They had been the loyal ones who stood by her with love and understanding during her bout with alcoholism.

Kate put the picture away and drank from her water bottle. The seat was confining and she shifted restlessly, thinking about this new job. The thought of starting over as a public health doctor in the Immokalee Health Center made her shiver. The clinic was partly church and partly government sponsored and served the local migrant farm worker and

Seminole Indian populations. She would receive a house and a monthly stipend, which would help her dwindling cash reserves. After a year's search for work, this was the only place willing to give her a second chance.

Caring for patients again frightened her. She had taken the time to read up on all the latest treatments and even had attended several medical conferences. But it wasn't the technical aspects of medicine that worried her. Her skills were as sharp as ever, she was sure of it. She questioned her caregiving skills. The natural ability that she seemed to have been born with to feel empathy had vanished, drowned perhaps in too many vodka tonics. One of her medical school professors had convinced her that even the best technical skills could never replace empathy, an important skill for a diagnostician. How had she lost it?

And how could she get it back?

She looked out the window again. Knowing the hows or whys were not as important as moving forward. She needed to rediscover herself first. The rest, she hoped, would follow.

A voice came over the intercom, "If there is a doctor on board, please ring the flight attendant's button."

Kate hesitated. After all, no one knew—it wasn't as if she wore a label. But it was that damn sacred Hippocratic oath to help the sick and injured that brought her to ring the bell.

A flight attendant came by. "I'm a doctor," Kate said. "Doctor Anderson."

The young woman led the way from the coach to the first-class cabin. A man was slumped over. A woman beside him was dabbing his brow with a handkerchief. Other passengers sat whispering amongst themselves.

She took his wrist and checked his pulse. "What's the matter, sir?" The thready-rapid beats and his pallor said he

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was in distress.

"I'm sick to my stomach. Who the hell are you?"

Kate blinked and rolled her eyes, but kept her voice steady. "I'm Doctor Anderson."

*What century does this guy live in?*

Her patient's tone was only half of her worries. Her hands shook and her mouth went dry. She was on stage and, like a new actress reliant on reviews, she had to perform as best as she could.

"He had a heart attack two months ago," the woman seated next to him said. She wrung her hands. "I'm his wife. We're on our way home." Tears filled her eyes and, in a halting voice, she gave Kate her husband's medical history.

The wife stood and Kate sat beside her patient. She asked, "Are you having chest pain now, sir?"

The man nodded, clenched his chest and gasped for air. "Are you the only doctor here? I want a man."

"George, mind your manners," his wife said. Then she looked at Kate. "I'm sorry."

A nearby passenger got up. Another flight attendant approached. "Sir, please stay in your seat."

"Is everything all right?" a woman asked with concern.

The flight attendant addressed each of the six first-class passengers. "Just stay in your seats."

Kate stood and faced the flight attendant. "Do you have oxygen on board?"

"Yes. I'll get our medical kit."

"I have some Valium." A man seated behind Kate's patient held a bottle for her to see.

The flight attendant wheeled out a cart with oxygen and a defibrillator. A small box with a white cross prominently etched on the front and sides sat on the lower shelf.

Kate grabbed a stethoscope and started listening to her patient's heart. He abruptly pushed it away.

"Looks like I'm all you got, sir. What's it gonna be?" She held the stethoscope over his chest like it was a toy waiting to appease an unruly child.

"You look younger than my daughter, for Christ's sake!" He suddenly grabbed his chest and winced.

"George, please. I'm sure she's a fine doctor. Let her check you out."

Kate tapped her right foot, ready to go back to her seat.

The man stared, almost daring her to make a move. "Oh, all right. What the hell. The world's falling apart, anyway."

Kate listened to his heart and heard irregular beats. "Let's clear some space."

The crew reseated the six other first-class passengers. Another flight attendant asked her to speak with the pilot, handing her the in-flight phone.

"I hear we have a man who's ill and a little belligerent," the pilot said.

It surprised her to hear the calmness in the pilot's voice as she fought to quiet her own anxiety. "He's experiencing considerable chest pain and some irregular heartbeats. Without an EKG, I can't be sure, but I believe he's having a heart attack."

"My crew tells me you've got things under control. We're one hour from Fort Myers. In your opinion, Doctor, can your patient make it?"

"I'm not sure. He could code at any minute, and it would be difficult to do CPR in the aisle."

After a quick pause, the pilot said, "We'll land in Atlanta, Doctor. I'll have us on the ground in ten minutes."

Within seconds, the captain announced the emergency

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landing. Kate strapped herself in beside her patient and his wife sat behind them. She tapped Kate's shoulder and handed her a bottle of nitroglycerine.

"I forgot to tell you about these. They're supposed to help his chest pain."

Kate told the man to put a pill under his tongue. The forceful descent made passengers grab the backs of their seats as the plane's nose pitched downward. It leveled quickly and within seconds, the runway came into view. The whole cabin seemed to sigh with relief.

After landing, they taxied to an open gate. When the engines were silent, the captain's voice came over the intercom. "Folks, please remain seated. We'll only be here for a few minutes while we take care of a sick passenger up front."

A flight attendant opened the door. Tarmac personnel pushed a large staircase against the plane. Emergency medical technicians rushed up as Kate unbuckled her patient.

Kate looked at the man's wife. She still had tears in her eyes. "It's going to be all right," Kate told her.

The EMTs gripped his arm and helped him down. Kate descended and related the man's history to the emergency workers below.

She leaned over her patient. "What's your last name, sir?" She yelled to be heard over the noise on the tarmac.

"It's Lambert," his wife said. "We can't thank you enough for all your help."

"Let's get on with this," Lambert said in a weak voice.

