

CHAPTER

1

WOODSTOCK, MONTANA

Carl Venable, head of the CIA task force on terrorism, was not often out in the field, and even less often in physical danger. But now he was missing. And he was the one man who couldn't be left behind.

And, dammit, there was no way Jude Brandon was going to have that happen.

"They're coming, Brandon!" Nate was skidding down the slope toward him as he came out of the forest. "Just over the ridge. I told you that you couldn't keep searching. Get on the damn helicopter! They'll be here in minutes."

"How many minutes?"

"Fifteen, maybe."

"Did you see Venable?" Brandon asked. "Did you *see* him, Nate?"

"I saw him." Nate jumped into the cockpit of the helicopter. "We've got to get out of here. Twenty or thirty of Huber's men are heading for that cabin. It's too late. We don't have a chance of retrieving him."

"The *hell* we don't." Brandon was already heading back up the hill. "We've got to get him out of here. He has a damn target on his back. You know what they'll do to him if they get their hands on him. Be ready to take off when I get back."

“It’s no *use*, dammit.” Brandon could hear Nate cursing behind him.

Screw it. Fifteen minutes could be a long time. Nate should have gotten Venable out when he saw him. It wasn’t like him to leave a job undone.

Three minutes later, he was at the cabin.

A minute later, he’d checked out the exterior of the grounds and determined it was clear.

But Venable had not been anywhere in sight, and Nate had said he’d seen him.

Brandon threw open the door, dove in, and rolled to the left.

“You never listen, Brandon,” Carl Venable said from across the room. “I’ve been expecting you.”

“Then you should have come when Nate—” He stopped as he saw that the CIA operative was lying on a cot that was as bloody as the front of his white shirt. “Shit.” He was on his feet and across the room in two strides. “You’re wounded. How bad?”

“Very.” Venable’s voice was barely above a whisper. “Sorry, Brandon. I know you’d like to rob Huber of this particular victory, but I’m dying. I should be gone in a few minutes.”

“Not if I can get you out of here.” He was opening Venable’s shirt. “I’ll just apply pressure and—” He stopped as he looked down at the wound. “Damn.”

“Too late,” Venable said. “You’re good at battlefield wounds. You know it’s the truth. Say it, Brandon.”

“Okay, it’s true.” He met Venable’s eyes. “But I can get you out of here before Huber shows up and does anything else to you.”

“I’ll be past worrying about . . . torture before he walks through that door. We both know it.”

He wasn’t going to deny it. Venable wouldn’t appreciate it. “What about your informant? Did Nemesis tell you anything?”

“No time. But I gave him . . . Rachel’s name.”

He stiffened. “Your *daughter’s* name? Are you crazy? Why not mine?”

“A little . . . insurance.” Venable tried to smile, but his voice was

getting weaker. “Not that I . . . don’t trust you. I just trust her more. And it’s a way of doubling my chances of getting Rachel out of this alive. Another reason for you to keep Max Huber away from her.”

“You don’t need insurance. I said I’d do it.”

“But you’re like me, a driven man. She’s had to contend with me all her life, I don’t want to leave her to face another struggle alone. Tell her that I kept . . . my promise. This time I’m giving her a choice.” He coughed, and a tiny bit of blood appeared at the corner of his mouth. “And I have one final job to do. I have to make sure . . . that Huber thinks he has plenty of time . . . for his next move. That means getting you the hell out of Dodge before . . . he finds out that you’re on your way to get her. So on your . . . way, Brandon.”

“I don’t take orders from you, Venable.”

“No, but you’ll take this one. Rachel’s your only way to score against Huber now. You’ve fought too long to give up your shot at him. I don’t flatter myself you’re doing . . . this for me, you’re doing it for pure revenge. You’re . . . good at that, Brandon. How much time do you have left?”

“Seven minutes.”

“Tell me how you’ll . . . get out of here?”

“I can’t use the helicopter, they’re almost on top of us. They’d know that I’d been here. I’ll hide the copter in the woods, and Nate and I will walk out, then call for assist when it’s safe.”

“And then you’ll go . . . for Rachel?” Venable was holding his gaze. “Promise me. There won’t . . . be much time. He’ll know where she is by now.”

“I’ll go for her.” He looked down at him. “She’s not my choice. But I’ll use her to get what we both want. You shouldn’t have gotten yourself shot, Venable.”

