

In Part One of *Sinkholes*, love always finds a way...

Sergeant Alexis Brown, recently more known in some circles as Dr. Alexis Brown in the rarified air of academia, is a former cop turned scientist. She had little choice in the matter. She was a street cop, a sergeant with her own squad and a double master's degree when she was badly wounded in a shootout during a bank robbery. A bullet to the knee shattered her seven-year career as a sergeant while her second major in geology/geomorphology opened the door for her in the world of academics at State College in Salem PA.

It's mid-spring at the college and Alexis' boss, Dottie Watson, demands that she create an attractive, can't miss, hands-on, ten-week summer course for summer interns and graduate students. Alexis is having problems coming up with a topic this time. She's also growing disillusioned with her playgirl life at State College. She finally finds a topic she can investigate: a series of sinkholes in a farm owned by Thomas Harris, the deceased husband of her college roommate and ex-lover, Isabella Harris. To make matters interesting, she discovers the young woman she accused of helping one of her students plagiarize a final paper is Isabella's youngest daughter. The same daughter the new girlfriend of Junior, one of the interns.

Isabella is still burning with white-hot rage against Alexis. Almost thirty years ago when she and Alexis were lovers, she became pregnant with the baby they both agreed to have. Alexis freaked out and decided monogamy wasn't for her. She left Isabella in the lurch and pregnant. She moved on to join the police force while Isabella found a man, Thomas Harris, who loved her and her fifteen-month daughter Marilyn Anne (Lenny). They married and produced four more daughters. She never told any of her daughters about her love affair with a woman. She didn't tell them that the woman in question could easily have been Lenny's other mother. Alexis and Lenny look so much alike in height, eye color, and body shape. She didn't mention the woman in question is the same

geology professor who wants to use the Harris farm as a college science project that she's already given permission to do.

Before she knows who Isabella Harris actually is, Alexis convinces her to allow her class to examine the sinkholes to discover their source and their cause. Once a busload of students and their professors arrive at the Harris farm, Isabella recognizes Alexis and tries to scare her off the farm by buckshot filled with salt pellets at her ass. Alexis' best friend Dr. Ramona Patterson speaks with Isabella's daughters to get them to convince their mother to allow her to investigate the sinkholes.

CHAPTER ONE

ISABELLA SIPPED HER COFFEE as she read the *Town Times*. Not much was happening locally. Thank God, no reporters decided the sinkhole explorers were important news yet. That was one less worry for her, she mused, folding the paper in half, then leaving it on the table as she gathered her plate and silverware and took them over to the sink. She rinsed them off and put them in the dishwasher, which was only halfway full. She looked out the window and could see the students grouped around the two professors and Juan.

They all seem to be looking at a laptop. She wondered what it showed. She continued to study the professors and their students. The students, all females, were talking among themselves and included Juan in their conversation. One of them pointed to something on the laptop's screen. Both professors looked at the monitor and then frowned. Alexis strode over to the biggest sinkhole. She squatted down and pulled up something stuck in the ground at the edge of the hole. It was one of the camera's many sensors. She flicked at it with fingers, then shook it.

Isabella watched Alexis trying to bring the sensor back to life by shaking and cleaning the lens. She'd bet something shorted it out. Her guess was confirmed when one of the students brought a replacement sensor after she removed the non-working one. The professors looked at the monitor and smiled. They'd set up a long folding table outside the RV, much closer to the sinkholes. They'd erected the canvas tent over the table, while waterproof floorboards made up the floor area under the tent. The tent became their second staging area. They kept maps of the area, several laptops, a cooler

chest filled with water, folding chairs, several first aid kits, monitoring equipment, safety supplies, and anything else they might need right away.

Isabella noticed that on sunny days, the students rolled up and tied off the tent flaps, which allowed soothing breezes to cool the tent's interior. On rainy days, the crew still worked the sinkholes from the tent with the flaps down. She'd overheard Juan telling Mary Louise how they inspected the damage to the structures using the video cameras and comparing non-rainfall earth movement and or damage to the three sinkholes against rainfall days. They measured the rainfall in and around the sinkholes and checked the structure's exterior integrity. Juan complained to Mary Louise how they did so much sketching and checking of the sinkholes, he could draw each of the holes in his sleep.

Once, she'd overheard the two professors lecture the students and Juan about locking up the maps, laptops, and the safety equipment in the security of the RV. She should ask Ramona about the tour she never took. It would be interesting to see what the students and their professors were doing in her sinkholes. She could do it tonight, if she remembered. The library was closing two hours early. City Council was using the facilities for an invitation-only function to thank major contributors. This was a regular event that City Council and the Mayor did the year following every election. She grabbed her keys and her shoulder bag and off she went to her library.

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THEY HAD HAD WEEKS OF straight hot, humid days from the middle of June into the first week of July. Last week, Alexis and Ramona told their students they would be going into the largest sinkhole this week. She sat down at the conference table in the RV to review her notes one last time. They'd been measuring and inspecting the size of the sinkholes on a daily basis in the

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morning, in the afternoon, and at night. Nothing had changed. They hadn't grown and they hadn't shrunk. They'd gotten the county engineers to take more bore samples so they could compare them with the first ones they'd taken weeks ago. Nothing had changed there either.

According to the cameras inside and outside the holes and the seismograph measuring the tremors, the ground underneath and around the sinkholes hadn't shifted a millimeter. Alexis sighed. She should be happy since they would begin gearing up for the exploration of the holes at end of this week. Something didn't feel right in her gut today. Several loud bangs on the camper's door startled her. She jumped up from the table, then patted her chest area over her heart when she recognized Ramona.

"Come on, Al! Quit studying those notes and get out here. The students are waiting for us in the tent."

"All right; I'm coming." Alexis stepped out into the boiling sun and groaned. "Damn! It's not even noon yet and it's this hot already."

"That's why you shouldn't stay in the RV too long. It makes it difficult for your body to adjust to the lack of air-conditioning when you get outside." Ramona took a good look at her friend's face, seeing the troubled look in her eyes. "What's wrong? Did you and Dottie have a fight or something?"

Alexis ignored the question aimed at her personal life. "You know how Sherrie always says you should trust your gut feelings?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"Well, my gut says something is gonna happen today."

"Is Dorothea coming down to see you?"

Alexis frowned. "That's not even funny, Mona. I mean, like falling into one of the sinkholes or something."