"Your husband will be taken to Atlanta Medical Center. I'm sure you'll be well cared for. Good luck to both of you." Kate squeezed Mrs. Lambert's hand. At least she had been grateful.

Kate re-entered the airplane and took her seat. The back

of her blouse was soaked with sweat. It took a few slow deep breaths to quiet her pounding heart.

Once the plane reached altitude, the flight attendant came by. "Can I get you something to drink?"

Kate rubbed her clammy hands. Without thinking she said, "Vodka and tonic, please."

It wasn't long before a bottle of Absolut, along with a can of tonic water, and a glass filled with ice sat on the tray in front of her.

"The drink's on us, Doctor," the woman said. "Thanks for all your help."

Kate delicately shook the small bottle as if it were a bell. Seeing the liquid slush in the bottle calmed her. She broke the seal and filled the glass. After a splash of tonic water, she swirled it. How she needed this drink! It would soothe her, comfort her, and make her feel safe again. After all, it was only one drink.

She hesitated, remembering a comment her husband had made on a flight to California. This was as close to heaven as they'd ever be, he had told her. Heaven. She had made a solemn promise.

The flight attendant came by and picked up the empty vodka bottle. "Would you like another?"

"I changed my mind." Kate handed her the mixed drink. "Just bring me some tonic water."

The woman scrunched her nose. Without comment, she returned with a can of tonic water.

Kate sighed.

*How will I ever survive this move?*

## Chapter 2

Kate's nerves were still raw when they landed at the Southwest Florida International Airport. She couldn't get off the plane fast enough and grew impatient with passengers in front of her who were having trouble getting their carry-on luggage down from the overhead bins. Finally making her way down a winding hallway, she stopped by a small gift shop, pulled out her cell phone, and punched the speed dial.

"Mitchell, it's me. I'm here," she said when he answered. The relief in his sigh turned into her relief. Right now she needed the reassurance of a voice that had comforted her through most of her growing-up years.

"I'm glad you called, Katydid. Rebecca and I were worried. You seemed so frightened this morning."

Hearing that old nickname was as comforting as a warm blanket and took away all the distance from the people she cherished most. "I was, but I didn't have much time to think about it."

"Did you sleep all the way?"

"No. I was too busy saving lives." Kate, breathless from the incident, felt suddenly hungry and remembered she hadn't eaten much breakfast.

"My goodness, what happened?" Rebecca asked.

"Hi, Rebecca. I didn't know you were on the line," Kate said.

"I just picked up."

Repeating the details of her experiences to the two people she trusted the most steadied her.

"Are you okay?" They said it together almost in harmony.

Kate smiled inwardly at their loving concern. How would she ever manage with them being so far away? Thank goodness her cell phone service came with hundreds of free long-distance minutes. "I'm fine. It was a harrowing few minutes, but I got through it."

"Good for you. Have you found Mrs. Parker yet?"

"I'm on my way to meet her. I'll phone you later."

"We love you. Good luck."

Kate hung up, pushed her cell phone in her purse and went to pick up her bags.

A woman wearing an orange dress with tiny white swirls held a placard with *Anderson* neatly printed on it. Her vivid green eyes sparkled and complemented a bright smile as welcoming as the brilliant sunshine streaming through the huge airport's windows.

Kate extended her hand. "I'm Kate Anderson."

"Marine Parker. It's nice to finally meet you. After all

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those emails, I feel like we know each other.”

“It’s good to finally meet you, too,” Kate said.

Marine’s slender body moved gracefully through the crowd of passengers gathering around the still-empty luggage carousel. “Do you have many bags?”

“A few.”

“I’ll get a cart.”

Kate waited by the belt. Nearby passengers huddled, talking excitedly. They all seemed to know each other and she suddenly felt like a lost child who didn’t know another living soul. After a klaxon’s blast, the conveyor jerked, dispensing luggage. She retrieved a large black suitcase with a red strap wrapped around its middle, along with two smaller black duffle bags, each sporting yellow ribbons. The two women loaded the cart, then headed to the parking lot. Sunlight blazed and Kate squinted. It seemed to shine brighter here, and she fished her sunglasses from her purse. A hot breeze offered no relief from the suffocating humidity that hung mercilessly.

“You just missed our afternoon shower.”

“Afternoon shower?” Kate huffed after hoisting the suitcases in the back of Marine’s Toyota Rav4. Rain would feel refreshing.

“It rains everyday in the summer months. Afterwards, it cools down a bit. You’ll get used to it.”

If this was the cool after the rain, Kate couldn’t imagine what the heat of the day must feel like. After buckling in, Marine steered out of the parking lot and drove down the winding airport boulevard, then turned right onto Daniels Parkway. At the next intersection, they headed south onto I-75.

“Your flight was delayed. Did you have weather problems?” she asked.

Kate fanned herself, welcoming the air-conditioner and related the story about the ill passenger.

“My goodness. You got put to work in a hurry.”

“I was glad to help. Your name is lovely, by the way,” Kate said. She had said enough, in her opinion, about the airplane incident. After all it was all part of her job—an everyday occurrence in her world.

“My father was a Gloucester fisherman and loved the sea. When I came along, he decided my eyes were as green as sea foam and named me Marine. It isn’t easy to live with. Most people want to call me Maureen.” She veered into the exit lane off the highway. “This is Immokalee Road. We’re going to stop for supplies since our little town doesn’t have any major grocery stores.”

“Good idea,” Kate said. Palm trees, their fronds floating with the breeze, lined the boulevard. Bright purple bougainvillea encircled them, creating a colorful scene. “It’s really lovely here.”