“I realize it was a major . . . disruption of your plans.” His voice was fading. “But you won’t have a plan unless you get yourself out of here. Forget that . . . bullshit about not . . . leaving a man behind. I always told you that the Army brainwashed you. That’s why . . . I told Nate not to tell you I’d bought it.”

“Yet I don’t think you would have left me behind.” Brandon was

already heading for the door. “But I’ll get out, and I’ll get Huber.” He looked back over his shoulder. He didn’t want to leave him, dammit. At one time or another Venable had been both ally and enemy to him, but he shouldn’t have to die alone. His eyes were closed, and Brandon didn’t know if Venable was still alive to hear him. “I’ve no use for the CIA, they’ve tended to get in my way. But you were the best and most honest operative I ever ran across, Venable. It’s been a privilege.”

“How . . . generous. I feel . . . honored that—” His head slumped sideways. Brandon could no longer hear his breath.

Dead.

Brandon could feel the fury tear through him as he shut the door and started at a run toward the hills. He hadn’t known Venable that well, but this time they’d been on the same side, fighting the same battle for different reasons. And what he’d known he’d liked and appreciated as much as he’d allowed himself. They were both obsessed, and obsession permitted little else to enter into a relationship. Venable’s death only added to the score Brandon had to settle with Max Huber.

And Venable had been his best key to getting Huber, he thought with frustration. He had been so close . . .

But Venable had given him another key. And her name was Rachel Venable. Forget about what might have been and go after the possible.

He took out his phone and dialed Nate. “Venable’s dead. You should have told me he’d been shot.”

“He told me not to do it. He said if I did, you’d go after him. He was dying, Brandon. I could see it. But you went anyway. I thought you would.”

“So did he.” Because Venable had wanted one last assurance that Brandon would do what he wanted. “I’m on my way back. Start preparing the helicopter. We’re going to hide it in the woods.”

“I’m on it. Anything else?”

“Call Monty and tell him to chart a course for Georgetown and make ground preparations. We’ll need a team of ten or twelve.”

“Georgetown?”

“It’s on the coast of Guyana, South America. We’re going to Guyana.” He cut the connection.

One more call. It was one he didn’t want to make. It could mean endless complications, subtle manipulation, and perhaps even duplicity. But he knew it had to be done.

He quickly punched in the private number for Claire Warren.

NALEZ, GUYANA

7:40 P.M.

Just one more drop of the broadleaf palm root . . .

Rachel Venable’s eyes narrowed with concentration on the glass vial as she carefully squeezed the yellow liquid into the mixture. Good enough. She’d had to substitute here in the rain forest because the ingredients had to be fresh in order to be at top efficiency.

And top efficiency might not even be good enough, she thought wearily as she put the cap on the vial. She’d already sent Maria Perez’s test results to the lab in Georgetown, and they’d said that nothing could be done. They’d given the little girl perhaps two to three days before she went into a coma. She’d been totally unresponsive to every treatment they’d tried since she’d come down with the virus. It might be another day after that before the virus killed her. The mosquito-borne Taran virus had caused a rare fever that had struck this village in the rain forest with almost always fatal results. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason why some victims were taken and others spared.

“You’ve been working for twenty-four hours straight, Rachel. Give it up.” Dr. Phillip Sanford stood in the doorway of her tent, his gray eyes narrowed on the vial in her hand. “I just received orders from headquarters. They’re pulling us out of Guyana. They said our team has done everything we could do here.”

Rachel tensed. She’d been expecting it since they’d sent the last ambulances with the survivors to Georgetown this afternoon. Their unit of One World Medical was always in demand in war-torn cities

or places like this where no one else was willing to serve. They were constantly on the move. “When?”

“Tonight. As soon as we can pack up. They want us in Sudan by tomorrow night.”

“No!” She looked down at the vial. “Not that soon. Stall them, Phillip. Give me another twenty-four hours.”

“That will be hard to do.” He made a face. “Would you care to tell me why?”

“No.” She moistened her lips. “Just stall them. It won’t be that hard. They think you walk on water. You always manage to bring in mega donations when they trot you out at those fund-raisers.”

“But I don’t walk on water,” he said quietly. “And I do this job because it needs doing. Just as you do, Rachel. Only I’m becoming aware that we approach it from different directions.”

“I work just as hard as you do, Phillip.”

