

CHAPTER 1—The Pitch

“If I could only live at the pitch that is near madness, when everything is as it was in my childhood, violent, vivid, and of infinite possibility!”
Richard Ghormsley Eberhart

Tuesday April 7

Sophie tasted the dust before she caught a glimpse of it rising over the oiled dirt road leading up to the house. She knew what was coming, even though her view was obstructed by the large knoll covered with scrub pine. It was unusual to have an unannounced visitor at this time of the year and this evening, she was alone, the sole sentry at White Bark Ranch.

Finally, the vehicle crested over the last rise of the driveway before it flattened out to a circular drive at the foot of the main house. A minute later a large sable colored SUV with tinted windows pulled in front of the house. She did not recognize the vehicle but didn't feel particularly apprehensive; she was annoyed. *Not this again! When in the hell is that asshole going to stop sending me developers that want to turn my ranch into a resort for the rich and irritating? He does this just to piss me off!*

She stepped inside the screen door to grab her shotgun, just in case the unexpected guests were not the friendly type. *Better safe than sorry*, she mused to herself. Sitting in a rocking chair on the porch, her body positioned slightly behind one of the large porch pillars, she waited.

The SUV was smack dab in front of the steps to the huge wrap-around porch, where Sophie had been sitting enjoying a rare warm spring evening. A well-proportioned woman, dressed in a blue pencil skirt, white crisp blouse and a matching jacket, elegantly swung her legs out of the SUV. Her head was down, as if she were watching where her feet were going to land. When she stood, Sophie pegged her at

about 5'7" and wished she could see her face. Before turning toward the steps, the woman bent into the cabin of the SUV and talked to her companion, a hulk of a man from what Sophie could see.

After pulling out a briefcase, she turned toward Sophie. Sophie's eyes widened. The woman was stunning. Her hair was black with mahogany tones and hung straight down to mid back. It was cut flawlessly. Sophie thought, *the haircut alone tells me she sure isn't from around here!* Sophie had been in Montana for thirty-six years and had yet to find anyone who could cut her hair to her satisfaction; but then nothing rarely was to Sophie's satisfaction, unless she herself choreographed it. Sophie ruefully smiled.

The woman squarely faced Sophie and mistook Sophie's slight smile for friendliness, returning it with her own.

"Hi, I'm Jules Law. Are you Sophie Martini?"

Sophie nodded her head. She couldn't stop starring. Ms. Law's skin was a lovely shade of olive splashed with golden undertones, smooth and without blemishes. Her cheek bones were prominent, but balanced with a gently sloping nose, a warm and inviting mouth, that when she smiled, announced a slight dimple in her chin. She was a woman who appeared to be comfortable, self-possessed, and confident. But it was her eyes that drew Sophie in. They were dark, intelligent, piercing, though not menacing, and they seemed old, as if they had seen a lot, in comparison to the woman's chronological age. Sophie wasn't sure, but from Ms. Law's facial structure, she thought she might be part Middle Eastern.

Finally, Sophie nodded her head, her thin smile disappearing, and said, "I am. Are you lost?"

Jules did not move toward the steps, but answered a polite, "No we're not lost." She recognized what Sophie had in her arms and was pretty sure that the shotgun was not just

for show. She made a quarter turn and motioned to her companion in the SUV.

Sophie heard the driver-side door open and shifted her eyes from Jules to a man who stepped out. He was big and well-muscled, maybe 6'6" at 250 pounds. Well-groomed with closely cropped hair, he was dressed neatly and professionally.

Definitely not from these parts! The proverbial red flag was waving in Sophie's face. He looked military, police, covert. She wondered if he was carrying a weapon under his well-tailored jacket. She pondered her own paranoia. *You've been watching too many Law and Order reruns and reading too many murder mysteries over the winter.* Sophie refocused and observed him come around the car to stand next to Ms. Law.

He said, "Howdy ma'am. I'm Jake Lawrence. Jules and I drove down from Missoula to see if we could talk to you. May we come up?"

Despite Jake's friendly and homey approach, Sophie's cautiousness did not dissipate. She shifted the shotgun in her arms, ready for action. Before Sophie could answer, Jules quickly said, "We're not here to cause any trouble but would like to discuss a business proposition we think you may find interesting."

Not another real estate developer, Sophie groaned inwardly. In the last year, she had been hounded by developers who wanted to turn her property into a mega resort with multimillion-dollar estates. The ranch was over 800 acres bordering the Selway/Bitterroot Wilderness Area, the third largest wilderness area in the lower forty-eight. US Forest Service Lands surrounded the ranch on three sides and the ranch's high meadows provided excellent grazing from late spring to early fall. Located about 125 miles southwest of Missoula the ranch was accessible, yet remote enough for privacy making it a prime target for high-end development. Who wouldn't like to wake up most mornings

and from the mesa, where the main buildings were located, look out over the wooded valley bounded with a halo of snowcapped mountains? On a clear day, Trapper Peak could be seen from the west side of the porch.

Damn Keith Woods and his fascist bank, deliberated Sophie. He could never keep his trap shut about Sophie's financial problems and the very real possibility that she would soon have to sell off the majority of her property to avoid losing the family ranch to the bank. Woods would love that. He was in bed with a local relator and stood to make a sizeable finder's fee if Sophie decided to sell. The property was worth between \$10 and \$15 million. Sophie loathed Woods. He was the most unethical man she had ever met, so he occupied the position of 'major scum' on Sophie's slime list. If Sophie could find a way to neuter him without going to prison, she'd consider it.

Pack of wolves, she muttered to herself just before addressing Ms. Law. "Look, I don't know where you got your information, but I am not interested in selling the ranch to anyone, so get back into your vehicle and leave!" Thinking about Keith made Sophie angry, but she managed to modulate her voice and not come across as a raving lunatic.

Jake, with an *okay boss, what do we do next* look toward Jules, waited for her to take the lead. Jules quickly corrected Sophie's impression.

"Ah, Mrs. Martini, we don't want to buy your property. We're not real estate developers. We're from a security firm out of Los Angeles and need your help. We're prepared to make it worth your while."

Jules waited for her words to sink in. She was hoping that Sophie would be intrigued. When the ranch personnel were vetted, Sophie's profile told them that she was high-spirited, swift to jump on the bandwagon for a worthy cause, principled, hardworking, inquisitive, and the first to help out a friend in need. She also couldn't stand being kept in the

dark. Jules was betting on Sophie's curiosity. Remaining quiet, Jules knew that if she spoke first Sophie would probably tell them to get lost again, punctuating her displeasure with a round from her shotgun.

Sophie's eyes were flashing. She was trying to imagine what kind of business proposition these strangers could have for her that didn't involve selling her ranch. She took her time in answering. "Do you have any kind of identification?"

When Jake and Jules made a move for the interior pockets of their jackets, Sophie, said, "Slowly, nice and easy. I don't know what you've got in there besides your IDs. Hold them up in front of you."

Both Jake and Jules gingerly reached into their inside jacket pockets, pulled out their IDs and held them up in front of them at chest level. Sophie couldn't really see them in the fading light from the porch and Jules knew this, so she waited patiently for Sophie to make the next move.

Sophie said, "Ms. Law, walk over to the steps with both your IDs, please."

Jake handed over his ID to Jules and holding both in front of her, Jules walked slowly to the steps, never taking her eyes off the shotgun. While she didn't think that Sophie was a real threat, under duress people could panic and do foolish things. Jules had seen this many times when she was in the military. Sophie came out from behind the porch pillar, moving a little closer to the top step and motioned to Jules to come up. She reached out and Jules offered the two IDs, which Sophie promptly took.

The IDs looked legit, but now-a-days you could get anything printed up. In the top of the wallet folder of each ID, there was California PI license. The bottom part of the bifold held an identification card with their respective photos for a company called Intelligent Security Services, with both a Los Angeles and Washington, DC address and phone number. Sophie thought about calling the number, but she knew that any number they gave her could be bounced and

answered anywhere in the world. She was going to have to rely on her intuition, which right now was conflicted.

She couldn't quite wrap her head around the vibes she was getting. She was not particularly fearful of Jules and Jake per se, rather she was nervous of what they represented and what might follow. While they were friendly and professional, something seemed to walk in their shadows that gave her a shiver. Sophie shook off the disquieting feeling and turned her attention to Jules who immediately spoke.

"I see you still have some doubts and I probably would too if two strangers just showed up out of the blue way out here. What can we do to convince you that we mean you no harm and all we want to do is talk about a mutually beneficial business deal?" Jules mentally crossed her fingers. Her expertise was in managing operations, not people and she was nervous that she would make a mess of the proposal she had been entrusted to make.

If I were in my right mind, thought Sophie, I'd tell these strangers to leave and come back tomorrow when Rick and the ranch hands returned. They'd come back if they had legitimate business, right? But Sophie was not in her right mind. She was very intuitive though sometimes a bit reckless when boredom set in and right now, boredom and curiosity were in the driver's seat. It was dusk and Rick would be back soon, so Sophie felt she had a cushion of safety. She backed up and leaned against the support post to the left of the steps. Looking at them she said, "Both of you, take off your jackets and put them in the car."

Jake and Jules looked at each other and complied without argument.

"Now, leave your firearms in the car and maybe we'll talk," directed Sophie.

Neither Jake nor Jules were surprised that Sophie had guessed they were carrying weapons. It was a logical conclusion. Jake raised his pant leg slightly, carefully

unholstered the pistol, opened the car door again, and laid it on the seat.

Sophie was pleased with herself and said rather arrogantly, “Okay, Ms. Law now you, and don’t tell me you don’t have one.”

Jules’s mouth turned slightly upwards in a furtive smile. *Sophie may be a back-water rancher*, she thought, *but she’s no dummy*. Still mildly amused, she slowly pushed her skirt up her left thigh until the holster was visible and removed a small automatic pistol. If either Rick or Alex had been there, they would have appreciated the unintended seductiveness of Jules’s unholstering. Jules walked to the open car door and laid the pistol on the seat, next to Jake’s.

Sophie said, “Ms. Law, lock the doors, come up here, and bring the keys with you.”

At the top step, Jules held out her left hand with the keys, ready with her right if Sophie should get crazy with the shotgun. Sophie, outwardly composed, reached out swiftly taking the keys and told Jules to sit down in the rocker next to hers. The porch was about fifteen feet deep, so Sophie positioned her rocker where she could keep both Jules and Jake in sight.

Sophie looked Jules over again, appraising her trustworthiness. Jules was not uncomfortable with the penetrating gaze. Men and women ogled her all the time, and in her profession, she was often “sized up” by potential clients and potential enemies. She waited patiently until Sophie said, “Okay, you have ten minutes to get my attention. Start talking.”

Jules nodded and began. “Thank you. Mrs. Martini. As I mentioned, I work for a security company based in Los Angeles. Most of our clients are celebrities, high profile businesspeople, insurance companies and government agencies. We provide typical security services, including body-guarding, business security, PI services, intelligence gathering, hostage negotiation and rescue services.”

Sophie did not interrupt, so she continued.

“About eight months ago, a woman from Los Angeles was kidnapped and held for ransom. She is the young adult daughter of a very wealthy and successful international businessman who owns multiple munitions factories.”

Sophie interrupted. “You said, ‘She is the daughter.’ I take it she survived the kidnapping.”

“Yes, she did,” voiced Jules.

Sophie once again interrupted. “Was her father one of your clients?”

“Not prior to the kidnapping. As I was saying, her father, George Bentworth, owns munitions factories in multiple countries. There are always rumors with this kind of business, though nothing illegal has ever been charged. Anyway, Claire, his daughter, disappeared from the dressing room of a department store. She was shopping with her stepmother who had left her to go another area of the store, returned an hour later and couldn’t find Claire.

“Mr. Bentworth was out of his mind. He reported her as missing, but the local police failed to turn up a single clue that pointed to a kidnapping, so they treated it as a voluntary disappearance. Basically, they did nothing. He called the FBI, but they concurred with local authorities that there was nothing to be done until there was solid evidence that it was an abduction.

“Bentworth refused to accept law enforcement’s interpretation of the events. Apparently, he had a contact in Washington who knew one of the owners of our company and was referred to us. We stepped in and treated it as an abduction based on Mr. Bentworth’s feelings, but knew that if it had been a kidnapping, the chances for a good outcome were slim. Typically, in an abduction, if there is no ransom call within the first 24-48 hours the chances of an adult victim surviving are small. He hadn’t received a ransom call in the four days that she had been missing.

“The afternoon we were hired, a ransom call came in. The demand was for \$6 million. Bentworth was able to get the cash right away. He and his family were covered under a kidnap/ransom/extortion insurance policy with Lloyds of London. Lloyds already had an agent on site that was authorized to proffer the money.”

Jules paused, waiting for Sophie to catch up, then picked up the story again, sparing no details of the steps they took to rescue the girl.

Sophie asked, “How old was Claire?”

Jules answered, “Twenty-two, but she was very sheltered. Her father is an extremely controlling man with overdeveloped protective tendencies which he seemed to have taken to the extreme after his wife was killed in a car accident over four years ago. He mapped out her every move, even hired bodyguards to follow Claire around her junior year abroad in Italy. I suppose, in all fairness, he was doing what he thought was necessary to protect his only daughter.”

Jules paused to assess Sophie’s interest.

“Mrs. Martini, the ten minutes you gave me are up. Shall I continue?”

Sophie smiled slightly, knowing that Jules was maneuvering her, but nodded anyway.

“There’s a multitude of details that we can give you later if you are interested, however the gist of the rescue efforts entailed dropping the money at sea and picking Claire up at a different location. We had covert teams at the drop and pickup locations, but it proved fruitless. The only conclusion we could draw was that the kidnapers never had any intention of releasing Claire or that something had gone wrong at the holding site. Jake and I were still convinced that the holding site was near the water, even though the rescue or pickup location’s coordinates were miles from the ocean.”

At hearing Jake’s name, Sophie remembered that he was still standing by the car. She turned her attention to him and

asked, “Why did you think they had Claire stashed by the water?”

Jake moved to the steps, stopped and answered, “It was a hunch, but at the first light of day, we really got lucky! One of our people who was assigned to monitor the news media, saw that there had been an explosion and fire some hours prior at an abandoned warehouse by the water. Jules and I rushed over. The fire investigator was able to tell us that he believed the explosion was due to a gas line leak. He speculated that the line was purposely disconnected allowing gas to leak into a room on the second floor. He still wasn’t sure what sparked the fire and subsequent explosion, but he hypothesized it might have been a candle set on top of a cabinet about five feet higher than the gas leak because there were no traces of an accelerant. Also, there were no signs of human remains. So, we operated on the assumption that Claire had gotten out and refocused our search, ultimately finding her.”

No one spoke for a moment, then Sophie with pursed lips said, “I’m glad she is alive and I’m really sorry that this young woman had to go through such a terrible ordeal but I fail to see how this is has anything to do with me.”

Jules took a deep breath and looked at Sophie. Sophie continued to rock back and forth for a few moments, deliberating on whether she wanted to hear more.

Finally, she motioned for Jake to join them on the porch. “Sit down,” said Sophie laying the shotgun against the wall in the alcove. Sophie asked again, “So what does this story have to do with me, Ms. Law?”

Jules shifted in her seat, pulling her skirt over her thighs. She desperately wanted to come across warmly and with concern. “It’s getting late and we have a long drive back to the motel, so I am going to give a synopsis of what happened after Claire was found. We can fill in details tomorrow if you like.”

There was no objection from Sophie, so Jules told her that Claire was physically and emotionally injured to the extent that she had to have surgery to repair the injuries to her shoulder and leg. She also was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Her concentration was impaired. She became hyper-vigilant, exhibited an exaggerated startle response and demonstrated emotional numbness.

Sophie didn't have a good feeling about what would follow, but she tried to remain relaxed. All she said was, "And?"

Jules put her elbows on chair arm rests, rubbed her temples, then looked up to Sophie and in a matter of fact, straightforward manner said, "We want Claire to continue her recuperation here at your ranch."