"We'll keep you away from the holes until tomorrow. We need to know what those spots are in the big one anyway. Maybe you can figure them out, based on the topographic and soil maps. I swear I didn't know how many coalmines, sinkholes, and

earthquakes Ohio had until we got here and started this project. Since you're staying away from the holes today, you could start reading the emails from our colleagues. They've been sending us some interesting history on coalmines in the area. They think that's what's underneath our feet. We could find fossils down there, yes?"

"Maybe yes or maybe no, Mona, so don't say anything to the students or Juan and especially not to the Harris clan." Alexis sighed. "If we are going into an abandoned mine, we need those gas masks and gas detectors. Did they come in yet?"

"No. The supplier emailed me. We can pick them up at the post office day after tomorrow. Back to our earlier discussion. Don't be surprised if some of our Ohio counterparts show up here to offer advice. Dottie emailed me to say a couple of paleontologists want to get in on the action. Did you know scientists found a fossilized roach in a coalmine here in Ohio in 2000? In 2008, they found an entire fossilized forest, a coalmine that extended some thirty-nine miles long and 250 to 800 feet deep? You could only see it once you were underground in the mines."

Alexis shrugged and wiped the sweat from her brow. "I knew about the forest. I didn't know about the roach. Anyway, I decided I'm coming with you to the sites." She followed Ramona to the tent. She could see girls were missing. "We seemed to be missing two students. What's up with that, Mona?"

"I told them they could stay in the RV. I'm surprised you didn't notice them. They're bunking in while they fight cramps." Alexis nodded her approval as they greeted the remaining six students. They began issuing instructions and answering questions.

"I understand why we need to keep monitoring the sinkholes, Professor Brown. What I don't understand is why we can't take a look today?"

"I agree with her."

"How come we have to wait until the end of the week?"

"The forecast is rain showers this afternoon, tonight, and into

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tomorrow. I want us to be sure the holes are safe for exploration. We want the structures supporting them to be solid too. We also need to double check those old mining maps to see where the openings to the mineshafts in this area might have been. I'd like to get a feel for how far down we can go too. I don't think the cameras in the bigger holes are showing us the bottom. We all need more practice on the ropes too."

"But, Professor Brown, I thought you said we'd use winches and a safety cage."

"Actually, I said we were bringing an expert out here to see what we'd need. I think it might be winches, slings, and ropes, or a safety cage and a crane or a lift. It never hurts to have secondary options. When we go down there, we'll all wear safety harnesses attached to secondary lines up here. In case something happens, we want another way out of the holes."

"I think we'll need several practice runs with the safety cage if we use it, Al," Ramona suggested. "The guy we hired emailed me last week to see what our schedule looked like. When I told him this week, he said he needs to see the farmland. He wants to check out the site to see what type of vehicle he can bring here without worrying about overloading the structure underneath the holes."

"Yeah, I remember. I had one of the students send him videos of the area. He emailed back to say we may have to remove the tent." Alexis prepared for another bitching session filled with complaints she knew she'd hear.

One of the students looked around the tent. "But I love this tent, Dr. Brown. It's in the perfect spot too."

"Yeah, the crosswinds keep us cool in here."

"Now we don't have to walk all the way to the site and then the RV if we need water or something."

The student groaned. "We will after they remove it."

"What do we do now?"

"I'm gonna die of thirst if we have to walk back the RV for everything."

“Can’t we just move it to the side, like in a lateral move, Dr. Patterson?”

“Yeah, how about that? Will it work?”

Alexis rolled her eyes upward as she exchanged glances with Ramona, then mouthed, “Thanks a lot.” She watched Ramona wink at her and then curtsy. She also hid the raise and waggle of a middle finger behind her back, turning slightly so only Ramona could see it.

“People, People, we’re getting ahead of ourselves with this argument. I believe Dr. Patterson said we might have to remove the tent. She did not say it was definite. In the meantime, get the safety stuff out of the RV and here. We’re going to practice packing our supplies in our backpacks. We’ll be testing the radios and making sure the batteries on the helmets and in the flashlights work. Then we’ll go over how to wear the safety harness and use the ropes, pulleys, and hooks that go with them. Finally, we’ll test our masks and emergency methane gas kits. Tomorrow and the rest of the week, we do dress rehearsals in full gear.” She and Ramona scanned the students’ faces, reading the excitement and the eagerness as well the disappointment in them.

Ramona stepped forward in front of Alexis to speak. “Look, we know you all want to get in the holes to see what’s down there as much as we do. We promised your parents, guardians, and the college we would use common sense and safety in the field. That’s what we’re doing. Everybody will get their chance at exploring the holes.”

She looked at Alexis, who nodded. “There is one more thing. We want you to look at a video on decontamination procedures after we come up from the sinkholes. As you know, with any underground spaces, dampness and darkness contribute to the growth of bacteria and fungi. It grows on walls and in the soil and floor of the sinkholes that may consist of water or mud or soil. In other words, the fungi and bacteria potential is everywhere. We control its spread if we remember to decontaminate our clothes,

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boots, masks, helmets, backpacks, and anything else we wear into the sinkholes as soon as we return topside. To that end, we will be erecting a decontamination area using one of the special outdoor shower kits we brought with us.”

“People, all of you dig out the gear and the ropes while it’s still nice outside.” Alexis walked outside the tent and put a hand against her forehead as shade against the bright sun. “Let’s use the trees in the front and back yards to practice our rope climbing and descending skills today and the rest of the week.”

She and Ramona waited for the girls to go into the RV and dig out the climbing ropes, ascenders, descenders, belays, jammers, karabiners, leather climbing gloves, harnesses, helmets, and boots, then she and Ramona watched as the girls and Juan changed from college kids into cavers, climbers, and mine explorers. The only things the students and Juan didn’t wear today were the backpacks containing extra power sources, energy bars, and water packs, protective suits, and radios. When the students returned to the tent, she and Ramona were waiting in identical gear and standing next to three wheeling ice chests filled with frozen bottles of water and energy bars.

During the next four hours, the students and their professors worked hard to “walk the rope.” They climbed up and down the height of the huge trees using rope wraps and knots around metal climbing clips called ascenders to go up, descenders to go down the ropes, Karabiners as connectors, belays for braking or stopping a rapid descent or to rest after a tiring climb up or down. They learned metal devices shaped like eights, called rescue eights or eights, did the same thing as descenders allowing for a rapid but more controlled descent. They practiced different rope ties like figure eights and double eights for connecting their harnesses to the ropes. They joined two Karabiners to webbing, creating quick draws for allowing ropes slide through safety connections like harnesses and anchors without as much friction.