“Harder. Because after you’ve spent your time at the operating table trying to heal these people, you’re here in your tent playing with all your potions.” His gaze ran over the shelves of ingredients above her worktable. “That’s been your *modus operandi* ever since you joined my unit two years ago. You’re one hell of a doctor, Rachel.” His gaze shifted to her face. “But what else are you?”

“It’s all in my résumé.” She smiled with an effort. “As you say, I like to play with my potions. I spent years studying with Hu Chang, who taught me a great deal about natural and herbal medicines before I went to medical school. Naturally, I can’t use them in my practice, but they keep me interested out here in the jungle.” She lifted her chin. “A harmless hobby, Phillip.”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t allow it to be anything else. You believe in the primary rule. First, do no harm.” He was silent. “But I’ve seen that you occasionally have patients who had miraculous recoveries after we’d given up on them.”

“There are always miracles. We’ve all seen them and been grateful.”

“But you have more than your share.” He held up his hand as she started to speak. “I’m not accusing you. We’re all in this fight

together.” He looked at the vial in her hand. “I just want you to know if you need help, I’m here for you.”

She inhaled sharply as she saw his expression. During those first years with Hu Chang, whenever she’d looked in the mirror, she’d seen that expression on her own face. The intensity, the eagerness, the potential that if you just reached out, you might make something different and wonderful happen. Of course Phillip would react as she had done. He was a healer of the very best kind, who would do anything for his patients.

But he mustn’t do this.

She met his gaze. “You’re head of the team. I know I can come to you with problems.”

“That’s a nice noncommittal answer.” He paused. “You held Maria Perez back when we sent the rest of the patients to Georgetown. Why?”

“Her mother, Blanca, wanted to spend her last days with her daughter.”

“She could have gone with her.”

“She thought Maria would be more comfortable here.”

“For the next twenty-four hours?”

“Yes.”

“And you won’t let me help you?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” She paused. “But if I did, I hear there’s such a thing as plausible deniability.” She added quietly, “You’re a good man and a wonderful doctor, Phillip. As you said, we approach our profession from different directions. My direction isn’t nearly as safe or free from the possibility of guilt or mistakes as yours.” She glanced at the rows of potions on the shelves. “Back off. You’re not welcome here.”

“Have it your way.” He grinned at her. “I’ll see you at the mess later to have a last cup of coffee. I think it’s going to take a longer time than I expected to pack up that mess. I believe it would be a goodwill gesture to deliver the remains of the food to the villagers. And we’ve left a lot of refuse to clean up around the camp . . .”

“Twenty-four hours?”

“It might take all of that.” He turned and headed for the tent opening. “Good luck, Rachel.”

“I don’t have any idea what you mean.” She took the vial and strode out of her tent and across the camp toward the single patient tent left at the edge of the clearing. “I’ll see you later, Phillip.”

“How’s she doing, Rachel?” Nancy Kavitz asked softly as the nurse practitioner came into the tent four hours later. “Such a sweet little kid. Did you know that she’s only eight? Even when I gave her shots, she’d try to smile at me.” She shook her head. “Until this morning. Is she asleep or has she gone into a coma?”

“No coma . . . yet.” Rachel looked back down at the little girl.

Maybe not ever, Maria. You need to stick around and grow up and have kids that are as sweet as you are. You think about it, and maybe somebody up there will hear you. “Though her fever is still high. I was hoping it would come down.”

“Why?” Nancy frowned, puzzled. “The fever in the other patients didn’t come down before they went into coma state.”

“Dammit, that’s *why* it has to come down,” Rachel said sharply. “Why are you taking it for granted that she doesn’t have a chance? They *all* have a chance. We just have to give it to them. She’s younger than the others, her body is fighting harder. You don’t have a right to—” She stopped and drew a deep breath. Nancy’s eyes were wide with distress. Rachel knew that Nancy never really gave up on any of her patients. It was just that with kids like Maria, she couldn’t get her hopes up because the pain was so terrible when she lost them. Nancy was in her late thirties, she’d been with the team for ten years longer than Rachel and she didn’t deserve an attack from her like this. “Sorry,” she said jerkily. “I guess it’s been a long two weeks for all of us. Who knew a damn mosquito would cause all this hell?”

“Yeah,” Nancy said. “I thought the Zika was bad; and then along came Taran. The government says the spraying is working. They’re keeping the infestation localized.”