“We’ve been here for almost ten years, and I’m still in awe of the landscape.” Marine parked. They walked to the store’s entrance. “During the season, you can’t get near this place.”

“The season?”

“From late November until mid-April, Southwest Florida becomes a haven for northerners. We’ve had a population explosion, so what was the quiet time of year has become busy. Most of these buildings went up in the last five years.”

“I didn’t know,” Kate said. “So how often do you come here for supplies?”

“Once a week. I have a freezer that you can use. Our place is right across from yours.”

Inside the brightly lit store, Marine said, “you’ll find some basics at your place; flour, sugar, cleaning supplies, spices.

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Just get enough to last a few days.”

“I get the idea.”

Kate untangled a cart from the parked jumble. Reality struck to the pit of her stomach. Like a junkie, she craved soda, candy bars, and coconut cookies but didn't know where to find them. At first she rambled aimlessly, cursing for moving to a place where she didn't know where to find her favorite foods, much less a bank and a dentist. A stab of chest pain felt like someone had tightened a belt around her rib cage, making it difficult to breathe. A few tears filled her eyes, and she shook her head disgusted at the anxiety attack. Had it been a mistake to move here?

*Get a grip.*

She took a few deep breaths and steered the cart. Soon her basket overflowed with candy, soda, and cookies. Like most alcoholics, sugar had become the new addiction. But one had to eat some healthy food, so in went chicken, potatoes, and broccoli, her favorite vegetable.

Marine helped her with her bags. “My goodness, you sure got a lot.”

Kate shrugged and feeling no desire to explain simply said, “My comfort food.”

After climbing back in the car and fastening their seat belts, Marine maneuvered along State Road 846. “As you see, it gets rural quickly. This is what the area looked like before all the development.”

“I noticed the different types of palm trees,” Kate said. She longed for the coconut cookies piled in the back of the car. Relentless sugar cravings had added ten more pounds of flesh to her medium-sized frame. She had to stop thinking about food. She pointed to a tree. “What type is that?”

“Sable palms. They're native to the area. The coconut and

royal palms are transplants.” Marine motioned to examples of each. “By the way, the moving truck arrived a few days ago. Your car is here, but I’m afraid your living room is full of boxes.”

“Thanks, you’ve been a great help.” Kate hugged herself and pushed her knees together. The insecurity hit her like a slap in the face.

*All this upheaval. It’ll take days to get settled.*

Some deep breaths relaxed her. This was all so silly and childlike. Thank goodness the internal turmoil was locked from sight. Marine never commented about it.

“We’re happy to have you with us. Recruiting a doctor wasn’t easy. If we hadn’t found you, I’m not sure what would have happened. For the past six weeks, several doctors from Naples volunteered their time, but frankly, it never seems to work. We need someone here permanently.”

“How are you involved with the clinic?”

“Graham, my husband, is our church’s pastor. I head the committee that runs the clinic on a day-to-day basis. The Public Health Service recruits the doctors, but it’s the committee’s responsibility to do the fundraising and get our doctors acquainted with the area.” Marine’s red hair, cut in a bob style, floated as she shook her head. The color, Kate thought, was definitely natural. You couldn’t get that shade of red from a bottle.

They turned onto a small main drag that sported a vegetable stand, several old houses, and a small store with a sign that said *Espositos*.

“That’s Juan Esposito’s place,” Marine said. “You can always get a few staples there.”

She turned and parked into a driveway across from the church. “And this is your new home.”

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A cluster of three sable palm trees stood in the front yard, and a row of tomato red hibiscus hedges lined the driveway. The tile roof and masonry walls glittered in the bright sun. Kate's Pathfinder, parked in the driveway, was like a welcome-home banner, making her want to pat its roof and climb inside. She restrained herself, thinking Marine would assume she was nuts.

Marine pointed to a house across the street. "That's our place."

Kate shielded her eyes and looked at a home that might have been the twin of hers. Next to it was a building with a sign that read, *United Methodist Church*. Other houses dotted the tidy street.

*I'm going to be living across the street from a church. A few prayers might save me from myself.*

Inside, boxes stacked in the living room set off another anxiety wave. She swallowed and refocused. "I like what you did with the place. It all looks so neat and welcoming."

"Thanks. The committee decorated it. As you can see, it's just been painted. It's small, but I think you'll be comfortable here."

Marine walked her through the living room, den, two bedrooms, and two baths. In the kitchen, a bouquet of mums, lilies and baby's breath sat on the counter.

Kate fingered the petal of a tiger lily. "What a nice touch. Thank you. I already feel at home."

"I brought those over this morning. Believe me, it's the least I can do."

"How long has the house been here?"

"Two years. We raised the funds to build it," Marine said. "Before that, our doctors had to drive in from Naples. Forty miles back and forth every day gets old. It also meant we

didn't have anyone here for emergencies. It's worked out well."

"It's just perfect," Kate said.

"Glad you like it. Why don't you get settled? I'll pick you up tomorrow around eight-thirty so you can see the clinic."

After Marine left, Kate stared at the boxes. All seemed to stare back. Inside were her dishes, books, family pictures, and her computer. Could all this wait until morning? She shivered. Had she taken on too much? After a year of AA and seeing a shrink, she had thought she was ready for anything, but dread and exhaustion caught her like a mouse in a trap. She threw her hands up.

*I'll take a shower first.*

Hot water tickling tense muscles eased her psyche. A vodka tonic would taste good right now. She swallowed, almost savoring the tingling of the soda water against the back of her throat.