Everything was going well. All eight students and Juan climbed

to the top branches of the three sturdy trees and climbed back down using the various devices attached their ropes and harnesses several times before the expected rain arrived. After doing a head count inside the tent, the professors discovered a student missing. They scanned the site, paying special attention to the trees. When thunder started during the downpour, one of the girls, the last one to come down from the ropes, had frozen underneath one of the trees, too frightened to move.

“There she is!” Ramona pointed to the student huddled under a single huge tree that would serve as a good lightning rod.

“Shit! That’s a bad spot for her, Mona. We need to go get her before the lightning does.” Alexis pulled on rubberized a rain suit and left on her rubber-soled climbing boots. She hoped it would be enough to protect her as she raced out to get the student. She found the girl thoroughly soaked and trembling from the rain and her own fear. “Come on, Kiddo, let’s go. This is bad place to be if lightning strikes.” She read the sheer terror in the girl’s face and sighed, then peeled off her suit and helped the girl into it. “Now, let’s go.” They both raced through the downpour. The sound of thunder encouraged the student and Alexis to speed up their journey to the tent. The student made it to the tent just as lightning struck the weathervane on the barn.

Meanwhile, Alexis slowed down to watch the lightning hit the vane and tripped on a rocky area she hadn’t noticed before. At the same time, she slid her arms across a series of sharp rocks to stop her fall. She sat up quickly, feeling stupid for falling on her ass. She was rain soaked with a torn shirt. She stood up without noticing the blood dripping down her arm until she reached the tent.

“You’re bleeding,” Ramona remarked, pointing to her right arm. “Al, hold up your arm to stop the bleeding.” She turned to look at her nervous students. “Somebody get me a first aid kit. Bring me something to wrap her arm with too.” She walked over to examine Alexis’s arm and whistled, then whispered, “It looks

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pretty deep, Al. I can nearly see your bone. You cut through several layers of skin when you fell. I think you need stitches.”

Alexis caught several students staring at her arm and then her face. “Keep your voice down, Mona. I feel stupid enough as it is. I tripped over my own two feet. How dumb is that?” She held her arm upright and felt warm blood sliding to the ground.

“Does it hurt, Professor Brown?”

“It looks like it should.”

“God, there’s so much blood.”

“Are you okay, Dr. Brown?”

“You’d better say something. The girls are frightened for you,” Ramona whispered, accepting the first aid kit from one of the students. She looked in the kit and frowned. She was reluctant to put anything on the deep cut or try to clean it out. The cut needed to stop bleeding first and then it needed stitches. She took the clean T-shirt and attempted to wrap it loosely around the bloody wound.

“No, it doesn’t hurt. Girls, I’m fine,” Alexis remarked, putting up a brave front as she tried to stop the bleeding by pressing on the T-shirt wrapped around her arm. She grinned at the worried looks on her student’s faces. “See, I’m still standing, Girls. If my arm was bad, I’d be howling or unconscious by now. The rock sliced the fleshy part of my forearm when I fell. That’s why all the blood.”

Ramona nodded in agreement. “Juan, hook up the safety videos and then the decontamination videos while I take Professor Brown to the house to repair the damage. Girls, take off your gear and clean it. Then I want you to watch the videos. Make a list of the items we’ll need for decontamination. If we aren’t back by then, start writing in your diaries and journals, Girls. Juan, start dinner after the videos.”

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IN THE KITCHEN, Isabella sat down on a chair and pulled on

a pair of knee-high waders. She left her work clothes, a business suit and blouse, on. She decided as she drove down her driveway and spotted the RV and Dr. Patterson from the road that she'd like to see the progress they'd made so far. She imagined the other professor was somewhere in the one of the holes, examining it. She wondered how they did that without falling into it and becoming a fatality as one of her neighbors' cows had almost done. She was also worried the sinkholes could eat up her house if they grew much larger. The county engineer came out to look and offer the opinion the two sinkholes wouldn't grow, but now she had three of them in her backyard. The rain seemed to enlarge them somewhat, but she wasn't sure to what degree. She was curious to see how deep they were too.

She grabbed a jacket that must have been Lenny's because it was too large for her. She inhaled the scent as she pulled it on and pushed up the sleeves and frowned. Had her daughter changed cologne? She didn't recognize the scent.

"Mona, could you come in here and help me a minute. I need you to clean the damned thing and wrap it. I don't think I'll need...stitches." Alexis stepped out of the bathroom, holding her right arm up with her left hand, trying to stop the bleeding. She stared at Isabella wearing her barn jacket. She cleared her throat. "I'll be out of your way in a minute. I know I'm not supposed to be in your house. Ramona thought we could finish treating me before you came home." She went back in the bathroom to wash the blood from the fleshy part of her forearm, then made a clumsy attempt to wrap a bandage over the long gash still streaming blood.

"Sit down on the toilet lid and hold your arm up above your heart. Put pressure on it," Isabella ordered from somewhere behind her. She started taking out gauze, scissors, and antiseptic from the medicine cabinet before she looked at the injury. With five children and three grands, her medicine cabinet stayed full of first-aid supplies. "Let's see it." She noted the long ragged tear that split Alexis's forearm open. "Jesus, I can't patch that! Just sit there and

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don't move. I'll bring you some paper towels to wrap it. Then I'm taking you to ER to get stitches, Professor Brown."

"I'm fine, Izzy. I've done worse damage over the years." Alexis brought her arm down. "See? It stopped bleeding."

Isabella stood over Alexis as she sat on the toilet seat, looking up at her. "You don't have the right to call me that. You lost that right thirty years ago."

"What would you have me call you? 'Mrs. Harris' is getting very old, very fast when other people are allowed to call you Isabella." The wound began to bleed again and Alexis held her arm up, continuing to apply pressure to the homemade bandage.

"Oh, just be quiet and keep your arm above your heart. I'll be back in a minute with some towels to wrap it," Isabella remarked, walking to the door.

"Hey?"

"What now?" Isabella turned around at the bathroom door.

Alexis grinned at Isabella's cheeky response. She decided it was better than when Izzy ignored her. "I like you in my jacket."

Surprising Alexis, Isabella smiled at her before she left. Why did she stop to listen, then smile when she should be slapping the confident grin from her nemesis's face? *She likes me in her jacket. What the hell did that mean?* She looked down at the jacket she thought belonged to Lenny. She raised an arm to sniff it. She sighed. Yes, it was Alexis's jacket. Now she recognized the fragrance of Yardley's English Lavender soap mixed with baby lotion.

"Hi, Mom, what's for dinner?" Marilyn remarked, stopping to remove her boots and leave them in the mudroom just inside the rear door. She noted another pair of muddy boots flopped next to hers. She remarked, striding into the kitchen from the mudroom, "So who's here besides us? I saw another pair of boots in the mudroom."