“Too late for Nalez. The village is a ghost town now.” She looked back down at the little girl. *Not too late for you, Maria. You keep fighting.*

Her glance shifted to Nancy. “Why did you come? Can I help you?”

“No, I’m supposed to help you.” Nancy smiled. “Phillip said that he told you to join us for coffee in the mess, and you didn’t come.”

“It was the wrong timing for me.”

“Whatever. He said that he didn’t think that you’d want him to help you, but I might be able to do it. He thinks you need some sleep since we’re not going to be able to pull out of here until sometime tomorrow. I can sit with Maria and give you a break.” She paused. “I’ll watch her, Rachel. Any change, and I’ll come for you. Trust me.”

“I do trust you.” She got to her feet and arched her back to stretch it. “And I don’t really need to check her again until ten tomorrow.” She’d given Maria the potion an hour ago and she couldn’t give her the last one for at least twelve hours, or it might prove fatal. All that could be done until then was to keep her liquids normal and watch her for any sign of deterioration. “But I’ll be back at seven in the morning to relieve you. Thanks, Nancy.”

She shrugged. “My job. And if I didn’t do it, Phillip would be over here instead. I think he’s got a thing for you.”

“A thing?” Rachel shook her head. “Not true. He’s just got a sense of responsibility for his team.”

“Yeah.” She grimaced. “As long as his team is a redhead with long legs and big green eyes. He’s a man, isn’t he? We’re always stuck out in these hellish conditions, and it’s natural he’d want to jump you.”

Rachel chuckled as she remembered Phillip’s intense, longing expression as he gazed up at that shelf of potions. “You’re wrong, Nancy. That’s not what he wants.”

She tilted her head. “And that’s not what you want either?”

“Right.”

“Good.” She grinned. “Then you won’t mind if I do the jumping? I’ve always had a crush on him since he took over the team five years ago. I was just a little intimidated by all those letters after his name. But I’ve decided that no one should wait for what they want. Dedication can only go so far. If I want anything else to make my life worth living, the rest is going to be up to me.”

“A sound decision.” And Rachel had no idea that Nancy felt that way about Phillip. But then she’d been working eighteen or twenty hours a day, and that didn’t lend to noticing much of anything else. “I’ll see you at seven.”

She watched Nancy sit down in the chair next to Maria’s bed.

Sleep well, but not too well. You have to come back to us, little girl.

Ten tomorrow morning.

And then another six hours, and she’d know one way or the other.

She looked up at the night sky. Not that she could see that much of it through the heavy canopy of the trees of the rain forest. But there were stars up there, weren’t there? It was important to remember in the darkness there were always stars.

Her phone rang, and she glanced down at the ID.

Hu Chang.

She smiled as she pressed the access. Strange that he’d called at this particular moment. He’d always been one of the stars in her darkness and there whenever she needed him. “I tried the broadleaf,” she said when she picked up the call. “I don’t know if it’s going to work, Hu Chang. I used redwood before.”

“Neither do I. But I trust in you to choose correctly as you’ve always done. You have infallible instinct. After that, it’s up to the patient.” He paused. “But it’s weighing heavily on you if you cannot even give me the courtesy of a greeting. Did I not teach you better than that, Rachel? Perhaps you should quit playing around in those jungles and come to me for a refresher course.”

“And perhaps you should have told me what to do with Maria instead of just listening to me go over my options,” she said tartly. “You persist in telling me that you’re the master and I’m only the humble student, yet you don’t give me—” She stopped. This would do no good. Hu Chang always did exactly what he wanted to do, and she would not have it any other way. She could almost see him before her in his black tunic, his shoulder-length hair drawn back from that intent face that had always seemed totally ageless to her. Ageless, expressionless, and yet she had felt as if she could sense everything he was thinking since the day he had taken her into his

home and his laboratory when she was only fifteen. “I’m sorry, I’m a little on edge. I know I didn’t ask for help, I just used you as a sounding board.”

“And it was my privilege. I always enjoy seeing how your mind works. And I realize you cannot talk to your learned colleagues about the intricacies of what you do. Such a pity. But then, you knew it was going to be that way. I’m such a magnificent example, am I not?”