She shivered. Would these cravings haunt her forever? She turned off the water and kicked the door open. No towel. Soaked and naked, she made her way to the kitchen and yanked a terry-cloth robe from her suitcase. She found her candy bars, ate one, and then tore into the boxes. At two in the morning, she settled into bed. Her journal and pen were ready on her nightstand.

*When I was little, my father told me stories about guardian angels, beautiful winged ladies with golden hair and soft flowing gowns. They were supposed to watch over me as I slept. I should never feel lonely, he had said, because my angel is always with me. But I find I am lonely and wonder if it is because of my alcohol cravings and the secret world it has plunged me into. Working keeps me busy but when night falls, being alone hits like an unrelenting wind. Where is my lady with the golden locks and the white wings?*

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*My heart won't stop pounding. I can barely breathe. I don't know if I'll ever be a doctor again, or more importantly, if I can be a good one. It's been a year. I think I've forgotten everything, or is it like riding a bike? Can I just start pedaling again?*

*Marine seems like a wonderful person. Perhaps we could be friends. I don't know if I can let anyone get close to me. I don't want them to see what I've become.*

She put her pen down, turned off the light and lay in the dark, hoping sleep would come soon.



Willie climbed on the barstool and ordered a Coors draft and a hot dog. The clock's hands, slightly covering a Budweiser advertisement, read just past noon. Lighting a cigarette, he inhaled deeply, thinking about last night. Finding the locks changed on the door of his former apartment hadn't done a damn thing for his temper. The son of a bitch landlord hadn't let him in. Where the hell was Morlee? Was she Houdini disappearing like that?

He took another drag and shoved the butt deep into the overflowing ashtray.

The bartender handed him his beer and hot dog. "That'll be five-seventy."

Willie pulled out his last twenty.

*If I don't get those diamonds soon, I'll be broke!*

He buried the dog in mustard and relish and devoured it—the first meal he'd had in twenty-four hours. The bartender pushed his change toward him.

"You're quiet today, Willie. Troubles?"

"It's nothing."

The bartender pointed to the empty mug. “Want another?”

“Nah. Gotta get back to work.”

Willie grabbed his Miami Dolphins cap and was about to make his way out when a man stopped him short.

“You Willie Jumper?” the stranger asked.

“What’s it to you?” Willie tried to plow past him, but the six-footer blocked his path.

“Hold this for me.” The stranger handed over an envelope and rushed out.

“What the fuck?” Willie tore it open. Was everyone out to ruin his day?

“Christ,” he said aloud. “She didn’t waste any fucking time.”

The bartender leaned forward. “What gives, Willie?”

“My fucking wife is suing me for divorce.”



The alarm blared. Kate’s eyes flew open—7:03 AM. She banged the off switch, sending the clock to the floor. Disoriented, she stood and stretched. The sun’s glare created eerie wall shadows that grew taller as she slipped on a robe and made her way through the row of boxes to the kitchen. The previous night’s work wasn’t finished. The brown boxes reflected the unsettled mess she had made of her life recently—not a comforting morning thought.

She turned the coffee pot on and soon the fragrant dark liquid dripped into the glass carafe.

*Think happy, settled thoughts.*

But they didn’t come. Maybe the coffee would help. Since it would be a few minutes, she showered and put on a pair of

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sandals and a blue cotton dress. She looked in the mirror.

*I should never have cut my hair so short.*

Even though the multiple layers brought out the curl, Kate missed the former single-length style, which had always worked best with her thick honey-colored hair.

*So many damn things to get used to. Can I do it?*

She combed the waves in place. A clump of curls on the right side of her head curved backward instead of downward, making it look as though she had wings. Hairspray didn't seem to make any difference. She threw her hands up, disgusted. She coated her thick light-brown lashes with mascara, which highlighted her dark-brown eyes. A wine-colored lipstick added vibrancy to her milky complexion.

Back in the kitchen, she fixed a cup of coffee and punched up the contact's file on her cell.

"Hi, Rebecca. Am I calling too early?"

"Of course not, dear. I just got Mitchell off to work. I was going to read the paper. Do you like your new place?"

"It's nicer than I thought it would be. A little on the small side, but big enough for me."

"You sound sleepy this morning."

"I stayed up late unpacking. I needed to get some stuff out. You know, the coffee maker and some towels. I got carried away."

"So you're off to work this morning."

"I'm scared to death."

"You'll do fine, dear. I just know you will."

Kate sipped coffee, wondering where the courage to meet the day would come from. "I hear my door bell, so I'll have to hang up. It's probably Mrs. Parker—she's supposed to pick me up."

"Call us when you can, dear. Good luck today. Remember,

Mitchell and I love you very much.”

“I love you, too. Bye.”

Kate opened the front door.

“Good morning. Here.” Marine handed Kate a basket of homemade cinnamon buns.

“These smell heavenly. Come on in. The coffee’s made.”

Kate led Marine to the kitchen.

Marine looked around. “Did you sleep okay? My goodness, you already look settled.”

A white vase with wooden spoons and bright yellow canisters sat on the kitchen counter. A toaster and blender stood side-by-side, ready for use. A green tea kettle was perched on one of the stove’s burners. Green-and-yellow striped kitchen towels hung on the oven door.

“I was so excited about being here, I worked until almost two this morning. I already feel at home.” Saying it made it true.

“You’ll kill yourself the first day.”

Marine tore off a bun and picked at it. Kate did the same.

“You made these?” Kate asked.

“I love to cook,” Marine said. “Lately I’ve gained too much weight. It hasn’t gotten easier since I turned fifty. Now I give my treadmill a real workout.”

“Whatever you’re doing, keep it up. You look great.”

“Thanks.”

Kate patted her tummy roll. “I should look into getting a treadmill. A small one would fit in the den.”

