



ALEXIS

chapter 1

Refusing to surrender, the rain god, *Chaac*, continued to veil the land in rainy shrouds. It was February of 1987, and for almost five months Alexis had watched the thunderstorms drench the jungles of Belize. Now another front of bruised clouds emerged from the east. A brisk wind rushed through the trees, and ozone filled the tropical forest with fragrance. Burning fiercely in the far western sky, *Kinich Ahau*, the sun god, fought to defend his meager patch of blue; there his bright face still opposed the forces of the storm.

From the wide balcony of the six-sided house, Alexis looked out over the lush yard. In the late afternoon sun, the rain sparkled on the giant *Ilorra sangre* tree that shaded and protected the clear blue artesian spring beneath it. As the sun crept higher, a brilliant rainbow appeared. Although she'd seen many rainbows during her twelve years in Belize, they were all far away and illusory. This time it was a double rainbow, perfect and complete, so close she could almost touch it, the luminescent colors radiating just beyond her fingertips like a vivid banner against the steel-gray palette. The unique phenomenon brought a flood of emotions, washing over her like the colors in the sky. She breathed in the pure mountain air and forced herself to be calm. It was paradise, but the price had been great. Moments later the double rainbow was gone and black clouds obscured the sun. In a matter of seconds, darkness changed the mood of the land once more as another blast of driving rain rose over the mountains.

In spite of the rainstorm, the herd of horses grazed contentedly. They raised their heads only long enough to search for the next clump of grass. It was a rare event to have a day off from the horseback tour business; during weekends and holidays the riding roster was always full. Only once in a great while did Alexis have the opportunity to enjoy a quiet day with no guests on the books.

It was just as well. At this time of year, many of the trails were nearly impassible. The horses disliked the sloppy muck almost as much as she did, and facing another day of inclement weather, week after week, had become increasingly difficult. Only the guests didn't mind. The ride was only one day of their vacation; the mud was a bonus,

more adventure for their money. In another three weeks the coming dry season would change everything. Trade winds would become steady and predictable; the rains would taper off until the sun burned down with such power that the clouds would evaporate, leaving a blazing ball of sun against the cobalt sky. All through March, the heat would intensify. Mud on the trails would shrink, flatten out, harden, and eventually turn to dust.

Tropical plants flourished in the forests of Belize, home to four-fifths of the world's botanical species. Strangler figs, mahogany, giant ceiba, palm, rattan, and immense clinging philodendrons grew in such close proximity that very little sunlight penetrated the high canopy. The effect was that of a false twilight, even at midday. The pungent scent of the bush was its most singular feature; Alexis loved its damp, spicy, moldering odor, fragrant with humus and rot – the smell of fresh new growth and ancient decay. But above ground was only half the magic. Below lay an infinite system of subterranean pipes and channels. Carved through the limestone bedrock by the acidic waters born of organic decomposition, countless caves of enormous proportion remained secreted within the rocky outcroppings. Hundreds contained relics of the ancient Maya civilization that had flourished a thousand years before.

Her mind drifted back to the previous day, the essence of this utopian lifestyle. An ideal day for riding, the sunshine had been brilliant, the breeze fresh and brisk. Seventy-five degrees of temperate perfection had lifted her spirits after the long months of rain. Nothing could compare with the sun and wind on her face as she cantered with her group of sightseers through the high pine ridges, slowing down only for steep ravines or a rushing watercourse. Around noon the riders had reached the waterfall and, after securing their mounts, made the one hundred-fifty-foot descent into the river valley. A horseshoe-shaped cascade made a sheer drop into the chasm of granite boulders below, while clusters of orchids dotted the canyon in bright splashes of pink and fuchsia. Guests and guides alike sought the special niches among the river rocks for an effervescent hydro-massage.

It was an incredible way to live all right. As a matter of priorities, Alexis had always chosen lifestyle over money. As a result she'd never had much money but had always enjoyed a lifestyle that most other people envied. However, none of her previous adventures in Key West or California compared with this: the ranch, the horses, the trails, and the high bush. It was the kind of fantasy lifestyle people described when asked what they would do if they won the lottery.

Alexis still lived with much uncertainty. Her situation with Max had taken years to create, and trying to undo the past would take even

longer. Her heart ached for her two children, Jordan and Jessica, now eleven and six. Someday it would be over and she'd have them back again. Someday, but not yet.

The symbolism was inescapable. The raindrops, like the tears she had cried, were a part of the reality. The rainbow, ancient symbol of promise, was her hope for the future. *Chaac* still gripped the Land of the Mists. As if he would never relinquish his hold, he mocked *Kinich Ahau*, and dared him to show his golden face.

How had it all started, she thought to herself? How had it all begun?