Magnificent was not an overstatement where Hu Chang was concerned. She might never know the full story of Hu Chang, but he’d told her once that he had grown up in Manchuria, trained by his apothecary father to be a master poisoner and later became a Doctor of Chinese Medicine. She knew that he had traveled the world, studied many cultures, and lived a life that was solely by his own rules. During the two years she’d stayed with him, she’d accepted those rules because they’d healed her. And God knows she’d needed healing after those months she’d spent in Sazkar Prison. “You warned me. I didn’t realize it was going to be this difficult.”

“Only because you lack a basic sense of ruthlessness or what some call the killer instinct. But that can be learned.”

“I *won’t* learn it. Why do you think I’m in the middle of this rain forest in Guyana?”

“It’s been safer for you. And allowed you to keep my inimitable teachings unsullied and useful.” He paused. “Or at least it was safer. Is everything well with you?”

“No. I don’t know if Maria is going to—”

“I’m not speaking about Maria. Is there anything disturbing happening around you?”

“No. The government workers have stopped spraying and pulled out of the area. They think they have the mosquito infestation under control. Though in this rain forest I don’t see how they can tell. But I guess the experts know what they’re doing.”

“Do they? I’ve always had problems with accepting experts. My skeptical nature. When do you leave Nalez?”

“Tomorrow. I’m only waiting for the last dose for Maria. Phillip wanted to pull out tonight.”

“But the good doctor gave in and allowed you to have your chance with her.”

She stiffened. “And what’s wrong with that? It’s a life, Hu Chang.”

“And he’s a doctor who would embrace any means of saving life . . . even if it came with a price?”

“Yes.” She should have known that Hu Chang would have perceived that about Phillip when she had only just realized it. “But doctors like him shouldn’t have to make that choice. He’s very visible, someone would find out what he’d done, and he’d be destroyed.”

“Better that you take the risk?”

“Why not? I’m very low on the totem pole. A dedicated physician with a hobby. Anyway, Phillip will cooperate.”

“I’m sure he will. Nothing’s wrong with his wish to give you what you want. Don’t we all, Rachel? He probably senses that vulnerable quality behind the strong surface and wants to protect you.”

“I’m not vulnerable. You *never* found me vulnerable, Hu Chang. You never took excuses, and you made me work all the hours of the day.”

“Well, most of them. And perhaps that was my way of ridding you of that vulnerability. Or perhaps it was purely for my own pleasure to see how far I could push you before you broke.” He added softly, “And you never broke, Rachel. That’s why when you left me, I knew that you were ready to face anything without me.”

“Ready, but maybe not willing. It took me a while to get used to all the rules I ran into at the university. I missed you.”

“And so you should. I’m totally unique and without peer.”

“And so modest.” She went back to that odd word he’d used. “Disturbing? Why should you wonder if there was anything disturbing around me?”

“I do not wonder. It was Catherine Ling who called me and asked where you were in Guyana. She’s the one who asked me if there was anything disturbing happening in your area.”

“Catherine?” That was a complete surprise. She had not seen Catherine Ling for over a year. Catherine was a CIA agent who had

been given her orders by Rachel's father, Carl Venable, ever since she'd been recruited as a teenager in Hong Kong. When Rachel was living with Hu Chang, Catherine had moved in and out of her life because she was Hu Chang's closest friend. Somehow during that time, she had also become Rachel's very close friend. "I didn't think she even knew where I was."

"You're her friend. Since you persist in traveling to hot spots with hardly more than a stethoscope for protection, Catherine keeps track of you. She doesn't have that many friends, and she doesn't like the idea of losing one." He paused. "Just because you distanced yourself from her when you broke with your father doesn't mean that she would allow anything to happen to you."

No, both Catherine and Hu Chang had always given her comfort and support during that painful period of separation. She had known they'd always be there for her. "I didn't deliberately distance—It just happened. She works with my father. It was . . . awkward."

"She didn't find it so. She respects Venable. She cares for you. She doesn't take sides."

"And did he tell her to keep an eye on me?"

"You'd have to ask Catherine. I believe she would have done it regardless. Now, may I tell you what she wished me to convey to you?"

"Disturbance. What kind of disturbance that doesn't concern these damn mosquitoes?"

"She said there were rumbles that a revolutionary guerilla militant group had crossed the Venezuela border into Guyana. Not a pleasant group. In Venezuela they've acted with true terrorist behavior, savage attacks on villages, robberies, rapes, killings."

"That's all these poor people need. Then why doesn't she notify the Guyana military?"