Sophie jerked back in her chair. Her mind was spinning, reeling. Anger slowly replaced the blood that had drained from her face, leaving her wan and worn out. She wasn't as introspective as some people, but she knew enough about herself to realize that when her mind was careening out of control, she shouldn't speak until she managed to calm down. Tonight, she was successful in holding her tongue. Jake could feel the tension. It seemed like an eon to Jake before Sophie broke the silence.

"You never found the kidnappers, right? So that means you want to hide her here while you hunt them down."

Jules ignored Sophie's question and answered obliquely. "Her shrink thinks that Claire would benefit from getting out of the surroundings where the trauma took place. We think that this is a perfect place for Claire to continue her recuperation."

"Why here?" asked Sophie, not liking the idea at all, but keeping a rein on her inclination to blurt out *Hell, no!*

Jake chimed in. "Mrs. Martini, we checked out many places against several criteria and your ranch is the best place. There are a lot of tabloids looking for a story, so we want her somewhere that is remote, difficult to reach, and

not on the top ten vacation destinations list. It's located smack in the middle of the Bitterroots, one of the roughest mountain areas in the US. The way the main buildings are laid out on top of this mesa, backing to the mountains and overlooking the valley, provides a natural sentinel location. Finally, the river is deep and provides somewhat of a natural barrier to casual interlopers, like, uh, reporters."

Jake shot Jules a look that was not missed by Sophie. Jules deftly piggy-backed on Jake's pitch.

"There is another factor, Mrs. Martini, perhaps the most important factor. Everything we have heard about you, tells us that you and your operation might be a good match. We did in-depth research on the top three locations that met all the security and privacy criteria, but your ranch was the only place with a potential environment that we think might be helpful to Claire's emotional state."

Sophie's anger had downgraded to agitation, but it spiked again. "What do you mean you did in-depth research? I don't like the idea of people digging around in my personal business."

Jules's stomach tightened, then lurched, but she remained outwardly unperturbed and explained that she understood Sophie's concern. She explained that it was necessary for Claire's safety. She reassured Sophie that everything they found was strictly confidential. Looking at Sophie's body language, Jules knew they were in for an eruption that would rival Mt. Vesuvius.

Sophie was fuming and cut Jules off before she could continue. "You are very adept, Ms. Law, at minimizing the fact that you investigated the ranch's personnel and invaded our privacy. Right now, I have half a mind to boot your PI fannies right out of here!"

Jules reached over and put her hand on Sophie's arm. Sophie shrugged her hand off and got up, pacing the long porch. Without warning, she spun around on her heels leveling a venomous look at the two of them. Jake was sure

she was going to throw them out. Sophie continued pacing the porch, shaking her head and muttering something in Italian. Jules and Jake barely breathed. Just as quickly as she had gotten up, she stopped pacing, came back, and dropped down into her rocking chair before leaning forward snapping, "You said you had a business proposition. Let's hear it."

Jules and Jake were flabbergasted. They didn't know what to make of Sophie's sudden and unpredictable change in her attitude and demeanor. All Jules could surmise about Sophie's change of heart was that although she was furious about the investigation, she had put two and two together and figured that they knew her financial situation and thus expected a pitch involving money. Either way, Jules was not going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"It's simple, Mrs. Martini. Claire comes out here for a few months and we make financial arrangements beyond what you would receive from a normal guest stay. We can go over all the details tomorrow."

"Now," hissed Sophie.

"The short of it is, if you decide to let Claire stay here, we are prepared to take care of back mortgage payments, pay the mortgage payments the months she is here and when she leaves, make a lump sum payment equal to the remainder of the mortgage."

Jules thought Sophie might slap her across the face for laying out the deal in such a direct and brutal manner.

Sophie, emotions bouncing between fury and incredulity, spit out, "I'm assuming that you know how much that amounts to, being that you did your investigation!"

Neither Jules nor Jake rose to the blatant bait, which was dripping with sarcasm and hostility.

Sophie continued, "What's the catch? Where's the hidden clause? Where do I find the small print?"

She picked up the shotgun, crossed her arms in front of her chest, and glared at the two of them. She looked like she was careening out of control, but Jules wasn't going to soft peddle the arrangement to Sophie and was fully prepared to detail the conditions and expectations, though she was exhausted. She had often spent days at a time without sleep under enemy gun fire but hadn't experienced this type of emotional weariness for a long time.

Sophie was tough, but if Jules was right, she would be a fierce ally, if they could convince her to take the deal. And that was a big if.

"Sophie, we'd have a contract with everything spelled out, no hidden agendas, no small print. Claire stays here for up to six months. Bentworth provides the financial resources and, of course, we provide the security. We'd have our people on site, perhaps as guests for the summer, and Claire would have a psychologist so that her treatment could continue while she is here."

Jules waited for the barrage of objections she surely thought would follow her summary, but Sophie was oddly quiet, even introspective. She seemed to be studying the pattern of the porch floor.

Jake looked at his watch, then at Jules. He stood up, muttering, "Excuse me, Mrs. Martini," and walked toward the far end of the porch. He thought that maybe Sophie would talk more openly with just Jules there.

Jules finally stood up and awkwardly put her hand on Sophie's shoulder. Sophie looked up startled. Jules looked into her pale green eyes and soothingly said, "We went over a lot tonight. Why don't you think about our offer and tomorrow we can go into more detail on the logistics plus answer any questions you may have."

Sophie made no response at all. Jules, unsettled and with a gnawing sensation of anxiety pervading her body, decided to take the lack of response from Sophie for tonight

“Good night Mrs. Martini. Jake and I will be by tomorrow afternoon. Thank you for your time. We’ll leave now.”

Quite out of character, Jules bent over and gave Sophie a timid side by side hug. Sophie continued to sit on the porch, numb from the night’s events. She heard the SUV doors close followed by the starting of the engine.

Jules and Jake headed down the road on their two-hour drive back to Missoula. Jake told Jules that he thought things had gone relatively well. Jules nodded but rolled her eyes, a gesture not lost on Jake. They turned off the road from the ranch and headed north on Route 93. Jake had been working with Jules long enough to know that she was preoccupied, and it might not go well if he interrupted her. He decided to do it anyway.

“When are you going to tell Sophie about Alex?” Jules groaned and sunk down in the seat, quiet the rest of the way back to Missoula. Jake knew better than to risk asking again.

^^^

The phone rang only two times before it was answered. “Hadn’t heard from you in a week or so. I’ve been waiting for your call. I take it you think it’s time to give it another go.”

The voice on the other end of the call answered, “Yes, and I have an idea how to get it done without complications, but we’ll have to move soon. Bentworth has those ISS people hanging around at the estate and I know they’re looking for a safe house to stash her.”

“When can you get away?”

“Thursday noon, usual place at 1:00 p.m.” replied the voice on the phone.

“Fine. I’m running out of cash. Any chance you can advance a few thousand?”

“I’ll see what I can do. I’ll have to juggle some things. Bye.”

CHAPTER 2—Phoenix Rising

“A mythical bird that never dies, the phoenix flies far ahead to the front, always scanning the landscape and distant space.” Feng Shui Master Lam Kam Chuen

Wednesday April 08

When Sophie was sure that they had left, she grabbed the shotgun, walked into the great room, and locked the door. She went back to the kitchen table and sat down with her head in her hands, trying to settle her emotions and look at it from all angles. Sophie was a dichotomy: Wild, passionate, short fused, yet intensely logical. She was often in conflict with her own personality and emotions.

She was still brooding when she heard Rick’s truck pull up to the back. Looking at the kitchen clock, she realized she had been sitting for over an hour. It was past midnight. She waited for him to walk through the back door into the kitchen. Moments later he dropped his duffle bag in the doorway, said, “Hi,” and with one look at Sophie, immediately knew that something was wrong. Sophie looked worried and out of sorts. He strode over with his usual purposeful gait and when he reached her, she stood up throwing her arms around him. Though Sophie was affectionate, this was not usual behavior.

It must be bad, thought Rick. He pulled away gently, holding her upper arms and said, “Are you okay? Is Alex okay?” Sophie nodded “yes” and told Rick to sit down. He joined her at the table, and she recounted the events of the night. Rick listened intently, seldom interrupting, knowing that Sophie had to get her tale out. When she had finished the story, she realized that Rick had her hands in his and was gently rubbing hers with a soft soothing touch. Without knowing it, Sophie had calmed down and much of the agitation she was feeling had subsided. Rick saw the signs

that Sophie was exhausted and hoped that she would agree to go to bed.

“Let me walk you up to your room so you can get some rest. Then I’m going to go down to the office and do some research on this ISS, the kidnapping, and Bentworth. Tomorrow morning I’ll call a couple of friends I have in D.C., then brief you so we can figure out the next steps, okay?”

Sophie nodded and headed toward the back steps to the family quarters. Rick was glad that Sophie had not given him an argument. She could be headstrong. He followed closely behind and went into Sophie’s suite after her. Sophie had a sitting room, which she used mostly for sewing, a bedroom, and a bathroom. They were standing in the sitting room when Rick asked her if she wanted him to sit with her until she fell asleep. Sophie told him she would be okay so he touched her arm briefly, gave her a peck on the cheek, and left with a “see you in the morning,” over his shoulder as he made his way back down the stairs to the office.

The office was located to the right of the main entry, across from the great room, just to the right of a small check-in area with two comfortable leather chairs facing a registration counter. Next to the office, were Rick’s quarters, a small bedroom and bathroom.

Rick’s official title was ‘Business Manager’, however, he wore many hats, including Sophie’s closet friend, confidant, and lover. He booted up the office computer and while he was waiting for Windows to come up, he went into the small bathroom and splashed water on his face. Opening a small refrigerator in the office, he pulled out a cola. He would need the caffeine to get through this night. Settling himself in front of the computer, he opened the Internet browser. As soon as Google came up, he typed in Intelligent Security Services. There were over 101,139 references to the company. He started reading and after an hour, was convinced that ISS was a legitimate operation.

Beginning a new search, he typed in Jake's name. A few references came up citing Jake's military career as well as his affiliation to ISS. He had served as a Navy Seal for most of his career, receiving various service medals, including the Navy Cross, an award for valor in action against an enemy. He retired with a Commander rank. Rick was also able to find an article from a local newspaper in upstate New York, where Jake grew up. The article detailed Jake's rescue of a young boy from drowning in a semi-frozen pond when he was a senior in high school. Jake had gotten a scholarship to Syracuse University as a starting running back and volunteered his time at the local nursing home. An all-American boy!

Jules was another story. Not much came up on her except for her affiliation with ISS and a few news articles about her involvement with ISS operations, including the Bentworth kidnapping. He found very little on her prior to her association with ISS. Rick thought that the absence of information was just as telling as an abundance of information. He guessed that she might have been with one of the government intelligence or covert organizations. Jules Law might not be her real name.

There was lots of information on the Bentworth kidnapping. He read every article and newspaper report that he could find before his eyes started to swim. Getting up from the computer, he retrieved his address book, which he kept locked, along with his firearms in a built-in wall safe hidden in the closet. Thumbing through the book, he found the two names he wanted. It was now about 3:00 a.m. Montana time, 6:00 a.m. on the east coast. He dialed the first number and waited for an answer. The automated response instructed him to leave a message. He did and about ten minutes later one of his cell phones rang.

"Daniel, how the heck are you? You up all ready?" said Rick jovially

“Rick, you son of a bitch, where the hell are you? You fell off the grid a few years ago and no one has heard from you.”

“I’m still out here on the ranch in Montana. Don’t miss all the saluting and groveling.”

“Isn’t it like 3:00 a.m. out there? What in the dickens are you doing up? Even roosters don’t get up until the sun comes up! How’s your girlfriend? Isn’t she from Montana?”

Rick ignored Daniel’s question and got right to the point. “Daniel, I need your help.”

Daniel heard the seriousness in Rick’s voice. He responded, “What do you need buddy? You know I’d do anything for you, as long as it doesn’t get my butt in a sling.”

Rick briefly outlined what he needed, information on ISS and their relationship to covert agencies. He also asked for financial or contractual data if Daniel could get his hands on it.

Daniel listened then asked Rick, “Are you somehow tied up with this organization?”

Rick, stretching the truth a little, told Daniel, “They want me to do a job for them.”

Rick couldn’t see Daniel, but he correctly surmised that Daniel was nodding his head up and down, understanding Rick’s caution before accepting a job with any organization that might have covert ties with the CIA or any other government agency.

“How fast do you need this?” asked Daniel.

“Unfortunately, I need information in a few hours.”

Daniel hesitated a moment and quipped, “For you, I’ll put a rush on it. Don’t know how much I’ll get, but I’ll call you back in a few hours. Let’s be careful, just in case.”

“Thanks Daniel, I’m on a prepaid cellular. Don’t think it can be traced back to me. Did your ANI capture the number?”

“Nope, bye, Rick,” and the phone went dead.

Rick did not make the second call yet. He decided to wait to hear from Daniel. Daniel was well connected with the various covert organizations in Washington, but sometimes, they didn't want to share information, so Rick wasn't holding out too much hope. He laid down on the bed, set his wristwatch to go off at 5:45 a.m. and let his mind wander to thoughts of Sophie.

Alex had convinced him to come to Montana the Christmas of 2015. Both were stationed at Camp Dwyer in Afghanistan. He was reluctant to go, not because of the subzero temperatures of Montana winters, rather he got overemotional around the holidays and didn't want to subject anyone to his melancholy. Mary, his wife, died in April of 2013, only a month after he had arrived at his new post as Brigade Commander. It was especially hard for him around Thanksgiving and Christmas. However, Alex kept hounding him and, in the end, made him feel guilty.

He had received orders from the Marine Corps Intelligence Division (MCIA) to send troops to the south of the camp in the Hemland River Valley, a hot spot for Taliban Insurgents, drug, and child trafficking. Air support was also dispatched to support the regimental combat troops to quell the latest uprising

Rick had sent Alex, who was the camp psychologist, to help out with any children that were recovered as part of the comprehensive mission. While there, Alex got caught in a crossfire during a skirmish and suffered serious injuries. Although Rick knew it wasn't his fault that Alex got hit, he irrationally felt culpable.

So, when Alex told him that his help was needed to make the trip, he couldn't refuse. Both had thirty days of leave, so Rick packed his gear and hitched several military transport rides to US Naval Hospital in Yokosuka, Japan, where Alex was recuperating after emergency treatment at the 31st Combat Support Hospital adjacent to Camp Dwyer. He expected much worse than what he saw. Alex only had a

slight limp. Rick just shook his head and smiled, knowing that he had been conned. He didn't mind.

Newly minted Captain Alex Martini became his friend, his confidant, and his rock during the months after Mary's death. Alex was not invasive, never pushed Rick to talk about his emotions, but somehow had a sense of what Rick needed. Often, he had difficulty sleeping when the emotional pain was too much to bear and prowled the camp during the early morning hours. Alex started appearing at his door, standing there until Rick noticed, then sat down on the bench outside of his quarters. Rick would come out and the two of them would sit there for hours, watching daybreak, sometimes not exchanging a word. He was convinced he owed his sanity to Alex. The least he could do was help on the trip to visit Sophie, Alex's aunt in Montana.

They bussed their way to Tokyo, flew commercial to Seattle, then hopped a flight on Alaskan Air to Missoula, where Dean, Sophie's foreman was waiting for them. Alex was right, the trip was grueling. It had taken them over 24 hours to get to Big Sky Country, which was under a siege of snow, wind, and bitter cold. Rick, who had been raised in Virginia and lived there most of his life, didn't know how the airplane landed on the frozen runway without skidding out of control, let alone how anyone drove on the snow-covered ice.

Rick was exhausted and stiff as he helped Alex into a huge dualie outfitted with chains. He could only imagine how Alex was feeling, but Alex was Alex and you never heard any complaining, no matter how bad it got. Dean had hot coffee in a thermos for them, offered sandwiches Sophie had made, and told them to catch some shut eye if they could, because sure as shooting, Sophie wasn't going to let them go to bed without thoroughly interrogating them.

