

CHAPTER THREE



Ava peered out over the dusty ledge of her prison window. She'd been in this village one week. Seven days of hard rains and little food. How much longer did her captors plan on keeping her here?

She swiped the back of her hand across her eyelids, then blinked. Nothing help. Her vision still blurred from fresh tears and chemical smoke. Lifting on her tip-toes, she rested her chin on the ledge and leaned her head on the two rusty iron bars, hoping to catch a glimpse of any activity in the village.

Each morning they burned their refuse, and the inky black swirls of noxious fumes already twirled through the sky. She angled her face, hoping to inhale a short breath of clean air. All she got for her efforts—the smell of animal waste and burning rubber. Ava held her hand up to her throat and attempted to swallow past the dry irritation coating her windpipe. Unable to find relief, she groaned. She needed water and clean air. For now, she was conserving what she had of one and praying she'd find the other.

Taking a few turns around the tiny room, Ava slid her

fingers lazily along the crumbling mud walls. Already warm to the touch, the heat in the small room wrapped around her skin like a blazing kiln. Shaky and exhausted, she lowered herself to the floor and tucked her knees under her chin.

Hours after the explosion, a group of armed men found her, soaked from new rain and hiding in the brush. She contemplated running, but the weapons slung over their shoulders suggested it wouldn't have done any good.

"Are you a doctor?" The taller, muscular man asked her after she stood, wobbly on her legs.

Ava looked down at Colby's medical jacket. Quivering nerves pooled in the pit of her stomach. "Not really." She fingered the coat nervously and scrutinized each man standing around her. Were they an answer to her prayers? Or just another layer to her nightmare?

"Were you with them?" The short man with little to no teeth nodded up the embankment.

A tingle walked down her spine as her mind conjured an image of what might be left of the truck. "Is there ...?" She paused, unsure of how to ask and uncertain if she wanted the answer. "Is there anything left?"

They all shook their heads.

"No, no, there are no supplies left." The younger of the four spoke up, then added, "There is nothing left."

Ava swayed. The tall man reached out and grabbed her arm. In a knee-jerk reaction, she yanked away from him.

He held up his hands and leered at her. "We won't hurt you." He exchanged a look with the other men and smirked. "But you *will* come with us."

Ava wiped several tears from her face and glanced back at the crude, cut-out window. How much longer could she endure them believing a lie? A lie that, so far, had kept her alive. Trying to rein in her dispirited thoughts, she sent a silent

plea up to heaven to renew her strength and provide a way back home.

Before Ava lingered long on her melancholy feelings, the bulky prison door opened with a reverberating bang. Two guards barreled across the threshold, dragging a limp man between them.

“You fix this.” The rotund guard with sweat pasted across his forehead pushed the tip of his boot onto the body they’d thrown at her feet.

“What?” Ava’s heart pounded against her ribcage.

“You fix this man.”

“I can’t fix this man.” She swallowed back the fear that bowled over her like a gusty west Texas wind.

The injured man moaned where he lay crumpled on the ground in a heap. She crouched down next to him and ran her fingers over the fresh scratches along his temple. His U.S. military uniform was faded and caked with red clay dirt.

“You fix.” The older, surly guard raised his voice and nudged her shoulder. “You healer, you fix.”

Ava’s face burned with anger as she shot to her feet. “I don’t know how to fix this man.” Surprised at her own outburst, she clamped her mouth shut. She couldn’t afford to make her captors angry, but she’d grown weary of being told what to do. Ava bit her lip to temper her burgeoning frustration.

The younger guard moved close to her and reached out his hand. Ava flinched and stepped back. She might have finally pushed the right button to make these hardened men want to end her life.

“You know physician?” The guard kept his voice low while he reached his hand out to her discolored jacket.

“What?” The question confused her. She’d told them she wasn’t a doctor, but they believed she’d been at least trained as

an assistant. On several occasions, she'd heard them whisper and call her the American nurse.

He leaned in and motioned toward the patch with the Swiss cross on her sleeve. "You fix this man."

Ava gripped the coat and pulled it snugly around her. The moments of the explosion galloped through her mind like runaway horses. Her head swayed. Taking in a few deep breaths, Ava fought to ignore the haunting image of Colby's face before he pushed her off the bed of the truck.

"I heard you last night. You asked a great physician to heal you." The man's stuttered English snapped her out of her troubled thoughts. "You wear his shirt."

Under Colby's name, the word *Physician* was embroidered in blue. Ava's heart sank. He'd heard her praying. Under certain circumstances, uttering a prayer might be more fatal than impersonating a doctor. She glanced down at the tattered lab coat, unsure what to say.

"I ... it wasn't ..." *What do I say? God, give me wisdom.* She couldn't deny she'd prayed, but they needed to understand she wasn't a medical professional. Ava looked back at the older guard. The skin on his face was weather-beaten and deeply scarred with old wounds. When he caught her staring, his eyes darkened with rage.

"You fix. He will bring a good price. Then, maybe we let you go."

Ava swallowed hard as a cool shudder worked its way down her spine. His expression and the tone of his words contradicted his promise to let her go. She understood this week could very well be her last if this soldier—half-dead on the floor—didn't miraculously get well. *God, please help me.*

The two men stomped out the door, and the familiar clang of the rusty iron bar slammed shut. She redirected her gaze back to the man lying at her feet and released a long breath.

Crouching again, she laid her hand on his chest. The soldier's rib cage moved up and down beneath her palm—a good sign—at least he was breathing, and they would spare her life for another day. Lowering herself beside her new roommate, she leaned against the grimy wall. Exhaustion and anxiety crashed over her like a bucket of ice water. “Why, God? Why did you put me in this situation?” Ava cried out in a whisper as her mind raced with petitions and prayers. It wasn't God who'd brought her here—but herself.

Two weeks ago, she'd been sitting in the sun on the back porch of her elegant home, drinking mint iced tea, and watching the leaves pinwheel to the ground across her yard. *I needed to leave. The memories were strangling me.*

She stared at the angled cut-out overhead. The sun's rays peeked out from dark clouds and danced across her skin. Did anyone back in Texas realize she'd gone missing? Had word even reached the United States about the tragedy that killed two of her friends?

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance toward you and give you peace. The Bible verse traced across her mind, and she forced a tired smile. Like the bright sun warming her cheeks, she believed the promise that God, even in this filthy room, still had His hand upon her.

It was my decision to come here. With little to no prayer or guidance, she agreed to join a mission trip with a few others from her church. Despite her rash decision, God had given her a sure way out—an easy way of excusing herself from the trip. No one would have blamed her if she had changed her mind. But she'd given in to her stubborn nature and tried to run from the tumult of emotions taking over her life instead of facing them with grace.

A quiet moan escaped the man's lips, and Ava pulled

herself back to the present. She leaned in his direction and put her hand on the battered soldier's shoulder. His name tape was dirty and torn, with the word *Maxwell* written in subdued green threads.

“Well, Maxwell, I sure hope you aren't as injured as you appear.”

His eyelids fluttered, then shut.

Ava took a deep breath and prayed that God would intervene, and get her—and Maxwell—out of this mess.

Because now, until God separated them, they were in this mess together.