The women polished off their rolls. Kate reached for another. “You know the rule?”

Marine laughed and said, “If you eat them standing up, it doesn’t count? We should get going. Are you ready?”

“I am.” She grabbed a bag of chocolate bars and stuffed

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them in her purse.

On the way out Marine said, “Alma Lawrence, our nurse, will be in the office shortly. She knows the ropes over there. I’ll get you started, but I have to drive out to the reservation this morning.”

“Reservation?”

“Most of the local Indians are scattered here in town, but one clan lives on an old-fashioned reservation. I home-school the children.”

“Really? How long have you been doing that?”

“A few years now. It’s an interesting story. I’ll tell you more about it sometime. In fact, why don’t you come out with me one day next week?”

“Sounds great.”

The women got into their respective cars. Kate followed as Marine led the way. They parked in front of a beige stucco building that looked fresh from a new coat of paint. It seemed out of place next to the others with peeling sides and crumbling roofs.

“Here’s your key,” Marine said.

Kate caressed the cool metal, and swallowed. A panic attack crashed into her psyche like a tsunami, paralyzing her. This was it. There was no more time to ask if she could be a doctor again. Fact was, she was here and had a job to do. It was time to face whatever came her way. She drew a breath.

*I have to believe in myself.*

The key turned easily in the lock, a good omen. The women went inside.

A small desk with three upright file cabinets filled one side of a waiting room. Just opposite were five metal folding chairs, waiting for patients. Dividers, almost hugging the ceiling, separated the waiting and reception areas from the

rest of the clinic.

“The clinic has been open only sporadically for the past few weeks, so until word gets out that you’re here permanently, you won’t be too busy,” Marine said.

The women walked down a hallway. A nurse’s station was carved into a wedge-shaped corner that formed the walls of a small pharmacy and a lab. Various murals, painted in lime green, bright red, and yellow, depicting scenes of children playing, adorned the tiled hallways.

Kate tensed. The medical equipment and the antiseptic smell taunted her, testing her capabilities.

In another room, an x-ray unit stood silently next to a large metallic table. The corridor wound toward the back of the building. Kate and Marine peeked inside two examining rooms. Each had tables, chairs, and a small desk. Medical equipment for examining ears, eyes, and blood pressure hung on a rack above the desk. The last room sported a brass sign with her name on it.

“This is your office,” Marine said.

Kate put her purse on the desk. “I’ll have to look around more, but the clinic seems well equipped.” The wall behind the desk bore a mural sporting a large red flowering plant draped over a trellis.

“Is that bougainvillea?”

“It is. One of the church ladies did that recently. Do you like it?”

“I really like the colors,” Kate said. “The artist captured the blue sky perfectly. It looks so real.”

“You’ll find all the equipment and supplies you’ll need. Let Alma know if you want anything else. There’s a copy of this year’s budget on your desk. It’s very generous. We raise a lot of money here. In fact, we’ll ask you to help us with that.”

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“Oh?” Kate said. The last thing she wanted was to take on more projects.

“We have several fundraisers each year, and we need our doctors to come.”

Kate winced at the thought of herself in a formal gown, circulating around a crowded room filled with donors who looked plastic and pretentious. She knew these affairs raised money for a good cause but she had always hated them. “I’m not good at that sort of thing.”

“You’ll take to it well enough. Besides, it’s the only way.”

Before Kate could comment, a matronly-looking woman with a gray ponytail strolled in. Her mocha-colored skin glowed against sharp facial features, revealing her American, Mexican, and Indian heritage. A neatly pressed nurse’s uniform stretched over her protruding abdomen.

“Doctor Anderson, this is Alma Lawrence, our nurse.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” Kate shook Alma’s stubby hand. “Please call me Kate.”

“I’m glad you’re here.” The slight drawl sounded part Southern and part Spanish. The nurse dropped a black cotton sack down. Knitting needles and a ball of blue yarn protruded from it.

“I’ll leave you to get acquainted. Bye,” Marine said and left.

“She has more energy than I do,” Kate said.

Alma flashed a smile. “She’s a wonderful woman who’s put up with a lot from that husband of hers.” Her tone turned sarcastic. “He’s a piece of work.”

Kate threw a puzzled look. She pulled a chocolate bar out of her purse and offered one to Alma.

“I never eat chocolate,” Alma said. “Don’t know why, just don’t. I need to show you a few things.”

Alma pointed to a stack of charts piled in a bookcase behind her desk. "These are some of our more colorful patients."

"Colorful patients?" Kate ran her hand across the top folder.

"You'll see what I mean soon enough," Alma said, calmly. "And here's a list of doctors you can contact if you need to admit anyone to the hospital. I'm assuming you don't have hospital privileges."

Did she know? It was barely nine in the morning, a ghastly time to explain one's alcoholism to a stranger.

"I'm sorry," Alma said. "Did you get privileges? Most of our doctors don't because they're here for a short time."

"Doctor Saunders didn't have privileges?"

"No."

"Well, I didn't bother, either," Kate said. She sighed with relief. "Thanks, Alma. I can see you're going to be a big help."

## Chapter 3

Reverend Graham Parker made his way up the mud-slicked path. Goey earth oozed over his socks. He'd have to throw away his new Gucci loafers. He hated coming to the reservation, but he had to see Tommy Tiger. As the clan's medicine man, Tommy was not the final decision-maker for the tribe, but was the easiest to reason with. Over the years, he and Graham had developed a good rapport.

The blistering eighty-eight-degree sun blanketed the morning with humidity. Graham took off his dark-blue Brooks Brothers sport coat and hung it over his arm. Realizing he had forgotten his handkerchief, he wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and sighed.