They finished the sandwiches and coffee and despite the caffeine, promptly fell asleep. Alex was stretched out on the back seat of the quad cab and Rick had reclined his seat, his

head almost touching Alex's feet. Dean didn't mind. He'd be better off without any backseat drivers in this storm.

When the truck pulled in front of the house, both Alex and Rick woke up. Rick hadn't shaved in more than 24 hours and his extra-heavy five o'clock shadow had evolved into a scraggy stubble. Great impression he was going to make. He rubbed his hand across his jaw and shrugged his shoulders.

Alex laughed, and said, "It'll be okay. Aunt Sophie knows we've been traveling for more than a day."

Rick quipped back good naturedly, "Oh sure . . . just because you don't have a five o'clock shadow!"

Alex punched his arm and Rick jumped down from the truck to avoid further jabs. He had expected to see Alex's Aunt Sophie in the doorway, but she had not come out.

Damn cold at ten below zero. Can't blame her, he thought as he stiffly walked toward the porch. He stopped in mid step, remembering that Alex might need help getting out of the truck. He went back to offer his arm, hoping that Alex wouldn't act all macho and refuse his assistance.

Dean was long gone, having deposited the bags inside the house and was headed down to the bunk house before Alex and Rick went inside. Alex opened the door, motioned Rick to follow, and both walked into a small foyer with coat hooks on the right side. They shrugged off their coats, put them up on the hooks, took off their fatigue boots, and went through the second door that opened to a huge great room. It smelled wonderful, a cross between evergreens and spices. In the corner stood a fifteen-foot Christmas tree decorated beautifully with a host of lights and ornaments. On the mantel of the oversized fireplace there were boughs of pine and holly.

Then Rick saw a nice-looking woman he guessed to be in her mid-forties, though he would learn later that she was 10 years his senior. Her red hair, swept up in a bun of some sort, complimented her green eyes which were framed with arching eyebrows and a few crinkly crows' feet. Her nose

was straight and sat squarely in the middle of her rosy cheeks, but oh her mouth. He could barely breathe. Heart shaped, perfectly symmetrical, with plump lips, slightly parted in anticipation, did him in. He was surprised by the unexpected stirrings he felt.

Without a word she took Alex into her arms, holding on tightly, as if she were never going to let go. Alex didn't shrink from the embrace, rather relaxed into it and let Sophie take all the time she wanted. Finally, Sophie kissed Alex on the mouth and both cheeks before letting go. Before Alex could introduce Rick, Sophie turned, and grabbed him in a fierce bear hug, her head against his chest, resting just below his nose. He swooned from the smell of her hair against his nostrils...sandalwood, musk, and orange, he thought as he breathed in deeply to enjoy the exotic fragrances. Unconscious of his movements, he lifted his arms to loosely hold her around her back. She held him for several moments, then released him and passionately said, "Thank you for bringing Alex home alive!"

Rick was thunderstruck, confused. Tears were running down his face, and he couldn't seem to move his feet. Head spinning and knees rubbery, he was at a total loss of what had happened, what to do, what to say, and how to handle the tears. Surges of emotion scuttled through his chest. He was no longer thinking; he was just trying to keep breathing.

Sophie looked up at him, quickly took his hand in hers, and led him right past Alex. They walked through the reception area to a little office and into a bedroom. He let her lead him because he didn't know what else to do. She turned to Rick and said, "Dean already brought in your bag. Why don't you wash up, maybe get a quick shower and shave, then come into the kitchen for a midnight snack? Sometimes the altitude, if you're not used to it, can make you a little dizzy and weak in the knees."

Lying on his bed in same room right now, he pondered what Alex might have told Sophie before his arrival and

thought that someday he'd ask. His visceral reaction to Sophie had left him shaken, feeling embarrassed and relieved at the same time. He also was grateful that Sophie had given him an out and time to compose himself. She may not have known what caused his emotional display, but he was sure she knew it had nothing to do with the altitude. He remembered digging into his duffle bag, finding his shaving kit, and doing just what Sophie had told him to do, shower and shave. After putting on clean clothes, he made his way into the kitchen. Alex was sitting at a table, dressed in a long-sleeved Henley and some sort of pajama bottoms.

"Aw, I thought you might be wearing your Big Dog pajamas!" Alex joked.

Rick blushed, bowled over by Alex's brash teasing in front of Sophie. He didn't want Sophie to get the wrong idea about Alex and him.

Sophie came toward him, put one hand on his shoulder and said "You never mind. Alex is always misbehaving. "She handed him a glass of scotch, picked hers up from the table, said, "Cheers," and downed the entire contents in one gulp. He looked at her, she smiled and nodded slightly, and he followed suit. He was appreciative that she had not asked if he was feeling better. She poured another glass for both, sat down at the table next to him and began asking about their trip.

^^^

Rick woke groggily to the alarm on his wristwatch. He got up, used the bathroom, and was drying his hands when one of his cell phones rang.

"Rick, I've got your information. Ready to take notes?" Daniel was talking in a low voice, not quite whispering, but low enough that Rick had to strain to hear. Daniel was hurried but organized. After he finished, Rick thanked him and promised to keep in touch. The information Daniel gave him wasn't much more insightful than what he learned from

public sources, except for two things; the political connections and Jules Law.

ISS was a well-established business with three owners. Greg Paulson, a retired Navy Admiral, who was the front man. He was very skilled in getting government contracts. The second principle was retired Senator Baluchi. He handled the money, which was a logical extension of his service on the Appropriation Committee in the U.S. Senate. *No conflict of interest, right?* He had put up most of the capital to launch ISS, though Paulson and Law had put in a chunk. Rick was not surprised to learn that Jules Law was also an owner. All three had appeared as owners on ISS's website.

What he didn't know was that she was in charge of Operations and unlike Paulson and Baluchi, who were located in Washington, she was based in Los Angeles. His instinct about her background had been right. Her dossier included a stint with Marine Intelligence, special assignment to the National Security Council, and unspecified covert assignments. Her upbringing was also interesting. She was born and raised in Glendale, Maryland, a stone's throw from where Rick grew up. Her mother was Iranian, born in the states, and her father was an Anglo with a well-positioned civil service job with the IRS. Jules was fluent in Farsi, probably learning it from her mother or maternal grandparents. Rick knew that Farsi was the most widely spoken Persian language in Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. She was also fluent in Kurdish, spoken in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. No wonder she was valuable in the intelligence community!

Seemed pretty logical that Jake's connection was to Admiral Paulson, both doing stints in the Navy, but he wondered how Jules fit in with the good old boys. Daniel was quick to answer that there were rumors that she and Senator Baluchi had been 'close' friends, all innuendo and nobody particularly cared, because neither of them were

married. Daniel also confirmed that the ISS group had ties to the NSA, Army intelligence, and occasionally did intel work for the CIA, known in the intelligence community as the Company. Rick asked him if there was any indication that ISS had been contracted by the CIA to provide cleaning operations. Daniel said there was no indication, however, it could be hidden deeper than he was able to go without arousing suspicion. He doubted that Paulson and Baluchi would play in that sand box, but everyone had their price.

The last piece of information that Daniel provided was about Bentworth. He had a strong relationship with the Senate Armed Services Committee, making sure that they were wined and dined, all within legal parameters. It was possible that Bentworth knew Baluchi, and word on the street was that a current member of the Armed Services Committee referred Bentworth to ISS. Again, nothing that seemed unusual on the surface.

Daniel abruptly said, “Gotta go,” and the phone call was disconnected.

Rick was about to make the second call, when his phone rang again. Daniel was back on the line.

“Listen, Rick, sorry about that, but I gotta make this quick. Just got word that Bentworth is tied into more than the Armed Services Committee. He’s the Company’s errand boy. That’s all I can say right now. I’ll get back to you when I can.”

He disconnected once again.

Rick understood exactly what Daniel was saying. There were conflicts going on all over the world and while the U.S. picked and chose its public battles, often covert monetary resources were funneled through the Company and more often than not, munitions were supplied to assist in protecting U.S. interests, economic or geographic in conflicted areas. The best-known example of covert operations was what happened in Chile. As a result of the declassification of CIA documents from the 1970 – 1976,

there was no doubt that the CIA had significant involvement in the military coup of 1973.

U.S. companies were heavily invested in Chilean copper, making it Chile's largest export. By 1930, U.S. investments were staggering. Between 1938 and 1963 there were various political parties in control of the Chilean government, none of them presenting a threat to multinational and U.S. economic interests.

Then in the presidential elections of 1964, there was clear danger to U.S. interests posed by the socialist candidate, who's plan included the nationalization of foreign owned industry. To prevent a victory of the socialist candidate, Salvador Allende, the U.S. poured \$20 million through the CIA into the campaign to get Allende's opponent elected in hopes of staving off financial disaster for U.S. companies.

Six years later economic conditions in Chile worsened and the 1970 election for president was a three-way contest. The CIA and interested multinationals put less money into the campaign than they had in 1964 thinking that Allende would lose, and the U.S. interests would be protected. However, Allende won and began the Chilean Path to Socialism, including ending the power and control of multinational corporations and large landowners.

By the end of 1971, 150 industrial plants were usurped and transitioned to state control and in July of 1971, U.S.-owned Anaconda and Kennecott Copper mines were nationalized. Henry Kissinger, in a now famous, but arrogant quote, fired off the current sentiment of the U.S. government concerning the actions of the Chilean government.

"I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people."

A covert plan was put into place to replace the democratically elected Marxist president, Allende, with a military government sympathetic to U.S. interest, solely

with the purpose to halt any further expropriation. First, the U.S. cut off all loans and blocked the World Bank and other sources of money to Chile. This economic war failed. Then, the CIA waged covert smear campaigns through conservative newspapers and radios, playing on the fears of communism. This too failed, leaving only one option.

On September 11, 1973, four branches of the Chilean Armed Forces, led by Pinochet, violently overthrew Allende, beginning seventeen years of violent military rule and flagrant civil rights violations, but the coup secured economic stability for U.S. interests.

Rick conjectured that Bentworth might be, at the behest of the CIA, a supplier of munitions to allied factions protecting U.S. interests. This put a whole new spin on the kidnapping!

^^^

It was 6:30 a.m. and he heard Sophie in the kitchen. He would wait to make his second call until he talked with her. Rick quickly washed up, pulled on a clean shirt, and headed to the kitchen.

As he came up behind her and put his arms around her, he asked, “Were you able to sleep at all?”

Sophie kept working at the sink while responding, “Surprisingly, I did. What about you?”

“About two hours, while I was waiting for east coast bureaucrats to wake up.” He had gotten himself a cup and was pouring coffee.

“Are you ready for a cup yet, Soph?”

“In a minute. Thanks. What do you want for breakfast?”

Rick loved breakfast. He could eat it three times a day, so he didn’t pass up Sophie’s offer. “You bet I’m ready! How about a couple of eggs over easy, a side of bacon, he said with a straight face, and whole wheat toast with some of those strawberry preserves you made last summer?”

Sophie turned and faced him with a forced smile. I’ll

make the eggs, but you will be lucky to get 4 slices of bacon. You'll have to make the toast and while you're at it, put in a couple of slices for me." Though she had slept, she was still preoccupied.

Rick got up, readied plates, napkins, butter, the preserves and dropped 4 slices of bread into the toaster. Sophie was already frying the eggs and bacon. Rick sipped his coffee while he waited for the toast, appreciating the fact that Sophie wasn't rushing him to share what he had learned. If Sophie had a fault, it was her tendency to be impatient, but in all fairness, occasionally she knew when to hold back, if and only if, it suited her purpose. Once they were both seated at the table with their food, he began telling Sophie what he had learned. He was careful not to identify his source.

"Bentworth's connection to the CIA may put a whole new face on the kidnapping. Here are the options as I see them. One, the kidnapping was random. In other words, some thugs targeted a rich guy. Two, the kidnapping was personal. Someone Bentworth crossed, either personally or in his business dealings, was trying to get back at him. And three, Bentworth ticked off the Company and they intended to teach him a lesson."

Sophie fully knew what the Company meant. She interjected, "Door number three sounds ominous. Do you think that ISS's involvement is part of the subterfuge?"

Sophie never failed to surprise Rick. She had a quick mind and could put things together rapidly to see the big picture.

"Good question. I don't think that ISS is working on behalf of the Company, but either way, if door number three is the right door, keeping the Bentworth woman here would be dangerous and risky to us and our summer guests."

"So, are you saying that we should turn down the proposal?"

Rick scratched his head, rubbed his jaw, and leveled a serious look at Sophie. He was so decisive about most things, that his wavering threw Sophie.

“Sophie, you and I know what the cash infusion could do for the place, but are you willing to take the risk of opening the barn doors and letting all the horses run out to get the cash?”

Sophie appreciated the metaphor, nodding her head in understanding. “Rick, do you think it would hurt to try and call ISS’s hand?”

“What did you have in mind, Sophie?”

“Well, Jules and Jake are coming back after lunch. What if we play blackjack, show our hand, let them know what you’ve found out and force them to show what they know. I would bet that they know more than they told me.”

Rick considered this as he got up to pour another cup of coffee for himself and Sophie. “I think that might be a good tactic, but I would like to make one more call to a friend in DC before we decide. I can see the wheels turning, Sophie. What else?”

“What if ISS is on the level and they don’t have any involvement with whomever abducted the woman? Even if this is true, do you think that Bentworth is going to shell out the kind of money they’re talking about just to stash Claire here for a few months? There’s got to be something else.”

Score another for Sophie. It was exactly what Rick had been turning over in his head. “Let’s say that ISS is on the level and they are not embroiled with the Company in this situation. Maybe the real mission is not just to provide security services and treatment for Claire. Suppose it is to track down the people who planned and executed the kidnapping and deal with them outside the legal system. Bentworth may be the type of fellow that wants his own brand of justice. It would be easier for ISS to get the job done if Claire were tucked away in a safe location, don’t you think?”

Sophie nodded and finished her coffee. When she got up to clear away the breakfast dishes, Rick said, "I think I had better make that call now. Talk to you in a few."

Once Rick was back in the office, he dialed Senator Thane's office. The phone was answered by one of his aides who questioned him on the nature of the call. Rick tried to be polite and sidestep the question, however the aide told him that she would not put the call through without a name and reason for the call. He told her to tell Senator Thane that Colonel Rick Hidalgo was on the line and it was a matter of personal business which he would only discuss with the Senator. His hackles up now, he also told the aide that if Senator Thane found out he had called and he wasn't put through, he was sure that she would be joining the ranks of the unemployed. She asked him to wait a moment. Two minutes later, Senator Thane came on the line.

"My god, the Phoenix rises! Is that really you, Rick?"

"Guilty as charged, Senator. Thanks for talking to me."

"I had no choice. You scared the hell out of my aide! What can I do for you?"

"Senator, you know I wouldn't be calling unless it was important, and I had struck out everywhere else."

"Rick, I owe you a lot for saving my son's ass. Tell me what you need, and I'll see what I can do."

"Senator, you don't owe me anything. Tyler was young and stupid. I just used a little influence to get him straightened out. How is he?"

"Tyler is doing fine. Just about ready to graduate from Wharton Business School and start a job with some wall street investment firm."

"That's great. I'm glad to hear that, Senator. I'm always at your service, anytime."

"I'll be sure to remember that, Rick."

The Senator was subtly reminding Rick, that there would be a price to be paid in the future for his help now. After Rick had pulled Tyler's ass out of the proverbial fire

while he was a snot-nosed kid in the Marines, a discrete three months later, Rick got a promotion from Captain to Lt. Colonel. Rick knew how it worked and accepted the quid pro quo.

“Any time, Senator, any time.”

“Okay, what do you need?”

“Senator, any reason to have your office phones bugged or recorded by anyone?”

“Naw. Even so, I have them swept regularly. You probably know that I sit on the Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee now. We’re extra vigilant lately.”

“Senator, I’m, talking about the home team.”

“Yeah, I figured. We’re okay”

Rick briefly described the situation, the players, and what he already knew. He asked the Senator if he could, without rocking the boat, find out if Baluchi or Paulson were in the Company’s pocket. Senator Thane didn’t answer right away. When he did all he said was,

“Wow. You sure are playing in the big pond. Is this a life or death situation for you?”