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Alexis had been ten years old in 1962 when she'd first heard of the little country then known as British Honduras. At that tender age she never dreamed that she would ever visit Belize, let alone live there for the greater part of her adult life. The least known country in Central America, it had only about 130,000 people nationwide, 30,000 of them in the former capital of Belize City. The official language was English. And for some reason, the nation seemed to have a conspicuous deficiency of common tropical exports such as bananas, rice, corn, or beef. Years later, Alexis would learn that Belize also had the largest area of unspoiled rainforest in Central America, a wealth of wilderness, waterfalls, rare colorful birds, exotic butterflies, and the ruins of countless Mayan temples, as well as the largest and longest living coral reef in the western hemisphere.

During the summer before college, Alexis became influenced by the cultural revolution that would impact all the years that followed. Dressed in a T-shirt and old patched jeans, she rejected the traditional values of her parents, school, and church, abandoning her nice clothes as well as her bra, wearing her hair long with a flower tucked behind her ear.

Countless others embraced the idealism of the dissidents as the rebelliousness of the late sixties resulted in the formation of the radical movement. The message of Dr. Timothy Leary was to "tune in, turn on, and drop out." As fierce anti-capitalists, their purpose was to reject the very society that had spawned them. By demonstrating their supposedly unconventional attitudes and individuality by letting their hair grow and wearing secondhand clothes, the ironic result was that they all looked different in exactly the same way. In retrospect, their attempt to create a new order had developed a culture that was just as standardized within itself as the one from which they were trying to deviate.

Nevertheless, Alexis saw her former high school friends come home from the Vietnam War with broken bodies and twisted minds. She attended marches in which protestors wore arm bands: militants wore red, anarchists wore black, green was for amnesty. Everybody had explicit convictions. Political demonstrations were frequent as were marches, love-ins, and boycotts. The incident at Kent State shocked the world senseless when four college students were killed during a protest turned police action. Tricky Dick Nixon became the arch villain while Joan Baez, Country Joe, Bob Dylan, and Simon and Garfunkel became the conscience of the new crusade.

The classes Alexis was supposed to attend at college were the last thing on her mind. At Christmas she came home and announced to her parents that she was dropping out. A few days later at three o'clock in the morning, her self-appointed hour of departure, they all stood there in the driveway together. Her parents expressed their love and they made their goodbyes. It would be years before she understood their pain.

As the hours of driving passed, Alexis was filled with an exhilaration she had never known. She was seeking her fortune. For the first time she had taken control of her own life and could do whatever she wanted. There were no parents, no teachers, and no peer pressure; she was totally and utterly free.

The scenery was beautiful as she crossed the state line from Kentucky into Tennessee. The sides of the mountains had been cut back and the diagonal strata of exposed rock curved gracefully in tilted disarray. In one spot, a huge outcropping of rock protruded from a jagged mountainside. Looking like a waterfall cast in stone, it appeared to be a tumbling cascade, frozen in time. The rock formation was spectacular. In appreciation of the moment, Alexis pulled over, and considered her assets.

I have a few hundred dollars, she thought. That's enough to get me to southern Florida. I'll need a place to live, and some money to keep my car going. Why is it all about money? Why do we have to pay for insurance and taxes, or have an income and pay rent? Wouldn't it be great just to live somewhere, like on a beach, or in a cave? To enjoy the earth in its natural state and pull fruit from the trees; to live like the Native Americans did? We should be able to live in harmony with the Earth, not at odds with it.

Alexis had always believed she'd been born in the wrong century, preferring that she'd belonged to the era of discovery – of adventurers, explorers, and pirates. Perhaps the lifestyle she sought had disappeared long ago. But there had to be more to life than being locked into what everybody else expected you to do, and she intended to discover what it

was. Getting back in her car, she took a last look at the stony cascade of rock and resumed the pleasant euphoria of her new found independence. Hours passed and the mountains of Tennessee gave way to the high plateaus and red clay of Georgia. It was still cold, but something in the air whispered a promise of warmth as she pressed south.

It was just after ten o'clock before Alexis pulled over at a rest area in northern Florida near Jacksonville. She'd been driving for almost nineteen hours straight through. Curling up in the back seat, she was dead to the world in a matter of minutes.

The next day Alexis headed east toward the coast to get a whiff of the ocean air at the earliest possible opportunity. Then she saw her first palm tree on the beach and delighted in the picturesque windy seascape. However, the majestic palms didn't sway gently in the breeze as the poets suggested. Instead, she saw that they defied the harsh winds that battered their leafy crowns and resisted riptides with tenacious roots that clung to the sandy shore. Watching them, Alexis couldn't have known at the time that it was more than an ambiguous analogy; it was to be an omen of her turbulent destiny.