Lately work had been nothing more than a list of boring tasks. An overriding sense of duty forced him out of bed in the morning. Thinking back, he couldn't remember ever feeling any satisfaction from being a minister.

Graham had joined the clergy to please his father and had married Marine for the same reason. But now, three years after his father's death, he didn't want to continue in the church and was more than ready for a change.

Recently, Garrett Peterson, an old college friend, had offered him a position as a business manager in his West Palm Beach real estate development firm. It meant a move to an upscale community with good restaurants and nicer homes. He knew he could be successful and could make it through the adjustments. Garrett's confidence in his business skills made all the difference. The church could easily continue with a new pastor. Now, the only thing stopping him was Marine. He was sure she'd agree to move to West Palm Beach. Problem was—he wasn't sure he wanted her to go.

He knocked on Tommy's front door.

"Reverend, this is a surprise. Come in." The scent of aromatic herbs wafted in the air. Tommy, dressed in his usual Levis, pointed to his cup. "Would you like some tea?"

"No, thanks." Graham started scraping the mud off his shoes.

"Don't worry about that." Tommy led his visitor to the kitchen. "What can I do for you?"

"I met a young lady at the women's shelter. She's a Seminole and about to be divorced. Abuse case." Graham shook his head. "She's very capable and wants to make a go of it. I heard the Snows aren't living in their place anymore. I was wondering if she might move in there." He paused, watching for signs of approval.

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Tommy curled a lip. "Do you know what clan she's from?"

"No, but she makes dolls like the ones you sell in the tourist shop."

Tommy's eyes widened. "Bring her by. We've never had a single woman living here. I'll have to talk with the tribal leaders and the other families."

"I understand," Graham said. "I hoped we might settle this today. The shelter's full. She can't stay there too much longer."

"What's her name?" Tommy asked.

"Morlee. Morlee Jumper. Her husband was Willie Jumper."

Tommy ran his tongue over his lips. "I'll meet her tomorrow," he said. "I'll run it by everyone tonight."

"Thanks." Graham shook the Indian's hand. He left feeling like he had accomplished something.



After Graham left, Tommy put his breakfast dishes in the sink. He grabbed his straw cowboy hat and headed outside. A blast of hot air greeted him. He brought the diesel engine of his Dodge four-by-four to life and drove out to the tribe's cattle ranch. Right before the turnoff, he parked by the roadside. A semi, waiting to maneuver into the narrow driveway, was stretched across both lanes. Billy Cypress, his new son-in-law, stood behind the fence, guiding the driver back. A dozen head of cattle were lined up for loading. When the truck was in place, Billy waved an "all clear" sign and ushered the cattle up the ramp.

As soon as his daughter had shown interest in Billy,

Tommy had been concerned that the young man wouldn't want to live on the reservation and adopt Seminole life. Since Nahah was of the bird clan, her first-born male child would be in line to be a tribal chief, therefore making it vital that Tommy's future grandchild be raised as a traditional Seminole. However, in the months that followed the marriage, Billy had taken to the ancient ways, easing Tommy's fears.

The sun grew hotter. The cloudless sky offered little relief. Tommy wiped his brow. Yes, he would influence the other chiefs to grant Graham's request. He had recognized Willie's name immediately and was ashamed to admit he was his nephew. He'd do anything to protect that girl from Willie. Anything at all.



When Alma finished showing her around, Kate settled in her office and ate another candy bar while looking over Doctor Saunders' phone list. She wasn't sure if it was the caffeine in the chocolate or the two extra cups of coffee she had earlier, but she couldn't sit still. It was driving her crazy. She tried to focus. The list contained the doctors' names, addresses, phone numbers, and their respective specialties. All occupied offices in the same building, and each physician was associated with North Collier Hospital on Immokalee Road.

She dialed the first number on the list, Doctor Marilyn Stacker, whose specialty was obstetrics and gynecology.

"This is Doctor Anderson. May I speak with Doctor Stacker?"

A pleasant secretary asked her to hold.

A few minutes later, a woman's voice came on. "Doctor Anderson, how can I help you?"

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"I'm new at the Immokalee clinic, and I'm calling to introduce myself."

"So, you're taking Peter Saunders' place. Welcome to Southwest Florida. Are you settled in?"

"Just barely. I got in yesterday." The soothing voice made her feel at ease. "Listen, I know you must be busy. The reason I'm calling is to let you know that I don't have hospital privileges, and I was hoping I could refer patients to you."

"Of course. I'm happy to do that. When you're able, join us for lunch. The staff eats in the doctor's lounge at the hospital. It's really the best way to meet everyone."

"Where do I go?"

"Just follow Immokalee Road into Naples. The doctor's lounge is on the third floor. Most of us hang out in there from twelve-thirty to one-thirty. I can arrange for you to meet the hospital administrator if you'd like."

"Great idea. Thanks, you've been more than helpful."

"I hope to see you soon."

Kate hung up. If all the doctors were this friendly, she wouldn't have a problem.

After failing to reach the other two names on her list, she went through the folders that her predecessor had left, scrutinizing notes he had made in his last days at the clinic.

After setting one stack aside, she came across another labeled "*Seminole Indians—Tommy Tiger's Clan*". Curious, she read short medical histories on several elderly patients with names like Big Gopher, Miami Billy, and Tabasco Charlie. One had diabetes, another high blood pressure, and still another had suspected lung cancer. A list of herbs that Tommy had used to treat them along with the plant's picture and a description of the herb's effect on each symptom was nicely displayed in a spreadsheet. Doctor Saunders had recommended

that each patient come to the clinic for further testing, but Tommy Tiger, the clan's medicine man, had denied the request.