Rick was honest.

“It isn’t right now but could be depending on the decisions my family and I have to make.”

“All right, Rick, but I’ll have to be careful. If they are, I don’t want to tip off any of the Company boys, or for that matter, Baluchi and Paulson.”

“Thank you, Senator. You have my number and please, don’t do anything that will cause you grief.”

Returning to the kitchen, Rick reported what he had done. Sophie was not surprised that Rick had friends in high places. He was a man of integrity and very resourceful.

CHAPTER 3 – Into the Fire

*“Double, double, toil and trouble; fire burning and cauldron bubble.”
..... William Shakespeare*

Wednesday April 8

Just as Sophie was laying out soup and sandwiches on the table for lunch, Rick came in and washed up in the kitchen sink instead of using the lavatory sink. She hated that, but it was practically his only vice, so she stopped complaining long ago. They were both tired, Sophie from anxiety and Rick from not sleeping the night before.

“Sophie, you know I love you, don’t you?”

“Rick, what brought that on?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Guess I’m just in tune with my manly emotions today.”

Sophie laughed. “Rick, you’re always in touch with your emotions. You just don’t express them too often, unless of course we’re in...”

Rick cut her off before she could finish her sentence, hoping to keep her from embarrassing him. “All right, all right Sophie. You made your point. No need to get graphic. But you do know that Alex and you are my family and I would do anything for you, right?”

“Of course, dear. Both Alex and I know this.”

“Sophie, I think we need to talk to Alex about this whole situation.”

“This is why we get along so well, my darling. We’re almost always on the same page. I was thinking of calling but didn’t want to add any more stress. Remember? Paper signing today. I’m sure that it is going to stir up some unpleasant feelings.”

“Right, right,” mumbled Rick. How Sophie kept all those details in her head, he could never figure out. He was the one with the almost photographic memory, yet Sophie

retained miniscule facts his mind refused to deem worthy of remembrance.

Alex was discharged from the Army in September of 2016 shortly after Rick had retired and moved out to the ranch with Sophie.

Alex started out in the Navy ROTC program while at the University of Montana in Missoula, then delayed entering the Marines for two years in order to get a Ph.D. in Forensic Psychology at the University of Denver. After an honorable discharge, Alex came back to the ranch for a short time, then moved to Seattle to take a job as a forensic psychologist for the court system.

Shortly after moving there, Alex met and fell in love with Reggie, short for Regina, a lawyer with some hot shot firm. They had been together over three years, but the last year of the relationship had been stormy, to say the least. Reggie was increasingly absent and finally told Alex that it was over just before Christmas last year. After several months of negotiation through Alex's attorney, Alex was buying out Reggie's interest in the home they had bought together. Rick knew that Sophie was secretly hoping that Alex would agree to put the house on the market, split the proceeds with Reggie, and come home. He wondered, *Is today more traumatic for Alex or Sophie?* He had to admit that it probably would be hard for Alex to be in the same room with Reggie, who had moved on and was already involved with someone else. To top it off, Alex would have to empty the legendary piggy bank to buy Reggie out and Rick knew how uncomfortable Alex would be without a nest egg stashed away.

"Earth to Rick, earth to Rick. Where are you?"

"Oh, I was thinking about Alex and that floozy Reggie. I still think we need to call and get some input, even if it's a tough day. Think we could entice Alex to come out here this weekend?"

“Who knows? You know Alex as well as I do. Once Alex goes down one path, it’s hard to change course.”

“Ah, Sophie, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

Sophie swatted him, laughed, and started to clean up the table when Rick’s cell phone rang. He answered it while walking out of the room.

“Rick are you by any chance on a secure line?” asked Senator Thane.

“I’m on a burner cell phone.”

“Okay I guess it will have to do. We seemed to have stirred up some, ah, discomfort. Don’t think you are in danger, though, but why tempt fate? Get rid of the phone and get yourself another one. Turns out your two boys are not in bed with the Company. They regularly turn down certain assignments that don’t meet their operational criteria. Some sandboxes are too full of shit. You know what I mean?”

Rich promptly answered, “Yes I do. Was there anything else?”

“Yeah, two more things, one of note, the other just background. Bentworth took over the business from his father, when he became ill about fifteen years ago. His father died shortly after that. There is speculation that the father may have been involved in some covert activities in South America, but I can’t get confirmation without ruffling big feathers. I don’t think this has anything to do with your current, ah, situation, but I decided to tell you so you’d have an idea on how ingrained Bentworth might be with the Company. The other, well, I’ll let you decide. Rumor has it that Bentworth refused to do an errand for the Company, but as it turned out, the Company now seems to be okay with his refusal. The Company’s intel was wrong, so when Bentworth refused the job, it probably avoided egg on their face. They should be grateful, though they’ll never admit it.”

“You sure about that, Senator?”

“Yup. It was easier to ask questions about Bentworth than about your other two boys. Got it on good authority.”

“You think they were telling you straight, or just what they thought would be good for business?”

“My take is that I got the skinny, but you’ve been around long enough to know that even seasoned ducks like myself can fall prey to a duck hunter’s call. Catch my drift?”

“Sure do. Better watch my tail feathers, even if the shot gun isn’t loaded!”

“Exactly, my friend. Take care and if you are ever in DC, call me for dinner. You’re buying.”

“You bet.”

Rick hung up and walked back into the kitchen to relay Senator Thane’s information. At first, she looked at him quizzically, then her brain synapses kicked in and her face lit up with recognition.

“So, the kidnapping was either random or personal, not CIA related?”

He nodded his head in the affirmative. “What time was Alex signing papers?”

Sophie told him it had been scheduled for early this morning.

“Soph, I think we should call now before Jules and Jake show up.”

“Okay, you do it. I’ll sit with you.”

He pulled out a different cell phone from his pocket, found the number in the phone book, dialed, and put it on speaker phone.

“Dr. Alex Martini’s office. How may I help you?” answered a perky voice. Rick said, “Would you please tell Dr. Martini that Rick Hidalgo is calling from Montana.”

“Rick!! Is that you?” Alex was on the line.

“Alex how are you, my dear?” chirped Sophie.

“Fine. I just got back to the office. It went better than I had imagined. Aunt Sophie, are you okay? You sound funny.”

“Oh yes dear. Just fine. Rick and I are on the speaker phone. Say, we were wondering if you might agree to hop a

flight this weekend and come out to the ranch. We have some things we want to talk to you about.”

“Really, Aunt Sophie, I’m fine. Stop being a mother hen.”

“Alex,” piped up Rick, “Your aunt is not being a mother hen. We’ve got something serious to discuss, and I’m sorry that the timing is so bad.”

“You haven’t decided to sell, have you Aunt Sophie?” asked a slightly panicked Alex.

“No, no, but we’ve received an interesting business proposal we’d like you to review.”

Both Rick and Sophie knew that Alex wouldn’t be satisfied with that explanation. They prepared for Alex’s typical relentless pestering.

“What do you mean a business proposal?”

Rick said, “Are you sitting down? It’s kind of wild.”

“Yeah, I’m sitting, but if you don’t tell me what’s going on, I’ll be pacing.”

Rick cut to the chase. “Yesterday, Sophie was asked if she would be interested in having a high-profile guest here for a few months. In exchange, Sophie would receive enough money to pay off all the ranch’s debts.”

Alex, equally as direct, responded, “Who is this high-profile person?”

“Do you remember reading about the kidnapping of a California woman, Claire Bentworth, several months ago?” asked Rick.

“Vaguely. Why would they want this woman to stay at the ranch? I mean, you know I love the ranch and it is a great vacation place, but why are they willing to settle all the ranch’s debts for her to stay there? Do they want you to cancel all the other guests for the summer?”

Typical Alex, three questions in the same breath. Rick tried to slow the interchange down and patiently explained.

“First of all, we don’t have to cancel any of the guests who have already booked. Secondly, they like the

remoteness of the area, away from photographers and reporters.”

Sophie continued, “There are a lot of details that we can’t go over right now, that’s why we want you to come out and—”

Alex butted in, cutting off Sophie, “I get the sense that you two are not telling me the whole story.”

Rick tried, “Alex, the deal essentially comes down to her staying at the ranch, we protect her privacy, and the mortgage is retired.”

“Who are the people that made the offer? Relatives?” continued Alex.

“Her father hired a security firm and people from the firm made the offer. I checked them out with my contacts in DC and the firm is legit,” explained Rick.

“Now I remember the case. What did they say about her medical condition?” pushed Alex.

“She had to have some surgeries to repair injuries she suffered, but she is well physically,” Sophie replied.

“And emotionally? Did they tell you about that?” Alex pressed on.

“Yes. She was diagnosed with PTSD. However, she has had extensive therapy and is doing better. Her psychiatrist thinks a change in environment would hasten her recovery,” answered Sophie tolerantly.

“You guys, PTSD can be tricky. I don’t think that either you are equipped to deal with some of the behaviors associated with PTSD..” Alex shot back.

“They said she would have a companion with appropriate psychiatric training to handle any complications from the PTSD,” responded Sophie.

“Man, I’d really like to be there to talk to these people. I don’t want you two getting involved in something that could be disastrous for you, the ranch, or this woman. When do they need an answer?”

Sophie and Rick exchanged looks. Better than what they had hoped. Alex was interested.

“They’re coming back today to provide us more detail, but they haven’t given us a drop-dead date to make a decision,” answered Sophie.

“Can you get them to stick around a few days so I can get there? I might be able to catch a flight out tomorrow or the next evening. Let me call you tonight to let you know if I can rearrange my schedule for Thursday and Friday. If I can’t get there, we’ll have to set up something over the phone. Promise me you won’t accept their proposal until I can talk to these folks and the woman’s doctors,” said Alex with finality.

Alex’s demand was unmistakably framed with concern, but Sophie recognized that Alex was on the hunt, impassioned with a new challenge. Sophie promised that they wouldn’t make any decision until all questions were answered. They said goodbye and would wait for the call tonight.

Sophie, mildly amused, looked at Rick. “Well, that was easier than I thought, I mean the part about getting Alex to come out here. At least this will provide a diversion from thinking about Reggie.”

“Sophie,” Rick started, still trying to decide if he would butt in, “I think Alex hasn’t been in love with Reggie for a long time but is still fuming over the infidelities and betrayals. The dream of a happy household evaporated a while ago. Alex has such high standards that it’s difficult for people to live up to them and for sure, Reggie just didn’t share the same aspirations.”

Sophie shook her head. “You talk like this is more than conjecture. How do you know this, Rick?”

“I think sometimes Alex tells me things that because, well, let’s just say, some things are easier for Alex to tell me than you.”

“That’s nonsense. I’m very accepting and tolerant! Reggie was always welcome here. I never passed judgement,” replied Sophie with a slight hint of indignation.

Rick had to be careful here, because Sophie wasn’t always tolerant, though she liked to think she was. “That’s true with most things Sophie, but remember Alex is trying to hold herself up to your and Mario’s example. How long were you married to Mario? Did Alex ever see you fighting? To Alex, you had the perfect relationship, even if it wasn’t.”

“I don’t want Alex to use Mario and me as a measuring stick, Rick. Times were different then and there weren’t as many choices, and just for the record, no relationship is perfect,” responded Sophie, her hackles definitely ruffled.

“I know, I know, Sophie, but you can’t change what was imprinted on Alex. After the death of Carlo and Franny, you and Mario became Alex’s world. When Mario passed, you became the only connection to everything Alex had known. Alex is trying to invent a world in which to live, but the only model available, is what was learned here.”

Sophie sighed heavily, put her arms around Rick and kissed him on the lips. “Sometimes I wonder just who the shrink is in this family!”

God was she lucky that this dear man had walked into her life. She remembered the night they met. Mario had been dead for about fourteen years. He had succumbed to lung cancer after eighteen months of aggressive surgical, chemo, and radiation therapies, leaving Sophie and the ranch in dire financial trouble. He died early in Alex’s senior year at college and it was always Sophie’s contention that Alex delayed military service for another two years, so that Sophie wouldn’t be alone. At least at graduate school in Denver, Alex was close enough to get home for long weekends and vacations.

When Sophie gave Alex a welcoming hug the night they arrived years ago, she caught a glimpse of Rick in the corner of her eye. Sophie had good observational powers. In an

instant she concluded that he was good looking, about ten years older than Alex, dark hair, closely cropped, strong shoulders tapering to a slim waist, and muscular thighs. His face was a classic roman face, chiseled brow, nose, and chin. His mouth was hard to describe. He kept pursing his lips together, a duck out of water in her house; ruggedly handsome, but terribly uncomfortable, and maybe a bit broody, thought Sophie.

When she hugged him and he fell apart, she was powerfully drawn to him. It was astonishing to her. After Mario died, Sophie had many opportunities to remarry. Drove of local, and some not so local, men were interested in courting her. None made her feel more than amused. But this man, several years her junior, hit a nerve. She remembered thinking, as she left him in the bedroom, *Great, I've been like an old prune for years and now the juices start running again with Alex's boss.* Sophie could be crude in talking to herself, but rarely was this self-deprecating side of her visible to others. Her attraction to him was a torment the entire time he and Alex were at the ranch. Every time she was close to him, she wanted to touch him. Every time he laughed; her heart flip flopped. She loved interacting with his quick wit and dry sense of humor. By the second week, after she had observed Rick's and Alex's interactions, Sophie decided that Alex and Rick were close and probably shared more than talk about baseball and girls. Finally, one night when Rick had gone down to the barn to help Dean on some winter project, she had time alone with Alex.

“Alex, I just wanted to let you know that I think Rick is a wonderful man. You two seem very close.”

Alex had a blank look, not yet connecting the dots. Finally, Alex laughed, “Oh, Aunt Sophie, what do you want to know about him?”

Sophie was almost positive that Alex wanted to say something else but decided not to. Maybe Alex had noticed how Sophie felt around Rick and was hesitant to say

anything but as usual, Sophie plowed ahead. “Alex, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, but is he with anyone?”

Sophie wondered if Alex would be truthful with her.

Alex groaned, fidgeted in the armchair, put the book down on the side table, got up and started pacing. “Oh, my god, Aunt Sophie! You like him!” Sophie’s face must have given her away. Alex chortled and said, “Oh my gosh. After all these years, finally there is someone who’s gotten you hot and bothered.”

Sophie’s face burned red. She twisted in embarrassment. Alex kept laughing in disbelief. The mild teasing had made Sophie uncomfortable, so Alex went over to her, sat on the arm of the chair and said, “I’m sorry, Aunt Sophie. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable, though it is nice to turn the tables now and then. I think this is great! It is wonderful to see that someone can still turn your head. Go for it! I know he likes you too.”

^^^

Rick had gone outside to wait for their guests. He saw Dean and the boys ride in. Dean would fill him in later and let him know if they had encountered any problems on the drive up to the spring meadows. Getting a herd of cattle from one place to another wasn’t the smooth going portrayed on TV. Rowdy and Ruby, the two Red Heelers came running up the road and leapt up the steps into Rick’s outstretched arms. Squatting on the porch floor, he rubbed both of their heads, hugging them, talking to them softly.

“Did you have a good trip? Did the cattle behave? Did Jeanne cook you something good for dinner last night? Don’t tell Sophie. Are you tired? You had a long walk. Want to take a nap? Maybe Sophie will give you a special treat for all your hard work.”

The dogs lapped up the attention and tried to sneak in a few wet kisses before he dismissed them with, “Go see Sophie.”

Still full of energy after a four-hour run, they said their goodbyes and raced around the back of the house to see if Sophie was there. No doubt the dogs were thinking that they could bribe Sophie with kisses to get some leftovers.

Rick got up off the step and moved to a rocker on the porch. He saw the dust rising in the distance and waited patiently for the SUV to pull up to the house. Both Jake and Jules got out of the car at the same time.

Jules saw Rick on the porch and said, “Good afternoon, Colonel,” not trying to hide that she knew who and what he was. She extended her arm for a handshake and said, “I’m Jules Law.” Jake came up behind her, offered his hand with a simple, “Jake Lawrence, here.”