Alexis appeared at the kitchen door. "Izzy, I can't get the thing to stop...bleeding." She held both hands up in surrender.

“Lenny... I don’t want any trouble. I just came to patch myself up.”

Marilyn grinned. “It’s cool, Professor.” She frowned at the still bleeding gash. “You do know you’re dripping blood all over my mother’s clean floor. Being the neat freak that she is, she’ll probably kill you or make you clean it up.” She walked over to look at the wound, then shook her head. “It looks pretty bad. Mom, you take her to ER. I’ll clean up your kitchen.”

Isabella studied her daughter and then her ex-lover. She handed Alexis extra-absorbent paper-towels that she needed to wrap the wound. “You take her, Lenny. I have some things to do. One of which is cleaning my kitchen. Then I thought I might go look at the sinkholes. Everybody has been on a tour but me. Lastly, what would you like for dinner?”

“Some of that chicken Ramona shared with me last night would be nice as a sandwich.”

“Nobody was talking to you, Lexy. I was asking my daughter for her suggestions.”

“Mom, you called her Lexy. Professor Brown, you called my mother Izzy.”

“Did I?”

Alexis pretended to grow thoughtful. “I don’t remember hearing that.” She kept her arm up and continued to apply pressure to the wound area. “Anyway, this thing is starting to throb. Could we discuss dinner menus later? One of you needs to take me to get this arm patched up.” She headed for the door, forgetting her boots.

“Put some shoes on, Professor Brown,” both women ordered, then realized that she’d need help with them. “Help her with the boots, Lenny. Then get her to the ER and stay with her until she’s all stitched up.”

Isabella watched the two women walk into the mudroom. Alexis sat down on one of the bench seats while Marilyn encouraged her to slip her foot into the right boot, then she laced it up. Alexis looked to be in a great deal of pain but hiding it with a smile every time Marilyn looked up at her to see if the laces were

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too tight. *Damn it! Tell Lenny you're hurting, Lexy, so she'll get you there faster,* she wanted to scold. *You two are so much alike it's scary,* she mused, observing her daughter making sure that Alexis kept her arm up as they walked down the rear stairs to Lenny's car.

She had to admit that Alexis was going out of her way to meet the conditions of their new agreement. She never appeared for Juan's breakfasts or her dinners at the house. She always managed to find things to do at the sinkholes or in the RV on her laptop during those times. Sometimes, she'd be on her cell phone. Judging by her body language, she was talking to Dr. Watson. Other times, she'd catch a glimpse of her eldest and Alexis taking a long walk in the wooded area beyond the sinkholes. One or two of the students might join them or Mary Louise if she was in town and Juan would walk with them. She wondered what they talked about, but she never asked either daughter, thinking that would somehow break whatever relationship they seemed to be forming with the professor.

She gathered a bucket, pine oil, and a mop. While she was running the water in the bucket, she suddenly remembered how much Alexis hated needles. She wondered if she should call Marilyn and warn her. No, let them figure out things. Looking out one of the kitchen windows that faced the backyard, she watched Juan and several of the students head in her direction. She mopped up quickly. She'd put the supplies away by the time they arrived in the mudroom, then the kitchen.

"Mrs. H, want some help with that?"

"We saw Lenny driving Dr. B somewhere."

"How come?"

"She said it was just a scratch."

"Where did they go?"

"Lenny took her to the hospital."

"How serious is it?"

"She'll need some stitches."

Ramona came inside, stopping to pull off her muddy boots and

slipping into clogs. “I tried to tell her the bloody thing needed stitches, but Professor Stubborn insisted she could slap a few butterflies on it and be fine.”

Isabella shook her head. “There was no way that would work. She was having too much trouble stopping the bleeding. I had her hold it up and apply pressure to it, which stopped the blood flow for a minute, then she did something and it started bleeding again.”

“You were here when she was using the bathroom?”

“Yes, Ramona. We were in the same space. And no, we didn’t kill each other.”

Ramona studied Isabella. It was a new development that she wanted to hear all about. “Okay, People, go wash up next door and we’ll make sandwiches from last night’s chicken. Do we have enough sodas, water, and juice for dinner?”

Isabella opened the refrigerator to look. “How about some iced tea? I have two gallons of it left. Juan, go check the RV and see. There should be some bottled water and sodas on ice in one of the coolers.”

Juan sighed. “I wheeled them out to the sites today. It’s empty. Dr. B said everybody has to stay hydrated, so I filled both of the coolers. They’re empty.”

“Okay, go bring ‘em back here. Who’s left at the site?”

“Nobody. The rest of the crew is in the RV, enjoying the air-conditioning. Want me to make a soda run?”

“Yes, take somebody with you.” Ramona turned around to face the three students. “Girls, you go with him. Bring back ice if you can find it and a couple of cases of water, sodas, and frozen juices... You know what we need. Take the school’s credit card and some ID. You have your driver’s license, right, Juan?”

“Right.” Juan turned to both women and patted his pocket. “Is there anything special you want while I’m out? If you give me a list, I bring it back for you.”

“Juan, you are becoming indispensable. I’m going to miss you when classes start in the fall.”

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“Mrs. H, I hope I’ll still be around. I mean, Mary Louise and I are still together, so I figured I’d be coming back and forth with her whenever I can.”

“I’d like that, Juan.”

Juan sighed. “I just hope Mary Louise will.”

“Juan, I’m planning to go back this weekend to see my wife and my baby. I think Lenny may be going and taking a few students with her. You’re welcome to ride there with me.”

Months ago, Juan would have felt uncomfortable about riding with Dr. P and refused her offer because she was gay. Now, he knew that didn’t matter. She got down in the mud and dirt of the sinkholes just as he did. Dr. P fussed about bad measurements and poor quality work from certain students. He bitched at his fellow students when they acted like pigs and ate everything without telling him so he could replace it.

Dr. P cursed a blue streak when equipment didn’t work right or Dr. Watson didn’t approve of something. He cursed when he kept cleaning up after his fellow students no matter how much he reminded them and left little nasty notes about their untidiness. Dr. P missed her peeps. He’d overheard her calling or using Skype to check on her family. He also missed his peeps and Mary Louise something fierce but tried to let it roll off his back when she didn’t return his calls as quickly as he did hers. Yeah, he could talk to Dr. P as easily as he spoke to Dr. B or Mrs. H. He liked all of ‘em.

“Okay, sure, Dr. P.”