"Alma," she called.

"Doctor Anderson, your first patients are here," Alma responded.

Outside examining room one, Kate took the chart from Alma. "I need to talk with you about Tommy Tiger."

Alma rolled her eyes, nodded, and went inside. Kate read the charts labeled, "Juan and Jesus Valdez." After noting that the one-year-old twin boys needed booster shots, she opened the door. Alma was already taking each child's temperature.

"Good morning, Mrs. Valdez," Kate said.

"She doesn't speak English." Alma spoke Spanish to the woman, who nodded and smiled at Kate.

It seemed strange not to be able to communicate with her patients. Kate picked up a pediatric stethoscope and listened to the first boy's heart. It sounded normal. The second child's heart sounded like an old locomotive, indicating a murmur. Before speaking, she laid the stethoscope aside and reread the chart, noting a lack of reference to any abnormalities. Had she heard it right? She listened again. The distinctive *chu-chu* sound was unmistakable.

"Please tell Mrs. Valdez that Jesus will need to be taken to Fort Myers for some tests."

Alma looked up. "What kind of tests?"

"A cardiac ultrasound. I hear a murmur."

"A truck comes over on Wednesday with CAT scan, MRI, and ultrasound. Can it wait until then?"

"I didn't know that." Kate scribbled a note. *So much to learn.* "Yes, ask her to come back then."

Alma related the instructions. They both looked at the

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door when they heard someone shouting in the waiting room.

"I'll see what's going on, while you finish up here," Kate said.

A young man had left the door open and was standing in the parking lot. "Doctor Saunders, come quick!"

Kate joined him outside. "Doctor Saunders isn't here anymore." She saw his tee shirt with the words "Tiger Clan" written across his chest. "I'm Doctor Anderson. What's the problem?"

"It's my wife, Doc. She's in the truck and can't breathe too good."

Kate opened the door of an old blue pickup. A young woman with braided hair sat in the passenger seat. She was gasping for breath.

"Can you walk?"

The girl nodded. The man helped Kate bring her inside. Once in the examining room, Kate grabbed her stethoscope and listened to her lungs. The sounds were normal. A pair of dark-chocolate eyes stared at her. "What's your name?"

"Nahah Tiger." The girl choked out the words as though she hungered for air.

"Nahah is pregnant," the young man said. He was leaning against the doorframe.

"You're her husband?" Kate asked.

"Yes. I'm Billy Cypress."

"How far along are you, Nahah?"

"About six months."

"We'll need to run some tests," Kate told both of them.

Out the examining room window, she saw another truck roar into the driveway. In a second, the front door burst open.

Rushing out to the waiting room, she ran into a man with a ponytail. His fierce dark eyes studied her like she was an

undiscovered species, but he held the gaze for only a second.

“Who the hell are you? And where’s my daughter?” His voice boomed as though the bass had been turned too high.

Kate stared back. His bronze skin tone held a reddish hue from recent sun exposure. She guessed he was in his early forties. “I’m Doctor Anderson...”

Billy Cypress hurried out and his mouth hung open. “Tommy Tiger! I had to bring her here, she couldn’t breathe.”

Tommy Tiger sternly pointed his finger. “You should’ve found me.”

“We didn’t know where you were. She’s my wife, after all.” Billy squared his shoulders, but he seemed small next to Tommy’s taller, more muscular frame.

“And she’s my daughter. Where is she?”

“I don’t know what’s going on here, but I’m Doctor Anderson. We have to get Nahah to the hospital right away. I think she might have a blood clot in her lung.”

For a split second, Tommy eyed Kate as though he believed what she said. But just as quickly, he plowed past her and found his daughter.

“Now wait a minute here!” Kate raised her voice.

*Who the hell is this character?*

Tommy ignored Kate and spoke to Nahah in an indiscernible language.

Alma came in. “What’s all the commotion?” When she saw Tommy, she pulled Kate aside. “That’s Tommy Tiger. He’s the medicine man for his clan.”

“He might be the medicine man, but I’m the doctor.” Kate’s voice carried through the office. She started back in, but Tommy’s stare stopped her cold. He took a bag from his pocket and crumbled some herbs in his hand. He slid his hand back and forth under his daughter’s nose gently and chanted

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unintelligible words. Kate thought it sounded like a song.

The young woman's breathing eased.

Tommy looked at his son-in-law. "I'll take her in my truck. You follow." Tommy carried his daughter out with Billy right behind.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Kate shouted, starting after them.

Alma stopped her. "Don't give no never mind to Tommy. He'll do the right thing. Do you want me to give the twins their booster shots?"

"Yes." Kate grimaced, realizing how sharp her voice sounded. She felt her cheeks redden, embarrassed to have raised her voice to her nurse. "When you're finished, come in my office and tell me everything you know about Tommy Tiger."



Tommy Tiger flung open the passenger door of his Dodge four-by-four and carried his daughter into the emergency room entrance of North Collier Hospital without waiting for his son-in-law. Nahah had inhaled the herb mixture on the forty-mile trip into town. He had chanted the traditional words, the song to ease one's breathing, but it hadn't worked, and he knew she was very ill.

The triage nurse put them in a room and went to get a doctor.

"I'm Doctor Miller. What's the problem here?"

Tommy looked down at the doctor who stood shoulder height to him. "It's my daughter, Doc. She can't breathe."

The physician attached an oxygen mask to her face, then listened to her lungs.

“How long has she been like this?” Billy Cypress walked in, breathless. Tommy had beat him into town by five minutes.

“Since this morning,” Billy Cypress said.

The doctor turned toward him. “And you are?”

“Her husband.”