Rick accepted both handshakes with a simple, “Rick Hidalgo. Nice to meet you. Let’s go inside and talk. Sophie’s waiting for us.”

All three of them walked into the kitchen. Sophie was already at the table. Looking up, she greeted them, and asked them to sit. She wasn’t sure how to proceed, but she needn’t have worried. Jules immediately took control.

“Mrs. Martini, have you had a chance to fill Rick in on our proposal?”

“Yes, I have. He’s up to speed,” answered Sophie succinctly.

“Great. Why don’t we spend some time answering any questions you might have and then we can move on to talk about the mechanics of the deal. Will that work?”

Sophie said yes and looked at Rick. Rick felt like he was in a relay race and Sophie was handing him the baton. He didn’t want to fumble and drop it.

“Uh, is it okay if I call you Jules and Jake?”

“Certainly. That would be fine,” answered Jake good naturedly.

“Okay, well, Sophie and I have been talking about your proposal and of course, we called Alex this morning. I’m assuming you know who Alex is?”

Jules purposefully didn’t look at Jake, but knew he was thinking the same thing. Since Rick broke the ice about Alex, they wouldn’t have to. She nodded, “Yes, we do.”

Rick picked up a slight deviation in Jules’ body language and paused to study her. Maybe he was mistaken, so he continued. “We do have some questions for you and hope that you can answer them truthfully.” He stopped for a moment to let the word ‘truthfully’ sink in.

“You see, if we move forward with your proposal, we would want a clause in the contract that gives us the ability to cancel our involvement and still receive compensation, if you don’t fully disclose any, shall we say, liabilities or dangerous situations that could arise from the deal.”

Sophie glanced at Rick and gave him a silent thumbs up through ESP, or so she thought. Jake looked like he swallowed a snake. Jules remained cool, non-plussed, no emotion crossing her face, and no telling body language changes. Jules smiled inwardly. Rick had done his research. Paulson had advised her to not react if something like this came up, but to take it as a sign that she was dealing with competent people.

She was expecting this Rick thought. *Now she knows that we did our homework and the game is on.*

“We’ll answer any questions you have to the best of our ability with the information we have today and if that information should change down the road, we’ll disclose it to you. We don’t want you entering into an agreement unless you are 100% comfortable and committed.”

Back in my court, thought Rick.

“Let’s start with what your company is going to do while the Bentworth woman is here. We think this is an awfully expensive venture, just to keep the press and paparazzi away.”

“Mr. Bentworth hired us not only to protect his daughter, but also to find the culprits who planned the kidnapping. He has not been satisfied with law enforcement’s efforts and wants to see the perpetrators brought to justice. We’ve gotten some small leads that might pan out, and we are prepared to run with them.”

“I see,” said Sophie. “So, while Claire is here, you are going to be playing cops and robbers?”

“More like Sherlock and Watson,” quipped Jake. This was the first sign that Jake had any sense of humor, corny as it was.

“Why do you need Claire stashed away somewhere, while you play Maggie and Fritz?” asked Rick.

Jules was impressed with Rick’s reference to fictional female – male detective characters Maggie McGuane and Fritz Thieringer. She genuinely laughed at his joke. The reference was lost on Jake and Sophie, but perhaps this would serve to launch a bond between Rick and her.

“As we continue to investigate, we might ruffle some feathers. You know about that, don’t you, Rick?”

Rick wondered if she knew the specifics of his research the last eighteen hours or if she was just talking in generalities. He’d admit what he had done, in a generic sense, if she asked him, but for now, he simply nodded his head.

Jake picked up the beat. “Truly, we want to see her safely tucked away where the chances of a repeat attempt are unlikely.”

Sophie shot out the next question, perhaps a little too aggressively, but no one seemed to notice, except Rick. We’d be in a lot of danger if whomever was responsible for the kidnapping found out she was here and wanted to grab her again, or worse, kill her. How likely is this?”

“We’ve given that a lot of thought, Mrs. Martini, and have made every attempt to cover our tracks and not attract attention. The ranch is remote, not a likely place that Claire

would go, and we've got a pretty good cover arranged, just in case. Plus, we'll take security measures, including having our people here at all times. If we get Claire up here without anyone noticing, and we think we have it worked out how to do this, there shouldn't be a way for anyone to find out."

"But you cannot guarantee that, right Jules?" asked Sophie.

Jules acknowledged that they couldn't guarantee it, but the likelihood of a repeat attempt at the ranch was very, very small.

Rick chimed in. "I imagine that you have eliminated the Company as suspects in the kidnapping?"

This time, Jules' eyes opened wider, but she answered straightforwardly. "We considered that it might be a possibility with Bentworth's, ah, activities and business practices, but were able to rule that out. What we have not been able to rule out is the possibility that it was a business associate of Bentworth. However, the small amount of evidence we have, points to a more personal connection."

Rick said, "Do you think that because the evidence points to a more personal connection, the risk for Claire and the folks here at White Bark Ranch is less?"

"Honestly, yes. I think the threat is minimal in any event, but I'm not going to lie and minimize the possibility of something going wrong."

Score one for Jules. She had told the truth. Rick was beginning to feel a little provisional trust with her. He peeked at Sophie. Her face was placid, and she showed no sign of agitation at this time.

"Jules, Jake, I think we need to get to some of the details now," responded Rick.

Jules dipped her head and Jake took over, spelling out the security provisions they wanted to implement, the cover that had been arranged for Claire, the personnel they would have at the ranch, how they would make sure that the ranch guests were clean, and an extraction plan if something did

go wrong. Jake spent the better part of a couple of hours going over details, while Rick listened and occasionally asked questions.

When Rick was satisfied, he came full circle from where he started, telling them that he and Sophie had talked to Alex.

“Folks, Sophie and I have a lot to digest. There is one more request that we have. Alex, who is in Seattle, wants to talk to you, Claire’s medical doctors and her psychiatrist before we make a final decision. Alex is concerned that we may not be equipped to handle the emotional or behavioral dangers that Claire might present.”

“Is Alex able to get away from work and fly out tomorrow? We can arrange a private flight from Renton Airport, a few miles north of Seattle.”

Jules looked at Rick with expectantly raised eyebrows, not at all hiding that they had considered Alex a key player in this and had made tentative arrangements for transport. Rick waited for Sophie to answer.

“We’re supposed to get a call tonight.”

“Okay. May we stay at the ranch and wait for the call? We’d like to see the facilities you have here if that is possible,” Jake requested.

Sophie and Rick simultaneously agreed, though Sophie wondered why they wanted to see the facilities if they had already done an in-depth investigation. Rick knew. They had already done most of it by satellite, and they wanted to put the finishing touches on it by doing an elevation survey. Jules asked Sophie if there was somewhere she could catch up on overdue work. Sophie invited the two of them to have dinner with them, then led Jules to the office.

An hour later, Rick and Jake were still out on their sojourn across the main facilities of the ranch they called the “Compound.” Sophie went to let Jules know that dinner would be ready in about thirty minutes. Jules looked up from her computer and saw that Sophie had more on her mind than

a dinner announcement. She turned toward Sophie and gladly waited.

“Ah, Jules I was wondering if you had a moment? I need to talk to you woman to woman.”

It sounded funny, clichéd, and old fashioned, but Jules didn't let on that she was amused.

“Of course, Sophie. Any time. What's on your mind?” Jules motioned her to go on.

“I know you said that the risk for people here at the ranch is minimal. I guess I feel better that you'll have people here as guests or ranch hands, but I can't help thinking that our paying guests could be in mortal danger if something went wrong. What do you people call it--collateral damage?”

“I think the way we can eliminate almost any chance of this happening would be to have Claire stay in the main house, if possible. I really think that if anyone wanted to try something, it would be done under the cover of night. There are just too many people around and experience tells me that if there is another attempt, the kidnappers won't want to draw attention to themselves. Remember that she disappeared from a dressing room and it was an hour before anyone noticed. No witnesses, no collateral damage.”

“Jules, I could never forgive myself if anything happened to our guests.”

“Nor could I,” responded Jules, trying to break out of her operational mode, which often came across as results oriented and cold. Sophie needed comforting and reassurance. “I honestly believe that with the proper planning, we can minimize any danger. I would not have agreed to this, nor would my partners at ISS, if we thought there could be any fall out. Aside from the ethical considerations, it would be bad for business.”

With unerring sincerity, Jules continued. “Sophie, we have never lost a client, we've never caused the death of anyone but the bad guys, and we certainly aren't going to endanger our record at White Bark.” Jules attentively looked

at Sophie. Sophie held Jules gaze through worried eyes, then pulled herself together, said thank you, and returned to the kitchen.

^^^

Dinner was a quiet affair. Everyone appeared to be talked out. Sophie and Jules were clearing the table, Rick was washing dishes, and Jake was drying, when the phone rang. Sophie picked it up answering,

“White Bark Ranch, how may I help you? Oh, hi, Alex.” Sophie listened, with an occasional, “uh huh” punctuating the otherwise silent kitchen. It felt like a long time had passed before Sophie actually spoke in more than one-syllable words.

“Listen, Alex, don’t worry about a flight. The people we told you about can arrange a private flight late tomorrow afternoon out of someplace called Renton. Do you know where that is?” Sophie listened, then hesitated a moment, finally saying, “Oh, I see. Let me put Jules on the line with you to work out the details.”

Rick heaved a heavy sigh. Alex was coming. Jake went back to drying dishes, and Sophie handed over the phone to Jules. She introduced herself, spent a few moments with the required niceties, then pulled out a piece of paper from her pocket. She read the flight arrangements to Alex and provided her phone number in case there were any problems. She cautioned Alex not to tell anyone about the trip. Then she became silent, listening intently. Sophie, Rick, and Jake had no way of telling what was going on, but it obviously was a one-way monologue by Alex. The call concluded with, “I’m looking forward to meeting you and spending some time with you, but you had better take that up with your aunt.”

Jules handed the phone back to Sophie, who briefly listened, then said, “I’ll discuss it with Rick.” She hung up the phone and turned to Rick, “Would you go for a walk with

me? There is something Alex wants us to consider. Jake, Jules please excuse us for a while.”

Rick dried his hands and headed for the door, trailing Sophie who was already on her way out. They headed toward the pond that was really a natural widening of the river. The tributary ran fast down from the mountains, but it was slower here and perfect for pond-side picnics, swimming, and fishing.

They walked arm in arm on the lighted trail until they were out of hearing distance from the house. When Sophie felt comfortable that no one could overhear them, she told Rick that Alex wanted Jules and Jake to stay at the ranch. Alex had mentioned it on their call earlier today, but for the life of Rick, he couldn't imagine why it was so important to have them stay on the property. Must be some kind of psychological thing. They discussed the pros and cons, and finally decided to go with Alex's instinct.

They lingered by the side of the pond under the cover of the tall White Bark pine, the ranch's name sake. Holding Sophie's hands in his, he teasingly asked Sophie if she was going to invite him to spend the night with her. She could be as flirtatious as he could. “Why, I could use a little bit of comforting with all that has been going on.”

He kissed her on the lips, obviously wanting more, but neither of them cared to leave Jules and Jake alone longer than was necessary.

Walking into the kitchen, they saw a sight they found amusing. Rowdy and Ruby were in the kitchen with Jake and Jules. Rowdy was sitting on the floor next to Jake's chair, getting his ears rubbed. Ruby had somehow convinced Jules to sit on the floor so she could lay in her lap and get her belly rubbed. The dogs were used to having strangers around, and they were generally polite, but usually kept their distance, especially with kids. However, tonight, they had settled right in with the two strangers.

“Uh, Sophie, I hope it’s OK, I mean about the dogs,” muttered Jake, acting like a schoolboy caught doing something naughty.

“It’s fine. The dogs are usually well behaved, so we let them come and go through their dog door as they wish,” answered Sophie, for the first time feeling more comfortable with the two sleuths. The dogs had proven to be pretty good judges of character.

Jules got up from the floor, much to Ruby’s displeasure.

“All the travel arrangements have been confirmed. Jake will pick up Alex in Missoula tomorrow around 7:00 p.m. and drive back here. It’s getting late, so we had better shove off, unless you have any more questions.”

“Hold on just a minute. I’m not sure why, but Alex wanted us to invite you to stay here at the ranch starting tomorrow. I don’t know if you planned to stay past tomorrow or the next day, but Alex was pretty adamant about you being here.” Sophie realized that her invitation left much to be desired in the way of politeness, but she had already put her foot in her mouth, so she waited for a response.

Picking up the uncertainty of the invitation and practicing her diplomatic skills, Jules asked Sophie and Rick, “How do you feel about us staying here?”

Rick, trying to recover from Sophie’s back handed invitation, attempted graciousness and responded for both himself and Sophie.

“We think it would be just fine, but the cabins aren’t open yet, so you’d have to stay in the upstairs guest rooms.” He hoped he sounded sincere because Sophie was already looking for a glass of water to wash down her foot.

Jake attempted to ingratiate himself. “That’s very nice of you. It would help us if we didn’t have to spend four hours a day traveling. One other thing, Rick, I’d like to finish as much of the tour tomorrow around the main compound, then take a ride up into the surrounding land if possible.”

“I’m available all-day tomorrow,” offered Rick. “Jules are you coming out tomorrow morning too?” He wanted to keep track of the two of them as much as possible.

“I’m going to spend some time in Missoula tomorrow, so I won’t be here until later in the afternoon.”

“How will you get out here if Jake has the car?”

“Don’t worry, Sophie. I’ll get a rental tomorrow morning before Jake heads out here. Thank you for dinner. It was delicious. Have a good night.”

CHAPTER 4—The Decision

“Once you make a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen.”
..... *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Thursday April 9

Midnight had come and gone and now daybreak was a breath away. One of Jules’ talents, and she had many, was that she could sleep almost anywhere and anytime, but Jules couldn’t settle. She wasn’t looking forward to telling Sophie the real reason ISS had chosen the ranch. She knew it could torpedo the whole deal.

She swore to herself that this was the last time she would compromise her ethics on this job, no matter what. Looking at the clock on the hotel nightstand, she sighed and decided to administer a little self-therapy in hopes of relaxing and getting a few hours of sleep before she walked into the lion’s den. ^^It was another balmy spring day. As Rick and Sophie were finishing up their pancakes and bacon, they heard Jake’s voice. God, he must have gotten up before sunrise to get here at eight in the morning. Sophie called to him and he appeared in the kitchen dressed in jeans and a fancy cowboy shirt. Sophie stifled a laugh and Rick, trying not to chuckle, asked if Jake had eaten, as he poured him a cup of coffee.

Jake laid three large bags of groceries on the table and said he had eaten. Sophie raised her left eyebrow, a tell that trouble was brewing. *Oh, here it comes*, thought Rick and shot Sophie a warning look. Sophie didn’t like the smell of charity, unless she was on the giving end. Sophie leveled her gaze at Jake and said, “What’s this?”

“Uh, Sophie, you’ve been so nice and fed us, so I, um, thought I’d bring some groceries by. Hope they’re what you like.”

“Well, now, Jake, that was very nice of you. I’ll put them up while you two boys go to work.”

Rick and Jake knew when they were being dismissed and bolted out the back door as quickly as they could. Ruby and Rowdy, loyal to the grocery bags, stayed with Sophie.

Lunch time came and went with neither Rick nor Jake showing up. It wasn’t a big deal; she had made an “Everything Soup” to serve with her fresh baked whole grain bread. As a child, Alex had dubbed the soup made with all the leftovers in the refrigerator, “Everything Soup” and the name had stuck.

Sophie called down to the bunk house and Jeanne, the cook for the ranch hands, answered the phone. Sophie asked her how the trip was the day before last and listened to Jeanne’s tales of on-the-trail culinary challenges. Jeanne was Dean’s wife and oversaw the feeding of the ranch hands and goading them into keeping the bunk house relatively clean.

Sophie bided her time and when Jeanne took a rare breath before chattering on, Sophie cut in. “Jeanne, did you feed Rick and his guest this noon?”

“No. Who is Rick’s guest?”