"It's only rumbles. They're still in Venezuela as far as anyone knows. The government's not going to pay attention until there's an actual sighting or attack. But Catherine would like to urge you to be careful and absent yourself with all due speed."

"I'll tell Phillip to call our headquarters in Georgetown and tell

them what she said. They'll contact the military and see if they think we have a problem here."

"And if they do?"

"Then Phillip will start packing and get everyone out."

"Except you."

"I'll make my way to the coast later. I don't want to move Maria that far until she's a little stronger. And that means I have to be here tomorrow to administer that final dose after ten in the morning. I'll stay in the village with Maria's mother, Blanca. There are only a few families left in the village anyway. They've all scattered and gone to other villages to get out of the infestation area." She was thinking, trying to find the best solution. "I'll go warn her now that we're going to shift Maria to the village and that she might have to find a place to hide her in the rain forest if it becomes necessary."

"May I point out your team isn't going to appreciate your staying behind."

"Maybe I won't have to do it. No actual intel, it's just rumbles. I have to hang up now, Hu Chang. I need to get moving."

"Because you believe that rumbles sometime become roars. Catherine thought that you would not ignore her warning."

"Catherine realizes that I know bad things happen. So do you, Hu Chang." She hesitated, then asked the question, "Did the warning come from her or from my father?"

"From Catherine. She's not been in communication with Venable for the last two months." He added quietly, "You know I would not deceive you. I'm aware that you have no trust in him."

"Let's just say that my trust is limited to the given situation. I also know that he can make black seem white if he chooses. He's done it before."

"Have you ever known me to be color-blind?"

"No."

"Neither is Catherine. Trust her."

"I do. I just had to be certain. I'll call and tell you if the Maria formula works." She pressed the disconnect.

She drew a deep breath and looked back up at the sky. She would give herself just a moment, then start to do what had to be done.

Rumbles? Conversations that could be rumors or just gossip that swept through the CIA community. It seemed unlikely to touch her in this place. A poor village in the middle of the rain forest? She heard only the night sounds of that rain forest right now telling her it could be all bullshit. But she knew what evil and pain was out there. All the violence and trickery and greed and death. And wherever that evil and death lived so did her father, Carl Venable. She could imagine him spinning his web of intrigue, plots, and lies. If not this time, then another.

But she was not her father. She would not let herself live in his world.

She took out her phone. First, talk to Phillip Sanford, then go to the village and prepare Maria's mother. It would all work out. She would make sure that it did. Death was always just around the corner, but so was life.

And after all, it might only be rumbles . . .

GEORGETOWN, GUYANA

1:45 A.M.

"Liberation Unity," Nate Scott said to Jude Brandon as he came back from the cockpit of the Apache helicopter. "I think Venable might have gotten it right when he told you that Huber would already be on his way to hunt down his daughter. Liberation is headed by Fidel Morales. It's a small, but vicious terrorist group that has affiliations with Max Huber's Red Star organization. And there was a sighting at a crossing at the northern border two hours ago. No reports of any attacks. They just disappeared into the rain forest heading southwest."

"And Nalez is in the southwest corner of Guyana," Brandon said grimly. "And why ignore all the rich, juicy targets in the north to head for the rain forest where the villages barely manage to survive?"

“And where there’s been a medical alert issued,” Nate added as he dropped into a seat beside Brandon. “Like I said, Venable might have gotten it right. This may not be Huber’s central organization, but he’s pulling the strings.”

“Right.” Huber’s Red Star terrorist organization had cells that reached worldwide and used their power to not only cause political disruption and terror but acquire wealth wherever they had the opportunity. That power and wealth made them very attractive to lesser terrorist groups who were more than happy to perform favors. “The minute he located One World Medical, he scouted around until he found a group he could use and sent them across the border on a mission. We’re sure Rachel Venable is still in Nalez?”

“According to the report from their headquarters, she was still there yesterday when their team transferred thirty-two patients to the hospital outside Georgetown.” He looked down at the report he’d brought from the cockpit. “The entire team is still in Nalez. Dr. Philip Sanford, Nurse Practitioner Nancy Kavitz, Dr. William Pallis . . .” He looked up. “So do we go and get her?”

“Why else are we here? Venable gave her name to his informant, and she’s the only one he’s going to contact. We *need* that information. We go into Nalez, scoop her up and get out. Did you get that dossier on her?”

