

## Excerpt 9 - Exile in Mexico

The sea-green walls of the cheap hotel room were meant to impart a feeling of tropical ambiance. But, with the shades drawn, the room felt ice-cold, more like an institution or a prison. Alexis shivered as she lay on the bed staring at nothing, staring through the walls, through the miles beyond nothing, and into outer space. Cold was the only sensation she could feel. Outside, Mexican ranchero music played in the streets of Cozumel. Sometimes she could smell the aroma of roasting peppers and corn tortillas. But no force was strong enough to lure her into the outside world. It simply didn't matter anymore. Nothing did.

Alexis couldn't remember the last time she'd taken any nourishment. A week? Maybe more. Nor had she slept at all. She had lost the ability to be hungry and the urge to be sated. On the few occasions when she tried to eat, her throat had closed up. She was unable to salivate or swallow. Shunning food and human contact, Alexis had lain there now, day after day, alone in the Mexican hotel room. Awake, unmoving, uncaring.

In the light of late afternoon, a ray of sun peeped through the cracks and fell across her legs. The huge bruises on her thighs had lightened to greenish-yellow. She stared apathetically, then roused herself to go look in the mirror. The black eye was almost gone, as were most of the marks on her face with the exception of the lump on her jaw. The face she saw was that of a stranger – an old hag, thin and pale, mouth pinched, eyes devoid of expression. Alexis lay down on the bed again and tried to recall the days since her departure.

Some memories were blocked out by the compassionate nature of subconscious denial. Others lurked beneath the gray veil, and when she dared to peek cautiously beneath that shroud of darkness, vivid nightmares were exhumed. Her head throbbed as a thousand little monsters assaulted her, pricking her eyeballs with hot needles. The legions of doom had been there all along, waiting, hiding – their evil faces painted in blackened blood, in terrifying illusions of smoke and mirrors. A silent scream died in her throat as she saw her children just beyond reach of her outstretched arms. She watched helplessly as they drifted towards a distant horizon. Her empty heart ceased to beat as a cold tide washed over her unholy corpse.

Homeless now, she had left behind the last hope of her survival. Now there was no life. Now there was nothing. The vigil was not a choice. Instead, it was a trial by fire to determine her destiny. Alexis had lost the strength to make the conscious choice between life and death. Now her inner spirit would decide which force would succeed.

Either she would stay alive, or drift into a coma and die. Time was running out.

Alexis had very little recollection of how she had actually reached Cozumel. She must have taken the money, as she vaguely remembered Chetumal, and a short puddle-jumper flight from Playa del Carmen, but the details were lost. In a forgotten dream, there had been a taxi ride from the Cozumel airport into its only town, San Miguel, and the payment of a week's rent for a room in the cheap hotel near the main square.

Still in a state of shock, Alexis managed to go through the motions of being human. Just before sunset, she showered, washed her hair, and put on a fresh change of clothes. Then she stepped out on the balcony and watched the twinkling lights of the village flickering in the dusky afterglow. That evening, as she walked the streets, the gravity of her decision seemed to sink in at last. Along every street were happy tourists eating and drinking, toasting each other in the spirit of camaraderie. Young couples walked hand in hand, laughing and talking. She saw old withered grandfathers leaning on their canes and heard Mexican mothers chastising their children. She smelled the aroma of tantalizing culinary delights and listened to the music of the *mariachis* as they played in the square. Alexis watched as the boats furlled their sails and docked in their slips for the night. It was here that they snuggled safely on the lee shore, away from the blustering force of the windward side. All around her were the sounds and sights of life, love, and laughter. Like a sleepwalker, she returned to the sea-green hotel room and lay down numbly on the bed. Then her spirit died. What was left behind was a mere shell of a living being, a mortal coil depleted of its soul and its humanity.