Marilyn glanced at her passenger periodically. She hadn’t said more than two or three words since they’d headed toward the hospital. It might not be too late for a clinic visit that would be much cheaper. “Dr. Brown, has it stopped bleeding yet?”

Alexis shifted the homemade dressing to look. It had slowed considerably but blood was still trickling from the wound. “Almost.” She grimaced while she re-wrapped the wound and applied pressure.

“It still hurts, huh?”

“Like a mother. How far is it?” Alexis bit into her lower lip. She must have nicked an artery.

“We’re here.” Marilyn made a left turn and parked near the clinic’s entrance. It was a small, one-story, yellow brick building. The parking lot was half full of cars. She’d remembered the place had one late night on Thursdays. She opened the passenger side door thrust a hand at the professor. “Come on, Dr. B. One of the medical staff needs to see. They’ll stitch you right up. We’ll be back at the farm before you know it.” She heard Alexis issue a ragged sigh, then stare over her shoulder at the clinic.

“I hate places like this, Lenny, so forgive me if I’m not happy to be here.”

“Aw, come on, Dr. B. It’s not so bad. A couple of pinpricks to deaden the pain, then the stitches and an injection, tetanus shot afterwards.” Marilyn offered her hand and helped Alexis scoot out of the car.

They walked into the clinic’s waiting area with Alexis still holding the bloody paper towels against the wound in her arm. As soon as the triage nurse saw blood dripping from the wound, she went over to Alexis. “Let’s bring you in here, Hon. Your friend can give us your information.” She looked at Lenny and then Alexis. “If you’ll go to the desk over there, the other nurse will take your mother’s information.” She walked behind Alexis. “This first cubicle will do just fine. I’ll send the doctor right in. Are you allergic to anything?”

“No, Nurse. No allergies, but I don’t handle shots well.”

“Do you faint?”

“No, ma’am. I just don’t like ‘em.”

“Knock, knock. I’m Dr. Sheridan, and you are?”

Alexis studied the brown-haired, young white doctor with the lively dark eyes for moment as he stood at the opening of the cubicle. “I’m scared shitless is what I am, Doc.”

He smoothed his beard as he pretended to think for a moment.

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“Tell you what. I’ll give you a lollipop if you don’t cry or slug me after I give you an injection. Is it a deal?”

Alexis chuckled. “I’d shake your hand, Doc, but as you can see, I have a damaged wing.”

“So let’s take a look.” He slipped on latex gloves, then unwrapped the homemade bandage. The gash in her forearm was nearly six inches in length and a half-inch deep. It opened up the fleshy underside of her arm enough to see several layers of skin. “Hmm.” The doctor held her arm under a large, portable magnifying glass. “I see some dirt in the cut and it’s ragged, much more difficult to patch up evenly. That means it’ll leave a scar. We’ll try to make it a faint one, Ms....?”

“It’s Brown. I cut my arm on some jagged rocks. Do whatever you need to do. I’d do better if you put me to sleep, Doc.”

“I’ll see what we can do. You ever have trouble waking up after anesthesia?”

“No, sir, not to my knowledge.”

“So you’ve had major surgery before.”

“Yes, sir, I was a cop in another life. So yeah, I’ve had surgery before.”

“How about keloids scars? Do you form them?”

“Yes, on my back and upper shoulder.” Alexis sighed. “I guess you’ll want to see them, huh?”

Dr. Sheridan noted the shy look on his new patient’s face. “No. I believe you. So what do you do now?”

“I’m a geologist. I teach it at State University.”

“I see. Put this gown on and hop on the table.” The doctor stepped out to give her some privacy. A minute later, he was back with more questions. “I heard you tell the nurse you aren’t allergic to any medications.”

“Yes, Doc, that’s true.” She breathed in and out as he instructed. Then he listened to her heart and lungs and took her pressure. He said she was fine other than that her pulse was a bit fast, which was to be expected.

“Lie back with the wedge underneath your neck. Close your eyes.”

Alexis did as she was told and heard him approaching her wounded arm, swabbing it with alcohol.

“Okay, Ms. Brown, I’m giving you a shot of Demerol. It won’t knock you out, but you won’t feel anything while I clean your wound and stitch it. If you do feel pain, tell me, and we’ll give you something more. We’ll give it a couple of minutes to take effect. I’ll send your daughter in to sit with you.”

“I’m ready.”

“Good, because I’m done.” He grinned broadly when hazel eyes opened to stare at him in surprise. “Aw, come on, Ms. Brown. It’s a simple distraction technique. You can’t tell me you haven’t used it when you need reluctant witness to talk or students to give you feedback.”

Alexis chuckled. “You’re sneaky, Doc.”

“Yes, I am when I need to be. Be back in a couple of minutes,” the doctor remarked, stepping out.

Marilyn poked her head into the cubicle. “Can I come inside, Professor B? The doctor said you were worried about needles and stuff.”

“Sure, Kiddo, come in; join the party. I’m feeling damned good. I hate hospitals, but I’m liking that doctor. He’s real okay. I’m real okay. Are you real okay, Lenny? Cuz I’m really okay.” Alexis pointed to Lenny with a wagging finger. “He thinks I’m your mom. Did you tell him that? Hey, Lenny, come here.” Alexis waved her closer. “Did I tell you I’m okay?”

Marilyn started grinning as she moved into the room and sat down. “Hey, Professor B, I think you’re getting high as several kites.”

“Nope, I don’t drink anything but scotch. No scotch in here tonight, Lenny. Just a shot of...” She frowned and looked around. “He said a shot of something...not whiskey, but something. This isn’t a bar, is it?”

Sinkholes Part Two

Marilyn chuckled. “No bar, Professor B. This is a clinic. You’re getting stitched up.”

“Stitches for what?” Alexis looked at her arm. “Hey, look. It stopped bleeding. We can go yet?”

Marilyn encouraged Alexis to lie back against the gurney. “Come on, Professor B, lie back down. Let’s wait for the doctor to tell us something.”

“You tell him I’m not bleeding. I’m getting sleepy. Okay, Lenny?”

*

HOURS LATER, MARILYN HELPED Alexis into the farmhouse. She decided on the drive back to put the professor in the living room rather than wake the students in the RV or in the spare bedrooms upstairs. She hoped the couch was free tonight. Since her mother had opened her home to the students and Dr. P, it was difficult to tell what the sleeping arrangements were from one night to the next. Professor B was woozy and high from the Demerol and the local he gave her.