“As up-to-date as I could get on short notice.” Nate indicated the folder he was carrying. “Here’s the report that Monty got from his contact in Georgetown about her before we took off. It seems fairly complete. But you may be familiar with most of it if Venable told you to—”

“I don’t know much of anything,” Brandon said flatly. “I didn’t want to know. I wanted to deal with Carl Venable, not his daughter. If Venable couldn’t keep himself alive, I don’t know how I’m supposed to keep her alive until we get Huber.” He took the report and glanced at the first page. The woman’s photo jumped out at him. Tall, slim, graceful in tan khakis and white shirt. Red hair just brushing her shoulders, green-gray eyes staring boldly, inquiringly, out of the photo. Not beautiful, but definitely arresting.

“Nice looking,” Nate said. “Red hair like her father.” He was still reading his report. “Twenty-nine. She had two brothers, James, who was killed in Afghanistan, and her younger brother, Kevin. Her mother and her brother Kevin died when their car was attacked by the Taliban outside Kabul. Venable was stationed there for five years and his wife, Judith, finally insisted on his arranging for the family to have safe quarters in Kabul so they could join him during that last year. Obviously a bad decision. Rachel was also in that car, but she survived and was taken prisoner. She was held hostage for five months while they bargained for her release with Venable, who the State Department had put in charge of negotiations. There was difficulty about prisoner-exchange terms. She was only fifteen at the time.” He looked down the report. “She was finally released to an intermediary party who had influence with the Afghanistan government . . . a physician named Hu Chang. But instead of returning to her father, she stayed with Hu Chang for the next two years before she entered medical school.” He looked up at him. “Have you ever heard of this Hu Chang?”

“Oh, I’ve heard quite a bit about him,” Brandon said dryly. “He’s fairly notorious in many circles. But nothing in connection with Rachel Venable. Anything else?”

“Brilliance. Dedication. Humanitarian selflessness in her professional life. No money. No important contacts. Why should Huber want to go after her?”

“The same reason he went after Venable. Actually, according to what her father said, he has an even better reason to kill her. That’s one of the reasons why Venable made sure I’d go after her.” He looked down at the photo again. “Our Rachel Venable is not what she seems . . .”

NALEZ

3:35 A.M.

“Where the *hell* are you?” Phillip Sanford’s voice was clipped when Rachel answered his call. “We have to get out of here. Our helicopter should be arriving in another fifteen minutes. I told you an hour ago that I’d gotten that call from Guyana military that there was a report of a village being burned to the ground not fifty miles from here. You said you were on your way back from Blanca’s village after settling Maria.”

“I lied,” she said calmly. “I knew you’d come after me if you thought you had the time. Now you don’t have the time. I’ll see you in Georgetown in the next day or so.” She could hear Phillip cursing. “I’ll be hiding out in the rain forest with Maria and her mother. They know that forest like the back of their hand. I’ll be fine with them. When that helicopter comes, get everyone out of here, Phillip.”

“We could wait if you tell me you’re on your way.”

“I’m not on my way. And you’re too responsible to wait on one person when you have to take care of the entire team. See you later, Phillip.” She hung up and took a deep breath. He was angry, and she’d be lucky if he didn’t kick her off the team. If he did, then she’d just have to accept it. Maybe it would be okay, she hadn’t deliberately endangered anyone but herself. But discipline was important when you dealt with conditions like the team faced on a regular basis.

But so was a little girl’s life.

She turned to Maria’s mother, Blanca Perez. “Were you able to arrange to have Maria’s stretcher carried into the rain forest? It looks like we’re going to have to move fast now.”

Blanca nodded. “My uncle and his friend. They’ll take us to a cave where I played as a child, then leave us and go east toward Surinam.” Her eyes were wide with fear. “It might be bad? Why would anyone want to hurt us? We have nothing.”

“I don’t know why. Some people are evil and don’t want anyone to be happy.” She looked down at the stretcher. Maria’s cheeks were too flushed. Was her temperature down even a little? “But

then you have a treasure like your daughter. It makes up for it, doesn't it?"

"Yes, she's such a good girl." Blanca's eyes were filled with tears. "And so smart. I was teaching her English before this happened to her. She speaks it almost as well as I do. She's all I have. The angels mustn't take her from me."

"Then you tell them they have a job to do." Rachel turned away. "Get your uncle moving, please. I'll go warn the other villagers to leave, then catch up with you."