“Just like Jeanne to be her usual Peaky the Elf, sticking her nose in where it shouldn’t be. Sophie said, “Thanks, Jeanne. I must go. I’ll try to stop by later.”

Sophie had no intention of stopping by to visit with Jeanne. She told her that solely to preempt Jeanne from coming up to the main house. The only reason she put up with her was because she was Dean’s wife. Mumbling to no one in particular, *Lord knows how he puts up with her, but she’s part of the package, so I gotta cope.* She started some light cleaning and made up rooms for Alex, Jules, and Jake.

After finishing, Sophie sat down for a mid-afternoon cup of coffee and cookies, thinking about what she was going to prepare for dinner. She, Rick, and most likely Jules would eat around 6:30 p.m., but Jake and Alex wouldn’t be in until 9:00 p.m. tonight. No choice but to make a stew that

could be reheated. She started getting her ingredients together.

^^^

The Learjet25 screamed down the runway at precisely 4:30 p.m. Pacific time, lifting off smoothly. The pilot told Alex that the flying time was approximately an hour. He also told her to sit back and relax, that they anticipated a smooth ride all the way. After takeoff, the co-pilot came out and offered Alex a drink.

“Maybe a nice Merlot,” Alex suggested, half joking, thinking that they’d only have those little bottles of liquor served on commercial airlines with usual red or white. The co-pilot nodded, walked back to a tiny galley, and in no time, brought, in a real wine glass, not plastic, presumably a Merlot.

Alex hated flying. As a small tyke, Alex got car sick frequently and never seemed to outgrow the motion sickness that caused her so much anxiety. Wine probably wasn’t the best choice for motion sickness, but after asking for it, it would have been embarrassing to tell the co-pilot not to bring it. Trying to relax, Alex leaned into the plushy padded leather seat, thinking that an hour wouldn’t be so bad on this little baby.

Reclining, Alex tried to bring some order to the events that had taken place in the last few months. Existence with Reggie had been exciting at first, but those things that had attracted them to each other in the beginning, were the same things that caused the downfall of the relationship. Reggie thrived on excitement and Alex, though sometimes a participant, more often enjoyed the quiet. She was a homebody. Reggie’s need for continued and heightened excitement caused a rift between the two of them, presumably leading to Reggie’s dalliances. While intellectually Alex understood the situation, raw emotions

trumped. They started living strained parallel lives. Reggie put an end to their three-year relationship in December and struck out to find the next unsuspecting victim. *What was I thinking when I fell for Reggie?* While Sophie had shown the utmost courtesy toward Reggie, Alex knew that Sophie didn't like her. Sophie's tolerance for Reggie was based on her love for Alex. Rick wasn't as ingratiating. Though he had remained neutral, not offering an opinion one way or another, his neutrality should have been enough of a tip off to Alex. *Guess Aunt Sophie is right about my pig headiness.*

Sophie and Mario couldn't have kids. Alex never knew if it was Uncle Mario or Aunt Sophie. When Alex's parents were killed in a freak car accident, just shortly after Alex's tenth birthday, Sophie and Mario became legal guardians and treated Alex as their own child. Maybe they overcompensated because of the tragedy, giving Alex a lot of freedom and space to make decisions early on. *That's probably why I became so headstrong,* rationalized Alex.

Thoughts of Reggie pushed their way back into Alex's consciousness. She wasn't operating under any illusions about Reggie but was still nursing wounds from Reggie's cavalier behavior during the last year they had lived together. Not only was Reggie insensitive to Alex's feelings, the one-night stands and affairs were out in the open. Reggie didn't have the decency to try and conceal them. *God, Alex thought. I can't believe I came out to Aunt Sophie for Reggie!* Fuming, the anger inundated her conscious mind like a spring torrent that made the river in front of the ranch swell, churn, and spit. Alex, her stomach roiling with a mixture of anger and nostalgia, remembered the day.

She had come back to the ranch from Seattle for Memorial Day weekend, resolute in having the dreaded conversation. Alex was edgy and sick to her stomach. She didn't think that Aunt Sophie would stop loving her, however she was terrified that Sophie would stop respecting her. Late Saturday night, she asked Sophie to take a ride with

her in the morning up to her favorite spot in the woods, north of the house. They rode for an hour, tended to the horses, and sat down to eat a picnic breakfast by the side of a pond. She knew that Sophie could tell something was brewing, though Sophie didn't inquire.

When Alex was agitated, she tended to pace. After they finished eating, Alex got up from the blanket and started pacing, rubbing her hands in front of her. She dropped to her knees in front of Sophie and said that she had something important to tell her. Sophie reached for her hands, but Alex drew back.

"Aunt Sophie, I've kept something from you for a long time and I no longer can hide it." She got up and paced again.

"What is it, Alex?"

"It's not like I've lied to you or anything, but I feel like I've been deceitful in not telling you. I feel dishonest and cowardly and I can't live like this any longer. I just have to get it off my chest, even though I'm afraid."

Sophie carefully inquired, "Sweetie, is it something that happened in Afghanistan?"

Alex again dropped to her knees in front of Sophie. "No, no, not Afghanistan."

Sophie continued, "Then what? There isn't anything you can't tell me."

Alex, fear seizing her, took a deep breath then said, "I don't know, Aunt Sophie. You're not going to like this. "I've met someone that's important to me." Sophie had a confused quizzical look on her face, so Alex blurted it out. "It's a woman. Reggie is her name."

Sophie hadn't expected that at all. Alex had a string of boyfriends in high school and her fair share during her undergraduate years, though she rarely brought any of them around more than once, and now that she thought about it, Alex wasn't particularly affectionate with any of them. She could see that Alex was suffering, waiting for her response.

“Alex, you’ve caught me off guard. Give me a minute here.”

Alex got back up and started pacing again. Sophie took her time to carefully frame her answer. “Alessandra, here’s what I think, and wait until I’m finished before you interrupt, okay?”

Alex nodded, afraid of what she was going to hear.

Sophie continued. “To be honest with you, I’m not thrilled with this news, but not for the reasons you might think. I would imagine that you’ve already experienced the difficulty trying to live this life in a discriminatory climate caused by the narrow mindedness of people. I don’t wish this on anyone, least of all you, the person I love the most in the whole wide world. Look how afraid you’ve been to tell me, someone who accepts you unconditionally.”

Alex couldn’t sit still any longer. “You don’t understand, Aunt Sophie,” but before she could continue, Sophie kindly said, “but I do. I understand this isn’t a choice for you, that it is who you are, and that to be happy, you have to act on your feelings. I just can’t bear the thought of this hostile world heaping more than your share of pain and suffering on you, but, in the end, love is love and there is so little love in this world that I don’t care whom you love, just as long as that person loves you back.”

Alex seemed to have been flash-frozen in mid pace. Tears flooded her eyes. Just as Alex dropped to her knees for a third time, Sophie reached for her and pulled her to her breast. Alex rested her head against Sophie while Sophie stroked her hair. Some time passed before she pulled away and simply said, “Thank you, Aunt Sophie. This means the world to me. I’ve been so ashamed.”

Sophie’s head was swimming, but she knew she had to maintain her composure for Alex. She thought that for all of Alex’s strength, she was as fragile as she had ever been in her life. “Ashamed of what, sweetie?” Alex, still crying,

choked out, “Ashamed that I was such a coward to hide who I am from you.”

“I’m the one who should be ashamed for not providing you a safe enough environment to tell me.” Sophie’s answer was most unexpected and rocketed Alex into uncontrollable sobs.

When Alex’s sobs subsided, she told Sophie that she could ask her anything. Sophie, regaining her composure, asked Alex easy, mundane questions. Where did she meet Reggie, what did Reggie do, how long had they been together, would she like to bring Reggie out for the fourth of July and did Rick know? Alex knew the not so easy inquiries were still to come.

On their ride back to the house, Sophie, breaking the dense silence of the forest, peppered Alex with the questions that had been smoldering in her skull since they sat at the pool. “Alex, um, when did this, uh, change take place? You always had a gaggle of boyfriends following you around?”

“I knew in high school, but I kept dating boys, hoping that one would prove me wrong and make me feel something.”

“Have you ever slept with a man?”

Oh Christ, thought Alex. *I’m going to have to deal with the whole sexual side of this now.* She answered Sophie, “I’ve had a few experiments. I could never seem to find a man that I could bond with emotionally.”

“You seemed to have bonded with Rick, though,” mused Sophie.

“Yes, but that was different. I just never felt the emotional and sexual connection like you do with him. He was more like a big brother to me,” answered Alex.

“Sweetie, I want you to be happy, of course, however, I’ve got to ask this question. Are you sure?”

“Yes, Aunt Sophie, I’m sure.”

“How do you know?” ventured Sophie.

“The same way you’re sure that you’re heterosexual and like men,” answered Alex without sarcasm. Alex was dreading the next question she knew would be coming and Sophie didn’t disappoint her.

“Ah, Alex, if you don’t mind me asking, what do the two of you do in bed?”

Alex was tempted to say, “Sleep”, but she knew that Sophie wouldn’t find it funny right now. She also didn’t want to be crass. While she guessed that Sophie could be very passionate in bed, she knew that Sophie’s public persona was conservative.

“The mechanics aren’t much different than being in bed with a man.” Fleeting confusion passed over Sophie’s face. Alex knew she’d have to be more graphic. “You just substitute fingers for a penis.”

“Oh, I see. Right, right,” Sophie uttered nervously, the blush spreading from her neck up her face.

Alex giggled. Sophie took off her hat and swatted Alex on the upper arm. They rode side by side for a while until Sophie’s brain came up with the next series of questions.

Alex you said up at the pond, that Rick knew. Did you tell him?” Sophie wasn’t asking to make sure that it would be okay to share this with Rick if he didn’t know. She wanted to find out if Rick had been guarding the secret from her.

“Not exactly. He caught me sneaking out of a doctor’s tent in the early morning hours.”

“A woman doctor?” inquired Sophie

“Uh huh,” was all that Alex said.

Impatiently, Sophie asked, “Well what happened?”

Alex sighed, then began. “We were in camp, waiting around until the next mission. Rick was prowling around that night because he couldn’t sleep. It was so damn hot. As luck had it, he was passing by, just as I was leaving her tent. He was cool, though. I’ll never forget what he said.”

“Lieutenant, you must be feeling pretty bad to rouse a doctor in the middle of the night.”

“He was so proud of himself to have made a play on words.”

Intrigued, Sophie asked, “What did you do?”

“I saluted and said, ‘Yes sir.’”

“Then what?” Sophie prompted.

“He told me, tongue in cheek, to get back to my quarters and rest so that I would be feeling better for morning report.”

“That was the end of it?” inquired Sophie.

“No, not by a long shot. Later in the day, he called me into his office, closed the door, and told me to sit down. I was scared,” answered Alex, shrugging off the anxiety laden memory.

“I’ll bet,” consoled Sophie.

“Then he said, ‘Look Alex, I don’t agree with all the policies, but there are people who do, and you have a good career ahead of you if you want it. And personally, I don’t care with whom you spend your private time, but you had better confine your doctor’s appointments to off-post furloughs, if you catch my drift, and then you had better be darn careful.’ He went on to reassure me that the conversation ended there unless I did something stupid.”

“What did you do?” Sophie was getting irritated. She was having to pull the story out of Alex.

“I told him ‘yes, sir’, saluted and left as fast as I could.”

“Did he ever say anything again?”

“Yes, but not what you are thinking, Aunt Sophie. Three months later, she was killed in a helicopter crash in the Hemland province. I never did find out what she was doing on that Black Hawk medevac helicopter. She shouldn’t have been on it.”

Alex didn’t have to explain much about Afghanistan to Sophie. Wherever Alex served, Sophie had a map and learned more about the region than most intelligence agencies did. She tracked Alex’s moves based on codes they had developed.

“It was a rough time for me. Rick helped me through it, gave me a safe outlet, and made me use my own psychological skills to regain a healthier viewpoint. He got in trouble, though, for spending so much time with a female subordinate, me, after-hours in his quarters. His CO called him in and read him the riot act for conduct unbecoming of an officer, supposedly, improprieties with a subordinate officer. That is one thing about the military I don’t miss. Guilty until proven innocent.

“Rick, probably unwisely, took him to task. As Rick tells it, after he explained that he was providing support for a soldier that had lost a comrade in battle and that he was not having any kind of inappropriate relationship, asked the general if the general would be having this conversation with him if I had been a man. I think the conversation with the general probably was part of the impetus for Rick taking retirement when he did.”

The co-pilot roused Alex from her thoughts and said to buckle up. They had started their approach to Missoula and would land in about 10 minutes. She asked him if there was time for another glass of wine. He returned with a refill and a slip of paper. Surprisingly, it turned out to be a 1996 Ignoble Charmant (Merlot) from a small vineyard in Deming, New Mexico. Alex mused to herself, *I’ll just bet there will be many more surprises to come*, as she sipped the wine slowly this time.

^^^

The scent of stew permeated the entire house with a delicious tomato and onion bouquet. Sophie heard a car door slam, followed by, “Okay to come in?”

Jules had arrived and was making her way to the kitchen. Jules knew that she’d gain five pounds if she stayed the rest of the week, but oh hell, it was worth it. She loved to eat and appreciated home cooking as much as gourmet fare.

When she settled herself in the kitchen, she made idle talk with Sophie until Rick showed up twenty minutes later.

“What time did Jake take off?” Jules inquired.

“Around 4:00 p.m. this afternoon. I’m surprised your paths didn’t cross on Route 93,” answered Rick as he washed up in the sink.

“Do you two still have more work to finish?” continued Jules.

“Yes, we never made it up to the mountains today. We were thinking of going out tomorrow, camping and coming back Friday afternoon. Want to come?” invited Rick.

Before Jules could answer, Sophie chimed in, “Where did you and Jake eat lunch today?”

“Sorry Sophie, I should have called you. Jake picked up a couple of sandwiches and cookies when he bought the groceries this morning.”

“No problem. Just didn’t want you boys to go hungry. Would you please set the table and figure out what you all want to drink?”

“Sure thing,” answered Rick good naturedly. He had never minded Sophie’s manner of asking a question but clearly meaning there was an expectation of compliance.

^^^

It was 7:00 p.m. when Jules’ phone rang. Looking at the caller ID, she recognized the call coming from Jake.

“You got her? Any problems? What time do you think you’ll be here? Sophie has dinner for the two of you, so I hope you didn’t ruin your appetite with a McDonald’s run. Okay, see you in a few.” She turned to Rick and Sophie, “Jake’s got her, no problems with the flight. They’ll be here soon.”

A few minutes after 8:00 p.m., Ruby and Rowdy flew out their dog door long before Rick, Jules, or Sophie heard

the SUV. “Must be coming up the drive,” muttered Rick, as he got up.

Jules’ phone rang and after looking at it, she abruptly got up, excused herself and went into the kitchen. Rick and Sophie went out to wait for Jake and Alex. The dogs were flanking the SUV, trying to herd it, then when it stopped, stood guard at each side. Rowdy greeted Jake with a dusty jump up on his jeans. Alex was smarter and squatted down as soon as she got out of the SUV, so Ruby wouldn’t try and jump up for a kiss. Once Rowdy realized that Alex was on the other side of the car, he raced around and bullied his way in front of Ruby. By the time the dogs’ excitement was contained, Jake had carried in both his and Alex’s bags. Rick showed him the way to his and Jules’ rooms.

Sophie ran down the steps and hugged Alex. Alex held Sophie at arm’s length and inquired how Sophie was doing with all the excitement. Sophie asked Alex if Jake had briefed her at all, though Sophie didn’t think even Alex would get much out of Jake.

“Nope, he didn’t. Kept saying that he thought it was better to hear everything from Rick and you. I am beginning to wonder what kind of shrink I am if I couldn’t get this guy to talk the entire trip.”

“Speaking of the trip, did you get air sick?” asked Sophie.

“No, not this time, so I’m ready to eat. That is,” Alex said tongue in cheek, “if you have something ready.”