Isabella and Ramona had grown concerned when the two women weren’t back within the hour they figured it would take to clean and stitch the wound. What they didn’t know was the clinic had gotten busy with several dire emergencies that the medical staff sent to the main hospital. Everything took longer. In Alexis’s case, it meant waiting for two hours before the doctor cleaned and stitched her wound. A text from Marilyn finally made its way to Ramona, who showed it to Isabella as they sat drinking coffee and making small talk at the kitchen table.

The two women heard a car door slam at the same time. Isabella turned on the backyard lights, then they both watched as Marilyn placed Alexis’s arm around her neck and helped Alexis out of the car and up the back porch steps.

Without thinking what she was doing, Isabella grabbed

Ramona's hand and squeezed it tightly. "Dear God, is she all right, Ramona? I thought it was just a gash...just a few stitches and some pain meds. She can barely walk straight. What should I do to help? Should I make some more tea or how about coffee, should I do that? Does she drink coffee, Ramona?"

Ramona turned away from the window to loosen Isabella's death grip on her hand. "Calm down, Isabella. If the doctors didn't think she was well, she wouldn't be stumbling around in the dark out there with your daughter. She'd be in a hospital bed. Unless you want to risk her falling down a flight of stairs, pull out the living room couch and make it into a bed or just toss some sheets on it as is." She watched Alexis pat Marilyn's face as a thank you when she kept her from tripping on the uneven driveway. *Oh yeah, Al is high as a kite.* She knew intoxicated when she saw it and Al was several sheets in the wind. "You better leave the bathroom light on too. She's gonna want to piss a lot tonight."

"You sound like you've been through this with her."

Ramona studied Isabella. "Not in the way you're thinking, although we did try that once. The next morning, we decided we'd make better friends than lovers. We've been friends for over twelve years now. The funny thing is I know more about her years as police officer than I do about you, Isabella. I know there's a story there and it's a good one. I see it whenever you look at her when you think nobody is looking. She does the same thing with you. Then there's the mystery of Lenny. She could be...related." She watched as dark eyes widened. "Yeah, it's been noticed by everybody but the three people most involved." She sighed. "Al needs someone stable in her life. She's floundering. She's been floundering for a long time."

"What has changed for her now?"

"She knows it but she doesn't know what to do about it. Isabella, tell her who Lenny is in her life."

"What makes you think I would do such a thing to my daughter or to her?"

Sinkholes Part Two

Ramona studied Isabella for a moment. “Because you love your daughter and you’re still in love with Alexis Brown after all these years. Sherrie says nobody could do what you did that first day if they weren’t fighting against the passion they were feeling.”

Isabella groaned. “Well, you can just tell Sherrie that I said to” She sighed. “How does she do that from long distance? What have you been telling your wife about us?”

“I tell my wife everything that happens here. If I don’t, I’m dead meat. Since I like living, I always tell her everything that happens with Alexis. We’ve been doing that for years. It’s how we communicate.”

“Isn’t she in love with her boss, Ramona?”

“She’s carrying on an affair, yes, but in love with her, no. She usually has them with her summer graduate students. This year, it was Dorothea’s turn. Quite frankly, I don’t think Al has been in love with any of the women she’s slept with over the years. Dottie has probably come the closest, but I don’t think she has seen the scars.”

“What’s that?”

Dark eyes studied Isabella again. “You’ll know. When she shows you, that’s when you’ll know.”

“Don’t be so obtuse, Ramona. What will I know?” Isabella moved over to the next window to see her daughter’s progress hauling the professor’s nearly dead weight up the back porch stairs. They were almost at the door.

“You’ll know. That’s all I’m saying.”

“You’re speaking in riddles tonight, Ramona.”

“Hey, Isabella, you’re a librarian who loves knowledge for its own sake. You’re also a very smart woman. You’ll figure out what I just said.”

“Lenny, want some help?” Juan called, flashing his penlight at her. He’d been looking out for the professor for several hours, sitting on the RV’s steps and then sitting in a chair when the girls complained about the cool breezes coming in from the open door.

“I wasn’t sleeping so well. I saw you with the professor. I figured I’d come help.” He grabbed Alexis at the waist.

“Ah, hey, Junior. How ya doing?” Alexis patted his face, just missing his eye. Her body swayed and she nearly stumbled again. “How ya doing, Honey? Lenny’s okay. I’m okay. Are you okay, Junior? How’s your girlfriend? She’s a cute little thing. She just talks so much.”

“Be careful of her left arm, Juan. We don’t want to bust the stitches.”

Alexis turned to grin at Lenny, then wave a finger. “She’s your sister. How come you don’t talk so much, Lenny?” She stopped weaving to study Marilyn’s face. “How come you named Marilyn but you called Lenny and not Mary.”

Marilyn chuckled. She found the professor very humorous tonight. “I guess I got sick of all the ‘M’s in my family. I liked Lenny so I’m Lenny.”

Alexis nodded, then frowned. “Ah, don’t understand.” Her arm still around Juan’s neck, she turned to him as they made their way up the final porch step. “You get it, Junior? I don’t get it.”

“Nope, I don’t get it either.” Juan caught Marilyn’s attention and winked.

Alexis shook a chastising finger at him. “You think I too high to see. I see you winking, Juan. You get it. Tell me how to get it.”

Isabella held the back door open.

Swaying badly, Alexis stopped walking to stare at her host, then pointed at the doorway. “No, Izzy. I can’t go in there! You say no. I do what you say.”

Isabella grabbed Alexis’s chin to look into her eyes, noting her pupils were huge. “You are high, aren’t you?” She watched Alexis nod. “Let my daughter and your friend Juan help you settle on the couch, okay?” She watched Alexis nod again.

“You say yes. I do yes. Now, I tired.”

“Forget the sheets. Better get her to the couch before she crashes,” Ramona warned, having been through Al’s drinking

binges.

The hot sun on her face woke Alexis the next morning or maybe it was the whispered conversation over her head that did it. She opened her eyes to see several blurry faces looking down at her. She closed her eyes and rubbed them, hoping to clear whatever was in them. It didn't. She cleared her throat. "I'm not sure where I am. Could one of the fuzzy faces standing over me say something?"

"Ah, so you're awake now. Do you have to pee again? You did a lot of it last night...like a race horse, as the saying goes."

"Isabella?"

"Now, that's a good guess since I was up half the night with you. Ramona took the other shift. She left for the sinkholes with Juan and your students. Lenny says the doctor doesn't want you doing too much with that arm today or for the next couple of days until the stitches come out. He wants you to protect it from dirt and debris too."

Alexis groaned. "What he wants and what I do are two different things." She rose from the couch, then grabbed the back of it for support when she felt her body swaying unsteadily.

