

PART I: THE OLD VILLAGE

1995 - 1999

**1 - What Right Do We Have?
Karen**

January 1995

"You want to move an entire town of indigenous people?" I withdrew my hand from Larry's. The sweetness of last night's reunion vanished.

"It could be the largest silver deposit in the whole world. Damned town's sitting right on top of it. You've got to understand, Karen, what this would mean for the people, for the country of Bolivia."

"I've got to understand?"

"Well, yeah." He shifted his body and rested his forehead in his hands, averting his eyes. "We have no choice. If it turns out there's an orebody there, we can't mine with San Cristóbal smack in the middle of it. That town's got to go."

"The town's been there for centuries. You don't *have to*."

I searched the coffeehouse for comfort in the familiarity of the forest green walls, the philodendra hanging from the oak beams, and the shelves of espresso machines for the home. The aroma of fresh-ground coffee permeated the place.

Larry was studying me through his thick glasses as he sipped his latte. His face, burned by the sun and wind, looked misplaced in our Northwest winter. Outside, the rain fell.

He licked his chapped lips. "This discovery is just too important to walk away."

The night before when I'd picked him up at the airport, he couldn't stop grinning. "I think I've finally found it!" he'd said, slapping his once-white hat on his thigh and releasing a cloud of dirt. "Geologists spend their whole lives looking for a deposit like this one. Thirty years and maybe I've really hit it."

He strode through the airport amidst a sea of business suits, his plaid flannel shirt torn at the left elbow and both knees of his faded jeans worn thin. The remaining bit of brown hair on his balding head, several weeks' growth of whiskers, and his mustache all looked a shade lighter from the dust. The other business-class passengers must have loved sitting next to him on this long trip from Bolivia to Ashland, Oregon, our home.

I wanted only to wrap my arms around him and keep him close to me for a while before he headed out again.

Now, this morning, I sipped my latte, buying time. I hated conflict, but too much was at stake. "How can you move a village? They've got to be rooted to their land," I persisted.

"They're poor, Karen." Larry took a deep breath. "San Cristóbal has fewer than two hundred residents, all women and children. The men have left for the cities to try and earn some money."

"But they've lived that way for hundreds of years. *Leave them alone.*"

"Maybe the men return at Christmas long enough to impregnate their women. Then they're off again. Meanwhile the women and kids survive on shriveled potatoes. There's no future there. They just watch their llamas eat grass all day."

"Maybe there's some way to help that doesn't destroy their culture. Maybe they have some skill, some resource that could be developed."

"Believe me, Karen. I sure didn't see any skills there. There are no resources other than this mine."

We avoided each other's eyes. Two university students sat down next to us with their laptops and Mexican mochas.

Larry spoke again, his voice soft at first, then rising, "Their chances of surviving are slim. Children die all the time. They have nothing. They want the jobs the mine would bring. The kids are wearing sandals made from old discarded tires. Sandals! No jackets! It's freezing there." His eyes widened as his words hammered me. "No electricity, no running water, no sanitation, no sewage."

“Yeah, well maybe they don’t want their village destroyed. Maybe they find a form of happiness that you could never understand. You don’t know. You haven’t lived there. Maybe they have cultural traditions or a spirituality that supports them. Who are we to say their lives aren’t okay? And who are we to make them leave everything they’ve ever known?”

A pained expression came over Larry’s face. “Honey, you know I love you, and I know you are compassionate. It’s just that you’re not being realistic here.”

I turned away and stared out the window. The school where I worked as a counselor was located only a block away. Faced with the many children I could not help, those living with drug-addicted parents who abused or neglected them, I had to be realistic every day.

I felt Larry’s hand on my arm, soft as a caress. I let his touch linger, then pulled away and lashed out at him. “What makes you such an authority on this village?”

He sounded tired. “Look, I’ve been to every God-forsaken hell-hole you can imagine from Tegucigalpa to Tashkent, and I always ask the people I meet what it is they want. And you know what they answer every time? Every time? No matter their religion or their color or their culture? They inevitably say, ‘I want a job.’ Poverty grinds

them down. That's the culture these villagers have, a culture of poverty, and they want out of it."

I glared at the National Republican Party button flaunting his conservative views on the rim of his filthy hat. Damned button had survived the trip. If I hated conflict so much, why had I married this man?

When I met Larry, he was recently divorced and taking time out from geology. He spent his days capturing the beauty of the surrounding mountains on canvas and wooing me with bouquets of wild flowers. A romantic at home and a world-wide adventurer, Larry was a real-life Indiana Jones and couldn't stay away from the treasure hunt for long. The quest beckoned and he returned to prospecting within the year.

As a youngster in the southern California desert, he had witnessed domestic violence and poverty. The world of rocks was safe. The desert became his refuge, and he, a loner, bicycled out to remote canyons for week ends to explore old mine shafts and tunnels.

I was born and raised in the first Jewish family to live in a blue-blood New England community. Having grown up as an outsider, I felt deeply for those who didn't belong. My passion was not rocks; it was

championing the rights of the underdog. But Larry had experienced the path up and out of the underdog world and thought everyone should be able to do the same.

After a long silence, I rallied. "Didn't you tell me they were Quechua, descendants of the Incas? They must still have their language and customs."

"Well, maybe, but their Quechua customs or spirituality or whatever you call it sure hasn't helped them very much. If they don't change, they'll die." Larry looked away, then leaned in closer to me, his voice almost pleading. "Culture, spirituality--it doesn't feed the people."

"Maybe not their bellies," I said.

"Well, let them eat first and worry about their souls later." Larry paused for a moment and let out a sigh. "We have our warm homes, good food, and children with bright futures. They don't. We're comfortable. They aren't. So, what right do *we* have to sit here and say these people shouldn't take advantage of the only opportunity to come their way in centuries?"

We had both raised our voices a notch. Next to us a couple in their warm, purple Patagonia jackets looked up from their *New York Times*. The students were also eyeing us. I didn't care.

Outside, a dark-blue BMW displayed a bumper sticker *Live Simply So Others May Simply Live*. Holes broke through the clouds, revealing small, brief patches of blue.

I was on the verge of tears. I fixed my eyes on the table; my heart pounded. "I can't live with a man who destroys villages. By staying with you, I'm giving tacit approval. I *can't* do that." I shook my head as my sweaty hands ripped the napkin on my lap into shreds.

"Wait, wait, honey." A look of panic crossed Larry's face. "No need for this. If the silver is there it won't matter what you or I think. The company will go ahead. It's out of my hands."

The implications of my own words scared me. I didn't want to lose him, but I didn't know how to make peace with the situation. I needed to see what was going on firsthand.

"I'll come with you," I said with conviction that surprised even me.

Larry raised his eyebrows and studied me. "You'll come with me? To Bolivia?"

"I want to see what you're doing to these people."

"It's rough country. It won't be easy."

"I don't care. If you're going to move the village, we need to see what happens. We'll have to live there for a while."

"Live there? You mean that?"

"Yes."

"You're not going to like it." He sat without speaking for some time. Then he reached for my hand and took a deep breath. "Yeah, I'm...I'm OK with that. I guess we could try it, but just for a trial period."

My body relaxed just a bit. "Promise me this," I said, "You can't just move on to the next project like you always do and forget these people."

"Okay, that's a deal--*if* we make a mine."

"And I think we owe it to the people to document all the changes."

"Document the changes?"

I said nothing; just stared Larry in the eyes.

"Okay, okay, but I guarantee you these people don't have much to document."

"I think you might be surprised."