With linked arms, and dutiful dogs following, they made their way into the kitchen. Rick came down from settling in Jake and Jules who had made her way upstairs after her call.

“Are the two sleuths coming down?” asked Sophie.

“Jules said they’d join us in about an hour,” responded Rick, appreciating their sensitivity in allowing Rick, Sophie, and Alex time alone.

“Alex, started Sophie, “I hope you don’t mind, but I put Jake in your room with the private bath and have you and Jules in the rooms with the connecting bath. I didn’t think it was proper for Jake and Jules to share a bathroom.”

“You and Rick share a bathroom,” teased Alex.

Rick groaned and slumped down in his chair, wishing he could hide under the table with the dogs. They had kept their relationship quiet and clandestine for several years, or so they thought. Everyone at the ranch knew but never said anything, respecting their privacy.

Sophie indignantly, and with a bad fake British accent, shot back, “My dear, we may share a bed on occasion, but we never, ever, share a bathroom!”

Rick, laughing, just shook his head, while turning beet red. Alex laughed until she had tears in her eyes.

“All right you two clowns. Enough of this tom foolery. Let’s get down to business.” Sophie slid a bowl of piping hot stew and two slices of her home baked bread in front of Alex. “Would you like something to drink?”

“Dr. Pepper, please.”

While Alex ate, Rick and Sophie laid out details of the proposed arrangement. Alex ate steadily, listening carefully. By the time Rick and Sophie had covered all the bases, Alex was eating a piece of apple pie Sophie had made earlier in the day.

“You’re uncharacteristically quiet. No questions?” asked Sophie.

“Oh, yeah, lots, but only one for you two. Right now, without any more information, what are your guts telling you?”

Rick answered first. “I think there is some risk, but minimal.” Sophie remained quiet until prompted by Alex.

“Alex, I agree with Rick, but I can’t help shake the feeling that it’s an opportunity we can’t pass up.”

“Aunt Sophie, if you don’t do this, realistically, what are the chances of keeping the ranch intact?” Alex knew that

Sophie had to mortgage the ranch to pay for her uncle's cancer treatments and with improvements they had made to turn the ranch into a part-time dude ranch, there was a pretty hefty financial obligation. However, she had no idea how serious the situation had become.

"Alex, we're facing having to sell off a good portion of the ranch for development without this deal," Sophie answered straightforwardly, deciding it was not the time to hem and haw.

"Aunt Sophie, why didn't you tell me? I could have given you what I had in savings instead of buying Reggie out. It would have been okay moving to an apartment," groaned Alex.

"No sweetie. You went through enough trauma. You didn't need to be chased out of your house."

Alex dropped her head, shook it left to right, then focused on Rick. "And you, why didn't you clue me in?" she said angrily.

"You know why Alex," Rick answered non-defensively.

Alex continued to shake her head with pursed lips, but this time it was with an up and down motion, signaling Rick that she knew his hands had been tied by Sophie, probably upon pain of not letting him back in her bed again! She let it slide and returned to her next question.

"One more question. Since you asked me to come out here, I am assuming you two want my input. Is that a fair statement?" she asked. Sophie and Rick were nodding their heads. Alex continued, "Well then, it looks like we have to do some more work to make sure we're all in agreement, one way or the other. I want to meet this Jules, tonight, but not do any heavy talking. I'll take her out on the property tomorrow, sort of get relaxed, you know, and get a sense of her."

Rick was rolling his eyes, anticipating some psychobabble bull shit about how getting to know Jules

would give them clues as to her real motives. Alex stared him down.

“Look, you gecko, don’t go putting down any of my psychological techniques. They served us well in Afghanistan, so just “f” off!”

Although Alex had said this good naturedly, Sophie turned from the sink and playing indignant, sharply said, “Alex, watch your language.”

Alex muttered “I’m sorry Aunt Sophie” and Rick performed a mock salute to Alex, “Aye, aye, General Shrink,” and they both laughed.

Ruby and Rowdy got up from under the table. It looked like Alex was finished eating and no more surreptitious scraps would be coming their way. They were headed outside, when they turned and looked up at the back stairs. Alex had her back to the stairs and did not see Jules coming down. Rick only noticed because the dogs were looking. She was very quiet, probably not wanting to intrude, or maybe it was an occupational habit. Rick invited her in. “Jules, come meet Alex.”

Jules walked toward the alcove and got to the table as Alex was getting up to turn around. Sophie turned from the sink to observe. One of Alex’s skills Rick had profited from while in Afghanistan, was her uncanny ability to size up someone quickly. Ninety percent of the time she was right.

Jules extended a hand, warmly saying, “You must be Alex. I’m glad you came.”

Alex took her outstretched hand but didn’t speak. She just stood there holding Jules’ hand, laser eyes locked on hers. Jules didn’t move either, meeting Alex’s gaze straight on. Rick and Sophie threw each other a look; they felt a current surging through the air. Something inexplicable seemed to suspend the women in time and space.

Sophie clocked the scene. Jules was dark, slim, athletic, lithe, like a dancer. Alex was the antithesis. She was shorter and had softer curves, the pale creamy skin of northern

Italian descent, collar length blond hair with strawberry and light brown highlights. Her eyes were a gentle hue of sage and moss with specs of cinnamon giving them a soothing look, and her soft cheeks framing a voluptuous mouth, made it appear that she was always about to break into a smile.

Alex was the first to punctuate the reverie with a subdued, “Do I know you from somewhere?”

Jules didn’t make a move to disengage from the handshake. “What gave you that impression?”

“Your eyes. There’s something familiar about them,” said Alex, stumbling over her words a little, feeling oddly embarrassed and at the same time electrified.

Cool and composed, still holding her hand, Jules told her, “Hmm, that’s interesting, but I don’t believe we’ve ever been introduced prior to this evening.” Jules had chosen her words carefully, avoiding an outright lie.

Alex, reluctant to break the handshake, finally gave up trying to place Jules and shakily pulled out a chair for her. Jules, eager to avoid any more questions from Alex, moved the conversation along as a parent does when trying to get a reluctant toddler to bed.

“Alex, you’ve had a long trip, and I know that Sophie and Rick filled you in on the basics, so I thought that you and I could spend some time together tomorrow getting your questions answered and contacting Claire’s doctors. What do you think?”

“Sounds okay to me.” Alex was still distracted and had the strong sense that she knew this woman from somewhere.

Jules continued, “I’d really like to see the trails that are used with the guests. Are you game?”

Rick, no stranger to Alex’s ‘tells’ saw that she was not fully focused on what Jules was saying. He chimed in to give Alex a moment to regroup. “Jake and I will be taking ATVs over a good portion of the property and then camping out, unless you need us for something.”

Alex's attention snapped back. "Terrific idea." She'd get to talk to Jules without Sophie and Rick around. "I'll have a couple of horses saddled and ready to go right after breakfast. You do you ride, right?"

"Well, I haven't ridden recently, but I'm up for it."

"Is eight o'clock too early for you? I don't know if that gives you enough time for your beauty rest," mildly joked Alex in an attempt to be friendly. "Be sure and bring a jacket. It's still cold in the mornings."

Jules said goodnight and excused herself, going back upstairs. Alex followed on her heels, eager to get to bed. She was tired. Rick and Sophie were left in the kitchen contemplating the whole scene, when Sophie asked, "Rick, did you feel it too? What just happened?"

Rick shaking his head said, "Hell if I know, but something electrifying is brewing."

^^^

CHAPTER 5—Flashback

*“Those with the greatest awareness have the greatest nightmares!”
Mahatma Gandhi*

Friday April 10

It was 2:00 a.m. At least that’s what the clock on the nightstand said. Jules woke up to muffled sounds coming from Alex’s room. She had forgotten to close the door to the adjoining bathroom and could hear Alex’s vague moaning sounds. Lying there, she listened as the sounds intensified. Getting out of bed, she made her way through the bathroom, and cracked open the door that went into Alex’s room. The full moon was waxing, and Alex had not closed the curtains. Moonlight immersed the room and Jules saw that Alex was thrashing in the grasp of a nightmare. She waited a few moments, not wanting to intrude, though Alex’s laments were becoming louder and more coherent, as coherent as a nightmare would allow.

“Take cover, get down. God damn it, get your asses down!” She wasn’t quite screaming, but her tone was fiercely intense and urgent. She twisted and turned in the bed, throwing herself face down. “I’m hit, I’m hit,” she cried out in pain. Flopping again on the bed, she lay on her side, in a semi-fetal position, repeating, “Stay where you are; that’s an order!”

Alex was having a flashback. Jules made the decision to wake her, even if she would catch guff later. Sitting on the bed and holding Alex’s shoulders, she pulled her up to a sitting position, put one arm around her back, the other on the back of her head, not out of tenderness; she just didn’t want Alex to sock her in the face with her flailing arms or hit her head. “Wake up Alex. Wake up. You’re having a nightmare. You’re safe. Wake up.”

Alex stopped struggling and went slack in Jules' arms. She was drenched in sweat, yet still smelled of rose and chamomile. Laying Alex back down on the bed, Jules, her lips close to Alex's cheek, whispered, "It's okay, you were having a bad nightmare."

Alex was still a bit disoriented. Though Jules had never experienced flashbacks herself, she knew that sometimes people who did were disoriented for a little while after the episode. She waited. In a minute, Alex said, "Was I shouting? How did you hear me?"

"I left the bathroom door open. You were loud enough for me to hear you. I'm sorry if I invaded your privacy, but I recognized the signs of a flashback."

"Thank you. I'll be all right now."

Jules had been dismissed, but she didn't take it personally and asked, "Do you have flashbacks often?"

"No, not since I got out of the Marines. I can't imagine what triggered it."

Jules watched Alex, who seemed to still be groggy. She didn't want Alex to be pulled back into the nightmare, so she got up, went into the bathroom, and wet two washcloths with cold water. Sitting back down on the bed next to Alex, she laid one of the washcloths on Alex's forehead. With the other, she wiped down her cheeks and neck.

"Would you like a drink of water, Alex?"

Alex looked up at her and nodded almost imperceptibly. Jules found a paper cup in the bathroom, filled it with water and returned. She took the washcloth off Alex's forehead, put her left arm under Alex's shoulders, and helped her up far enough that she could drink without spilling it. Taking one more look at Alex, she thought she was okay

"Alex, I'm going to return to my room now, but I'll keep the doors open in case you have another episode."

Alex didn't argue. While Alex didn't know what triggered the flashback, Jules had a good idea. Alex may

have recognized her on some subconscious level earlier in the evening, which in turn, had triggered the episode. If this were true, it was only a matter of time before the subconscious perception seeped into her waking consciousness.

^^^

The next morning, Rick and Sophie were already down in the kitchen waiting for the others. Rick had been up early and fixed scrambled eggs, biscuits with homemade preserves, and juice. Alex came down first.

“Sweetie, did you have a nightmare last night? I thought I heard something, got up, but then, things were quiet.”

“Yeah, Aunt Sophie, I did. Sorry to have awakened you.”

“Don’t worry about that, I just wanted to make sure you were all right,” responded Sophie.

“I’m fine and raring to go. Any word from our two guests?” inquired Alex.

“Not yet. Why don’t you sit down and eat, while I pack a lunch for you and Jules? Rick, will lunch, dinner, and breakfast for tomorrow be enough for you and Jake? By the way, how did you introduce Jake to Dean, just so I don’t contradict you?”

Rick, proud of himself, puffed up his chest and said, “Told Dean that Jake was doing a survey of the property for an asset re-evaluation. You were thinking of refinancing the mortgage and he’d be around off and on during the summer seeing how the place was run. He didn’t ask anything more after that.”

“That was pretty creative,” said Alex between bites of her strawberry jam laden biscuit.

Rick smiled broadly. “Why thank you. There is an element of truth to it, don’t ya think?”

Jake came down first, dressed again in jeans, with a fresh cowboy shirt and brand spanking new cowboy boots. He was comical, trying hard to fit into the surroundings.

Jules followed a few minutes later. She had on curve-hugging blue jeans, a nicely tailored button-down blue oxford and paddock boots; a sure sign that she had been around horses more than a little.

After eating, they all picked up their plates, carried them to the sink and headed to the barn. On their way up to the mountains, they would stop by the house and pick up the provisions. Jake and Rick went to the equipment shed, an adjunct to the barn. Alex and Jules heard the roar of the ATV engines, followed by zooming up the road toward the house.

^^^“Dean, can we get Jules outfitted with a horse? We’re going to be riding most of the day.”

“Howdy ma’am. You a friend of Alex’s?”

After a quick look at Alex, Jules answered Dean, “Why yes, yes I am. How are you this morning?”

“Where’d you meet Alex?” queried Dean, ignoring Jules’s polite inquiry as to his wellbeing.

Alex jumped in, “We’re Marine buddies, both served in Afghanistan. Jules’ eyes widened; a movement not lost on Alex. Jules thought that Alex might have remembered and was waiting for the shoe to drop.

Dean seemed satisfied and got back to business. “You know how to ride?”

“It’s been a while, but I rode hunter jumper in college,” answered Jules.

“Is that like steeple chase, with those skimpy little saddles?” asked Dean.

“Yes, and those skimpy little saddles are much easier on the horse than the twenty-pound Western saddles,” challenged Jules.

“You’ve been out of touch, girlie. We only use neoprene saddles here. Light as a feather.” Dean smiled with superiority. Jules, sufficiently rebuked, shrugged her shoulders and caught a quick glimpse of Alex. She was stifling a grin.

Dean picked out a seven-year-old mare that had good manners but still had a little spunk. “This here is Goldie. You’ll like her. Real steady but can get down and go with the best of them. Wanna start brushing her while I get Alex’s mount? Alex, you want to ride Tommy boy?”

“Sure, Dean. Is he as naughty as ever?”

“For everyone but you, Alex.”

Soon the women were saddled up and heading the quarter mile back to the house to pick up the lunch that Sophie packed. Alex watched Jules. She had quiet hands and used her legs to direct the horse, as opposed to yanking on the reins, as most novices do. Goldie, the mare she was riding, seemed to appreciate Jules’s gentle hands. They went around to the back of the house and Sophie came out with a saddlebag. In one side she had packed sandwiches, fruit, and cookies, and in the other, bottled water. Alex jumped off Tommy Boy, throwing the reins to Jules. She tied down the saddlebag, hugged and kissed Sophie, remounted, and headed east, down to the river.

Alex and Sophie’s affection toward each other left Jules a little sad and wanting. Her childhood, by all accounts, was perfect, except that her parents were cold and doled out affection as a reward, not like Sophie who dispensed warmth and fondness with Alex like an artesian spring, always flowing, never freezing over. She had to admit that she was envious.

The path was still wide enough for the two women to ride side by side. Alex picked up a trot with Jules following suit. Jules rode very relaxed and moved with the horse, sitting deep in the saddle to minimize the jarring of the trot. Alex turned to Jules and asked if she was up for a canter. Before she could answer, Alex cued Tommy Boy. Looking back over her left shoulder, Alex could see that Jules eased her Goldie into a slow and rhythmic canter without any problem. They rode north along the river for fifteen minutes, before the river veered east. The relatively flat trail began to

climb and narrow. Alex took the lead, slowing Tommy Boy to a walk. They continued to climb for another fifteen minutes, winding through a mixed conifer and deciduous forest. Jules was glad that she had brought a jacket. It was much cooler in the woods than it was riding along the river. Neither woman spoke. Alex loved riding in the woods, she knew like the back of her hand from canvassing the property as a child. She had always taken solace in the deep green silence. Jules was quiet for another reason. She was intelligence gathering. When they came to a small clearing, the path leveled out and widened again. Jules rode up next to Alex.

“Alex, are there a series of trails that crisscross each other in this general area?”

“Yes, but they all end up at the same place.”

There were two trails that exited the clearing, not including the one that they rode in on. Alex chose the path to the extreme right. The trail steepened almost immediately. Both riders leaned forward in the saddle to help the horses negotiate the uphill climb. They climbed steadily for another ten or fifteen minutes, then the trail cut due east, traversing the hill.