Isabella started to stabilize her, then decided not to. "Oh, just sit back down and stop being a stubborn fool before you fall down." When Alexis remained standing, Isabella sighed and pointed. "If you're going to walk around, you might want to put more clothes on." She watched Alexis look down, then frown at what she saw. "Shit!" Thank God, she was still wearing her boxers and an undershirt. "Ramona said you sleep in your underwear, so we left that on."

Leaning against the couch back for support, Alexis rubbed her eye sockets with her palms. "Should I even ask who the 'we' includes?"

"Well, let's see. My five daughters, all of your students, including Juan, me, and Ramona, all saw you in various stages of undress."

“Jesus! What did you do? Sell tickets to see the wounded, half-naked professor?” Alexis looked like she wanted to hit something.

Isabella chuckled. “Are you hungry?”

“Have you looked at me? I’m in my underwear, Isabella. I got no idea where my clothes are or what happened last night after I came back here. Food is the last thing on my mind.”

“Hello, Mrs. H, is she awake yet?” Juan knocked on the back door before striding into the kitchen and then the living room, forcing Alexis to dive under the covers, which had Isabella giggling. “Yes, Juan, Professor Rabbit is that rather large lump lying on my couch, hiding underneath those blankets and sheets.”

“You won’t think it’s so funny when I start bleeding all over your couch.”

Isabella started digging through the material making the lump, tossing covers aside as she tried to find her houseguest’s bandaged arm. “Damn it, Lexy! Let’s see your arm. Swear to God, I will kill you if you busted a single stitch.”

Juan frowned. He didn’t think he should be in the living room while they fought and so he started backing out of the room. “I’ll just leave you ladies. I’ll come back later.”

Alexis sat up completely wrapped in blankets and quilts. “Junior, bring me some clothes: jeans and a T-shirt. I gotta get out of here, now!”

“The hell you will, Alexis Brown! I’m going in to work late today. Humph, maybe I should stay here all day and make sure you don’t overdo it. You’re sitting right here in your undies for the next couple of days...longer if you force me to call the doctor to get his opinion.” She offered the two pills in her hand to Alexis. “Take your pain pills and go back to sleep, Professor Brown.”

She watched Alexis prepare to open her mouth to disagree and wagged a finger at her. “Juan, why don’t you bring her clean underwear? No outdoor clothes, but some T-shirts and shorts or just a robe should be fine. Take her boots and shoes with you. We can’t trust she won’t disobey the doctor’s orders.” She watched

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hazel eyes narrow as Juan rapidly hustled out the door.

“You know you’re pissing me off, don’t you?”

Isabella held the hand containing the two pills out to Alexis again.

“Is that supposed to scare me or something?” Dark eyes stared into angry hazel eyes and held them for a long moment until Alexis relented. Her arm was starting to throb from the dive under the covers, then using her arm to cover her underwear with the bedcovers. She grimaced when she moved her injured arm protectively against her chest.

“Just take the damned pills, Professor Brown, unless you want me to sit on your chest and force them down your throat.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Wouldn’t I? I do have a history of bad behavior when it comes to you.” Isabella stepped closer. “Wanna bet a dinner that I couldn’t shove these pills down your throat, Professor Brown?”

Alexis groaned, then snatched the pills and the bottled water from the end table next to the couch. She grimaced at the sharp pain radiating from her right arm after she used it to reach out, grasp, and hold the bottle of water until she felt the couch dip.

Isabella sat down and took the bottle out of her grasp and the pills from her hand. She was used to tending sick children. How much different was tending to a stubborn, wounded woman who was acting exactly like a big baby? “Open your mouth for me.”

Annoyed hazel eyes glared at her and Alexis opened her mouth to protest her treatment. Isabella used the opportunity to pop the pills into her mouth, then pressed the water bottle against her lips. “Take a big gulp for me.” She tilted the bottle slightly. “That’s a good girl. Now swallow.” She watched Alexis swallow the water in her throat. “Take another gulp to wash them all the way down to your tummy.” She pressed the bottle against Alexis’s lips, ignoring furious hazel eyes turning a dangerous shade of muddy brown-green. After Alexis swallowed more water, Isabella dabbed at the excess water on her lips. “There. You should feel better in about

ten minutes.”

“If by ‘feel better’ you mean be high as a kite, I don’t want that. If I want to get that way, I’d buy a nice bottle of imported scotch and go visit Ramona and Sherrie. We’d all get drunk, watching old movies for the entire weekend with Mr. Peepers.”

Isabella thought that sounded like a very lonely existence. “You didn’t mention bringing a woman with you unless Mr. Peepers is a code name for your women.” She heard Alexis grunt and turned to study her face.

“Jesus, you are nosy, aren’t you?”

“My life is an open book. You can see whatever you want in mine. I can’t say the same for yours, can I?”

Alexis shrugged. She wasn’t playing the “Here’s my life. What do you think?” game with Isabella today or any other day. “You mentioned something about food. I’m hungry enough to....” She stood up again. This time, the dizziness was worse and she couldn’t complete her sentence. The damned pills were making her sleepy, but she wanted to eat before she passed out. She grabbed Isabella’s shoulder to steady herself before she fell flat on her face.

Isabella took hold of Alexis’s waist. “Easy, there. Take it easy, Professor. Let’s get you settled back on the couch. We can feed you later if you still feel like eating. I’m betting you won’t want to eat anything. But as you said, what the hell do I know about you or your life anyway?” She managed to guide Alexis backward and forced her to sit down, then she swung solid, muscular legs onto the couch, covering them with the quilts.

Drooping eyes studied her. “Wanna know something, ask me. I’m tired of hiding from you and wondering ‘bout you. Can’t move on till you forgive me. Okay, Izzy?”

“Go to sleep, Professor Brown.” Isabella smoothed damp dreadlocks away from a smooth caramel-colored forehead as she watched Alexis finally allow the medication to take over. She watched Alexis’s eyelids flutter, struggling to open again.

“Don’t like Professor Brown. Say Lexy. Nobody call me Lexy

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but you. Don't let anybody say 'Sexy Lexy.' Just you, Izzy...only you say it," Alexis murmured, then turned onto her left side. She began to breathe deeply and evenly.

Isabella stood at the foot of the couch, looking down at Alexis. "What am I going to do with you, Professor Alexis Brown? You're not supposed to be here. I'm not supposed to feel anything but hatred for you. Yet here you are in my home thirty years later. And here I am growing more curious about you every day." She sighed. "I have no idea what this all means or where my curiosity will take me or you."