“And I’m her father,” Tommy said, holding Nahah’s hand.

“Okay, okay. Look, everything’s going to be fine. What’s your name?” he asked his patient.

“Nahah.” She was still gasping.

Seeing she had difficulty speaking, Doctor Miller turned to Billy Cypress. “Does your wife have any other medical problems?”

“She’s pregnant,” Tommy said.

“Sir, why don’t you have a seat in the waiting room?” the doctor said to Tommy.

Tommy crossed his arms. “I won’t leave her.”

Nahah tugged on the doctor’s shirt and whispered. “It’s okay.”

Tommy didn’t budge.

“How far along is she?”

“About six months,” Billy Cypress said.

“We have to run some blood tests,” Doctor Miller said. “Nahah may have a blood clot in her lung. It’ll be a few hours before I get results. Someone will be along to take her to x-ray. In the meantime, we’ll keep her comfortable.”

“Thanks, Doctor,” Billy said. He looked at Tommy. “Looks like that lady doctor at the clinic was right.”



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After her patients had left, Kate sat at her desk and opened the file labeled “Tommy Tiger’s Clan.” She reached for a mini chocolate bar, but realized she was out.

*Damn, I wonder if Juan Esposito’s market carries these.*

Focusing her attention on the notes, she learned that Doctor Saunders had never convinced Tommy Tiger to use preventive health measures. The detailed remarks about different herbs and their botanical names convinced her that he had been trying to understand Seminole medicine.

Alma came in and handed Kate a cup of coffee. She plopped in a chair. “Where do you want to begin?”

“Tell me everything.”

“My first experience with Tommy was ten years ago when he brought his pregnant wife in for prenatal care. The doctor here checked her weekly. In her last month, she developed high blood pressure. We recommended that she deliver in the hospital, but Tommy wouldn’t hear of it. She went into labor one evening after a bad tropical storm blew in. The road to the reservation washed out. I understand she was in labor about fifteen hours. She gave birth to a boy, but they both died within minutes.”

Kate listened intently and sipped her coffee. “Aneurysm?”

“We thought so. I never really found out how his son died because Tommy wouldn’t allow autopsies. He blamed their deaths on the vitamins his wife had taken and has been suspicious of doctors ever since. When Nahah found out she was pregnant, he wouldn’t allow her to take vitamins. These Indians are very superstitious.”

“I don’t understand,” Kate said. “I thought the Indians believed in modern medicine.”

“They do, but they want to use their medicine, too. Tommy’s parents became concerned after most of the Indians

moved into town and adopted modern ways. His father convinced several families to move back on the Immokalee reservation. Twenty families live there now.”

“You mean they live like traditional Indians.”

“It’s kind of interesting. They built small houses, have running water, and electricity, but that’s about it for modern conveniences. They try to keep to their old ways.”

“How do they support themselves?”

“The men hunt and fish. They have a huge garden and a profitable cattle ranch. The women make crafts and sell them in the tourist shop. They share whatever money they earn and pay cash for everything.”

“Amazing.” Kate swallowed the last of her coffee. “Marine said something about running a school out there.”

“Tommy didn’t want the kids to go to public school, so he hired Marine. They pay her with fresh meat.”

“I had no idea,” Kate said. “We need to make sure Tommy took his daughter to the hospital.”

“Don’t worry, he did. I’ll call over there in a few hours. Knowing Tommy, he probably kicked a little butt in the process.”

Kate shook her head. “This is more than I expected to deal with.” She kept her voice confident to cover up the anxiety that slammed at her insides like a strong incoming tide. It wasn’t bad enough that she was unsure of herself, now she had some unstable Indian medicine man to deal with.

“Most of the Indians are very modern and grateful for this clinic. Doctor Saunders even got in the habit of making a few house calls.”

“House calls?”

“As Indians age, they go off by themselves, because if they die on the reservation, the whole clan has to move. Something

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to do with evil spirits hanging around. They think the dead person might take a few of the living relatives with them.”

“I really have a lot to learn,” Kate said. “I did some reading about the Seminoles before I came, but I guess I have to look up a few more things. I never expected to deal with traditional Indians. Any more patients scheduled today?”

“A few this afternoon. As soon as word gets out that we have a doctor here again, you’ll be busier than you want to be.”

“Alma, do you know if Esposito’s market carries these?” She held up a bag of her favorite chocolate mini bars.

“I would imagine, but I don’t know for sure since I never eat the stuff.”

The clinic door opened. A man hobbled in, looking pale and faint. He was leaning on the shoulder of a short woman who was speaking Spanish.

Kate motioned them to an examining room. “What’s she saying?”

“Her husband cut his leg about a week ago and has a bad infection,” Alma said.

They hoisted the man up on the examining table. Kate snapped on some gloves and cut off his pant legs while Alma popped a thermometer in his ear and waited a few seconds.

She took it out. “101.”

Pus oozed from a two-inch gaping wound in the patient’s leg. A dirty bandage stuck to his skin.

“Ask her how it happened.”

Alma translated. “He cut himself chopping wood.”

“Let’s get a white count and give him a tetanus shot.”

Alma nodded. Kate filled a bowl and administered a local anesthetic. Then she removed the old bandage and cleaned the wound. Once it was free of pus, she inserted a drain and

loosely covered it with a fresh bandage.

“Alma, please tell her to come back tomorrow so I can check this again and give her some of these.” She wrote a prescription for an antibiotic. “Have him take them three times a day for ten days.” Kate made some notations in the patient’s chart as Alma explained about the medicine.

When the couple left, Kate said, “I’m glad you’re here, Alma. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Alma looked pleased. “That’s what all the doctors tell me.”

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