At the kitchen doorway, Ramona looked down at the clothes in her hand, deciding now wasn't the time to interrupt either woman. After leaving fresh clothes for Alexis on the kitchen table, she padded quietly back to the mudroom, slipping on her boots and returning to the site. Sherrie was right. Isabella's heart was softening toward her best friend. Where did that leave their boss, the Dragon Lady?

*

"RAMONA, HOW IS SHE?" Dorothea asked, pacing back and forth in her office while she ran a desperate hand through her hair. "I've been calling since you left a message yesterday. Is her phone working? I'm going crazy here. God, if anything happened to her, I swear I'll kill you first and then her for talking me into this ludicrous trip so far away."

"Well, good morning to you too, Dr. Watson! How are you, Dr. Patterson? Oh, I'm fine, Dottie. Thanks for inquiring on this rainy Ohio morning," Ramona retorted as she sat outside on Isabella's back porch where she could keep an eye on the students. She was also looking for the underground transportation expert who was due to check out the site either today or tomorrow. Isabella had decided to go to work after Alexis took the pain meds that would keep her on the couch all day. There was no chance she'd overhear

anything that was said.

Dorothea dropped back down in the leather chair at her desk with a loud sigh. “Forgive me, Ramona. I’m sorry to be so rude. Why couldn’t I have fallen for calm, practical you instead of her adventurous ass?”

“If you had fallen for me, Sherrie would have stomped my butt into next week after she killed you, then dumped your body somewhere isolated and gotten rid of the evidence. Anyway, since when did I become calm and practical? I always thought you considered me as a flaky but loveable and brilliant geology professor.”

“Did you earn a promotion I don’t know about, Ramona? I thought you were an assistant professor here at State College.” Dorothea had to admit Ramona’s brand of dry humor took the edge off the reason for her call.

“For now, that’s true, but who knows what tomorrow could bring, hint, hint. After all, I do have a family now, Dottie...double hint.” When she heard Dorothea snicker, she chuckled. “Goody, you’re laughing.” She cleared her throat. “Al is fine, Dottie. She split her forearm open on some rocks when she tripped. It bled a lot because that’s the fleshy part of the arm. It was a jagged cut, so it took about twenty-five stitches to close it. She’ll have some scarring because of the unevenness of the injury...skin not matching up and all that.”

“How is she?”

“The doctor, in his infinite wisdom, gave her enough pain pills to knock out a horse or at least put the horse down and stay high for a couple of days.”

“Why do that to her?”

“She wanted to get back to work today, but she was still feeling the effects of the injury. The doctor wants her to rest the arm. He says the wound needs protection from dirt and debris until the stitches come out in five days. You know how stubborn she can be about sitting still, especially now that we’ll be exploring the

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sinkholes by the end of the week.”

“What’s the hold up on the holes?”

“We need our guy to tell us the best way to do it. We thought a winch with climbing ropes. Now we’re thinking safety cage and cables. We’ve been checking out coal mining maps in the area. We’re not sure, but we suspect the sinkhole is the result of deficient or eroding vertical coalmine shafts or the adits...the horizontal openings to mines that are used as entrances for ventilation or drainage.”

“Mine shafts huh? What are your cameras telling you?”

“We brought fifty- to eighty-foot cables that worked fine in the smaller sinkhole. It’s about twenty to thirty feet deep. We don’t think it’s connected to the larger sinkhole but might be connected to the second hole.”

“On the daily videos you’ve been sending me, I thought I saw something that looks like pipes of some sort. It’s so dark down there, it’s difficult to tell. Would a higher quality camera lens help?”

“Yes, and so would more lights. We think that’s the sinkhole caused by old sewer line installations.”

“I’ll see what I can send in the next couple of days. What about the second hole...how deep is it?”

“It’s over eighty feet down. Our cameras and lights are telling us it may be a little deeper than eighty feet...possibly ninety to one hundred feet. But it’s difficult to tell in the pitch blackness down there.”

“And the biggest one? Sinkhole Number Three?”

“We know it’s deeper than the eighty feet our cables can reach. We suspect its double or triple that depth. We’re curious to see if any of the holes link up underground where we can’t see them.”

“How dangerous will it be to explore them, Mona?”

“We’ve had the students practicing with ropes and climbing gear.” Ramona sighed. “We’ll feel better when our expert gets here. I think and Al agrees that we should use the safety cage with

a winch or an overhead crane if the underground structure is strong enough to hold the crane's weight. We've had county engineers out here to take borehole samples again. We've been taking seismic readings and measuring the holes every day. Nothing much has changed since the county came out to make inspections." She sighed. She wondered if she should admit the first report said they didn't expect to see other sinkholes. There were two sinkholes at the time of the first report. A second report said the third sinkhole would not grow but it did. The third report said the underground structure appeared to be stable and suggested an underground tunnel connection.

"Mona, talk to me. I can hear doubt in your voice."

"We really need those lights and cables, Dottie. Al and I want to be certain about depths. We want to know what's down there. Yes, we're excited about all of this, but we're worried we don't know enough about what's down there to allow students to go with us. We've been thinking we should go down there in the safety cage first as a test run and to install lights if we can in the larger of the two sinkholes."

"Have you asked your expert about lighting the holes?"

Ramona smiled. "No, but that's a good idea. We chose him because he has a background in getting personnel to and from underground systems like sewers, construction excavation sites, and mines. He'd probably know who to hire for lighting systems."

"I'd be surprised if he doesn't do that himself. Small companies such as his are one-stop shopping. I bet he'll supply you with lighting and camera equipment. Send me an email after you ask and let me know if I still need to send you the lighting supplies and camera lens."

"Send us the lens and the lights anyway, Dottie."

"Okay."

"Dottie?"

"Yes."

"She really misses you. Why don't you come down here for a

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visit?”

“If she misses me so much, why am I the one calling her and not the other way around?” Dorothea snapped, annoyed once again that her relationship with Alexis Brown was becoming more and more one-sided.

“Well, let’s see. She’s a busy bitch who’s trying to make this experience good for these girls and Juan. She’s taught them some field skills, like pitching tents, map reading, using measuring and monitoring equipment such as rain gauges, temperatures gauge, cameras, and laptops, operating the portable seismograph, and how to use the climbing and safety equipment when we get into the sinkholes. She’s also trying to see if the sinkholes have any redeeming value...exploring their possible origins with her students. The expert we hired will take us inside the two bigger ones as soon as the stitches come out of her arm. Will that do for now?”

Dorothea exhaled. “You just made me feel ashamed to question her motives, Mona.”

Ramona groaned. “That wasn’t my intention. I’ll tell her you called, Dottie.”

“Thanks.”