Jules asked if the trails had been cut to challenge both the horses and riders and if the section they were on now, had been designed to give the horse a rest. Alex was mildly impressed with Jules’ perception but wasn’t willing to give the farm away just yet. Another fifteen minutes passed, and the trail abruptly turned north again. They climbed steadily for another ten minutes, then they broke into another clearing. This one was level; larger than the small clearing they went through forty-five minutes ago. Soft greenish yellow grass was beginning to sprout after a winter nap.

Alex hopped off Tommy Boy, tied the reins to a tree branch and announced, “Let’s let the horses rest for a while.”

Jules dismounted Goldie, tying her a couple of trees away from Tommy Boy. She joined Alex, who had perched

on a fallen tree log and was deep breathing. She loved the musty scent of the forest.

“Alex, I made arrangements for you to talk to Claire’s psychiatrist this afternoon about four o’clock and then with Dr. Metuchi and Claire tomorrow.”

“Good. Thank you.” Alex turned to look at Jules. *She is so beautiful but seems to be unaware of how striking she really is. I wonder if...* Alex filed away her thought as Jules spoke.

“Is there any background information you want from me before talking to Dr. Metuchi?”

“If you’re willing. Aunt Sophie and Rick told me what you had shared with them, but I have a feeling that they got the sanitized version.”

“They got the whole picture on how she is now, but I had my reasons for leaving out the specifics of her injuries, both physical and mental. There was no need to burden your Aunt with explicit details. I didn’t want to paint such a sad picture of Claire as a victim that your Aunt Sophie would have agreed to the deal solely from feeling sorry. In addition, I figured that you and I would have a conversation.”

Alex believed that Jules was sincere but decided to challenge her. “Why does it matter if Aunt Sophie agrees to your proposal from feeling sorry about Claire, or for some other reason?”

Lightly touching Alex on her forearm, Jules responded, “That might lead to ‘buyer’s remorse’ down the road if things get rough. I’d much rather give a realistic preview. That way everyone knows what they are getting into.”

Thinking that Jules’ reason made sense, Alex asked, “Ok, did you sanitize any part of the story?”

Jules easily responded, “No. I told her as much as we know right now.”

“I’m sorry if I doubted you, but I have to have all the facts in order to advise my aunt properly.”

Jules did not gloat. “I completely understand. Things are a little topsy-turvy right now. This is personal for you. The welfare of the people you love is at stake.”

Alex was quiet, recognizing Jules’ graceful concession. *This woman is classy, and oh so hot.* “You’re right. I’m short-sighted when it comes to Aunt Sophie’s wellbeing. Let me see if I can remember what we were talking about. Oh yeah, why do you think the kidnapping was personal?”

“It’s just a hunch. I can’t speak to the reasons. You’re the forensic psychologist, maybe you can provide some insight.” Jules’ comment was not meant to be condescending or sarcastic, though she feared that Alex would jump to that conclusion.

Thinking for a moment, Alex continued. “Was she raped? God, how I hate that term.”

Jules shrugged her shoulders as she said, “She says she was not raped, but then she didn’t remember how she got the other injuries.”

“Classic repression?” asked Alex.

“Maybe, but I’m not convinced,” answered Jules. “She doesn’t remember much.”

“What did the physical examination show?” Alex was busy formulating a theory and needed additional data.

“It supported her story, that she wasn’t raped. There was no semen, no vaginal tearing, no pubic hairs, and no bruising.”

Alex was deep in thought. Jules waited patiently.

“Jules, what if the kidnapper used a condom? Would that change the thought that there wasn’t a rape?” I wonder why she can’t remember. Hmm. What if she was in a state of conscious sedation?”

“What does that mean?”

Alex explained. “It’s when a pharmaceutical is administered to allow the patient to respond to commands and maintain their breathing without assistance but, probably won’t remember anything afterwards. Amnesia is

common. That could explain why she insists she wasn't raped. She doesn't remember. There are three primary ways that sedation can be administered. First, by IV, which produces a profound amnesia. Any indication of needle marks, particularly IV's?"

"I don't know that they looked."

"It could have been overlooked," Alex continued. We also have to look at the possibility of External Conscious Sedation, induced by an orally administered pill. Typically, the patient relaxes and falls asleep. It's hard to predict the level of amnesia that can occur, because each person responds differently, but with the right combination, the amnesia can also be profound. I'd rule out the third method, which is Inhalation, used in dentistry offices for years. You know, Nitrous Oxide, or 'laughing gas'. This would have been too cumbersome. One other thing, if the physicians weren't specifically looking for sedation pharmaceuticals, they wouldn't have shown up on a typical tox screen."

Jules didn't respond right away. She was wondering if Alex would come to the same conclusion that a consulting forensic psychologist did. Alex got up and paced, obviously talking to herself. "Jules, I'm sure you have had the best people look at this, right? Besides Metuchi, you probably called in a forensic expert?"

"Yes. We consulted with a retired FBI profiler and forensic psychologist. Do you know Ansel Fahad?"

"I've never met him but know of his work. He's solid. What did he say?"

"I'd be more interested in your thoughts before I tell you what conclusions he drew." Jules wasn't giving anything up at this point.

"Nothing like performance pressure," groaned Alex.

Half amused, Jules' lips curled, as Alex continued. "Without talking to Claire, it's really difficult to speculate. You can't hold me to this."

"Fair enough" uttered Jules.

“Well, then, I’d speculate that one of two things could have taken place. First, the person or persons who were responsible for the kidnapping gave specific instructions to their cohorts who held Claire not to sexually abuse her, maybe under the threat of not getting paid. If this were the case, chances are that the mastermind was a woman. The second possibility is that the mastermind was a man, but the person holding her was a woman. Both scenarios would explain the lack of sexual abuse. I’d bet money that we are dealing with a male-female team.”

Jules was impressed. Alex seemed to have a gift. Even hearing information second and third hand, without the benefit of any of the written reports and medical records, or talking to Claire, in fifteen minutes, she came to the same conclusion as the FBI guy did after two weeks of investigation and deliberation.

“I have a few more questions, Jules. Did Claire remember if her captor was male or female or did she have an impression if her captor was male or female?”

“No. The only thing she remembered is that the person was taller than she and always wore gloves. Claire said the hood she was forced to wear prevented her from seeing anything, plus the person never spoke to her. She didn’t remember any particular scent, except diesel.”

“Then the person holding her could be either male or female,” answered Alex. “Do we know if Claire is rebellious? Would she have tried to fight the kidnappers?”

Jules told Alex that Claire was restrained on a bed and allowed to use the bathroom at regular intervals. The tox screen showed low levels of valium, so she probably was mildly sedated to make her easier to control. Then she added,

“Claire was described by both her father and stepmother as passive and non-aggressive. It seems out of character for Claire to resist, unless she got the sense that she was expendable.”

Alex thought a moment, trying to pull something from her memory. “That makes sense. Valium combined with Midazolam can induce conscious sedation. The Midazolam has a rapid onset and it doesn’t last very long. The presence of valium, which lasts longer, as much as forty-eight hours, could indicate that Midazolam was added to induce the sedation. With that combination, there would likely be no recollection, and meanwhile, the Valium would have kept her mildly sedated to reduce any combativeness. Then something changes, and she senses she is expendable, somehow she rallies and escapes.

“I think this tends to point to a very personal kidnapping, possibly with people that Claire might recognize.”

Jules was pensive. Alex waited patiently for a minute or two, then asked, “Shall I go on?”

Jules nodded, interested in Alex’s impressions.

“I’m sure your guy at the FBI also considered that Claire might be involved as a perpetrator.”

“Yes, but only for a minute,” answered Jules.

“What did he conclude?”

“There wasn’t a scrap of evidence of Claire’s complicity and it also didn’t make sense from the ransom perspective. Claire has much more than the \$6 million in her trust fund.

“Hmm, Fahad probably is right, though perhaps the kidnapping wasn’t about the money. It wouldn’t be too big a leap to theorize that Claire was sick and tired of her father’s control and set out to teach him a lesson. This might satisfy a pathological need,” offered Alex.

Agitated, Jules jumped all over Alex. “Are you saying that there is a possibility that Claire is mentally disturbed and did this to herself? There’s not a lick of evidence that would lead anyone to that conclusion.”

Afraid to go down a slippery slope, Alex decided to dole out what she was considering in small measures. “Possibly.

Many times, individuals can lead a pretty normal life and still harbor psychosis, that with the right stimulus, can take over.”

“Go on,” ordered Jules.

“Well, it is possible that she suffers from Munchausen Syndrome and something pushed her over the edge.” Alex wondered if Jules even knew what Munchausen’s was. Most people had misconceptions about the mental disease.

Surprised and incredulous, Jules, asked, “What? Doesn’t Munchausen’s usually refer to a parent inflicting injury on a child to get attention?”

“Give the girl an A+.” sang out Alex. “Technically, you’re right. Munchausen’s is typically associated with a pattern of harm and the cases best known, in which an adult inflicts harm on a child, are called Munchausen’s by Proxy.”

.I think that there could be a possibility of a single-incident Munchausen with Claire as her own perpetrator. I’ve done enough work to know that it is possible.”

Jules caught on right away. Alex appreciated not having to explain in lay terms. “So, what you are saying is that Claire could be both the perpetrator and victim of self-induced Munchausen’s.”

“Yes, exactly”.

“Even if Claire didn’t manifest any personality disorders pre-kidnapping, she may still have suffered a Munchausen’s episode. Did Fahad even consider this possibility?”

“No, he didn’t. You’re the only one who has proposed this as a working theory.”

“Whoa, hold on Jules. I said nothing about a working theory. I’m just trying to cover all possibilities, even though remote. I wouldn’t want to put a line in the sand and stake my professional reputation on this.” I haven’t even seen the girl.”

“Understood, Alex. We’ll keep this to ourselves for now, all right?”

“Yes, but as farfetched as this may seem, if there is even a remote chance, and I mean, one chance in a million that Claire is her own perpetrator, then there is no way that I would want her here. Her presence would present a patent danger to everyone around.” Alex knew what this meant for Jules. She looked dejected knowing that this was going to be a deal breaker.

Jules, trying to hide her disappointment, reached out and lightly touched Alex’s hand. “Of course, I certainly understand, but you yourself said it was a long shot.”

Alex could see that this was a huge setback for Jules. She turned her hand over and interlaced her fingers with Jules’, “I’m sorry to rock the boat. I know this puts a wrench in your plans. However, just as you pointed out earlier, my first duty is to Aunt Sophie.”

“I’d probably have the same concerns if I were in your shoes,” offered Jules, trying to be gracious and understanding.

Alex non-verbally acknowledged Jules’ sensitivity by squeezing her hand and then asked. “Who diagnosed the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder?”

“She saw three psychiatrists and they all agreed. Metuchi, the one she sees now, is an expert in PTSD.” Jules was amazed at how fast Alex switched from a virtual dismissal of the proposal to hunt down additional information.

“Is she on medication in addition to therapy?”

“Yes, she’s been on Propranolol, I think that’s what it’s called, for the depression and Zyprexa.”

“Zyprexa is an antipsychotic,” interjected Alex, wondering if her theory wasn’t as farfetched as she originally thought. “Does she exhibit signs of agitation and hyper vigilance? Sometimes Zyprexa helps, sometimes not.”

“That would be a discussion for this afternoon with Dr. Metuchi,” responded Jules.

“Is there anything that feels ‘off’ to you about the kidnapping and her recovery? Try and forget what I said about Munchausen’s for now.” Alex’s mind was grinding.

Jules thought for a moment, then said, “Funny you should ask. There has been something nagging in the back of my head, but I can’t put my finger on it. We’ve been through the particulars of the entire ordeal numerous times and nothing jumps out at me. Maybe I’m just naturally suspicious.”

“Ah, yes. Rational paranoia,” joked Alex zinging Jules again. “Speaking of something in the back of the mind, I still can’t shake the feeling that you and I have met before. Were you in Afghanistan a few years ago?”

“Yes. I was with the MCIA. The intel side of things.”

“Were you ever in the Hemland Province? Perhaps Camp Dwyer?”

“I may have passed through the Province, but I was never at Camp Dwyer.” Jules hurriedly changed the subject. “What other questions about Claire do you have?”

“You’ve been around Claire post-abduction. Do you really think this is the right thing for her? I mean, wouldn’t she be better off in a private institution? We certainly know she would if she were suffering from Munchausen’s.”

“Personally, I didn’t think she’d be better off in an institution, before talking to you. She’s starting to cope with her symptoms and sees the need to reconnect with the world. I’d probably defer to Dr. Metuchi.”

“Did Claire choose Metuchi?”

“I don’t think so. Why?”

“Jules, it’s important to know who chose Metuchi. Can you get that information?”

“Yes of course.”

Alex bobbed her head, thinking. Jules saw where Alex was going with this. Butterflies were fluttering up a storm in Jules' stomach.

"Do you know if they have been seen together outside of a professional context before or after treatment began?", inquired Alex.

"Alex, I'm not liking this at all. We vetted Metuchi in the first go around. What have you picked up?"

"Nothing yet, but I want to know with what I'm dealing."

"All right, I don't know, but I'll get someone on it right now. Is there a cellular signal up here?" Jules pulled out her cellphone, ready to dial.

"Coverage is spotty at best. You can make calls on the mesa, where the house is, and to the east. There's nothing to the west, north and south. You might try though, we're high enough."

Jules saw that the signal was weak, dialed anyway, and got through. She asked for Mickey. Apparently, Mickey answered because Jules was outlining what she wanted done ASAP. She ended the call with, "Mickey, don't let Metuchi, Claire or the Bentworths catch you and call me at once, either way." Jules returned the phone to its leather case and turned to Alex. "We set up an appointment for you to talk with Metuchi this afternoon. Do you think it's wise to bring up the idea of Munchausen's?"

Alex shook her head several times, then spoke. "I don't think we should share any of our theories with her right now."

"My thoughts too," answered Jules.^^^

Alex held Goldie while Jules slipped her left leg into the stirrup and threw her right leg over the back of the horse. She took the reins from Alex and waited for Alex to mount and lead the way. They continued alternating traversing then climbing the hill for another hour until they could go no

further. The hill backed up to a tall craggy peak that stood like a sentry over another sculpted clearing. There was a corral, a good-sized lean-to, and an outhouse. They unbridled the horses so they could munch on hay Alex took out from under a tarp in the lean-to. There was a water trough in the corral. Water flowed in from a diverted creek, then out again, back to the stream, assuring the horses a fresh supply of water.

Jules was walking stiffly, but not complaining. It was only eleven o'clock, but both of them were hungry. Alex dusted off a bench under the lean-to and moved it up against the hay, so they'd have something to lean against. She unpacked the sandwiches, fruit, cookies and water and set them on the bench between herself and Jules. When they finished, Alex asked, "How are you feeling? The air up here is thinner, and some folks get dizzy, or get a headache."

"I feel fine, though my legs are a little stiff."

Alex, grinning, taunted Jules. "Probably from hanging on to Goldie for dear life, when we made the last climb."

Equally as good natured, Jules retorted, "And I've got the ride down ahead of us. I look forward to more clinging."

Alex got up and from a set of lockers, pulled out a blanket. "Want to sit in the sun? I think it's cold here."

In a flash, Jules was up from the bench. "Here, let me help you."

They chose a spot in full sunlight, spread the blanket, and sat down. Before long, Alex laid back on the blanket. Relaxing in the sun, she dozed off. She was dreaming about her aunt and uncle taking her to the state fair for the first time. She had begged them to let her ride the Ferris wheel, even though she was very susceptible to motion sickness. They finally gave in, but Alex turned green and her aunt had to ask the attendant to stop the Ferris wheel after the very first rotation to let her off before she upchucked her cotton candy. How mortified she was!

Alex awoke to a wispy touch on her face and realized that Jules was on her side, propped up on her elbow, stroking her cheek. “Wake up, Alex. Alex wake up. We need to start back.”

Alex just about jumped out of her skin, quickly sitting up. She hurriedly got off the blanket and started folding it as soon as Jules got up.

What is she so tense about? thought Jules. *Would she have preferred that I shake her awake?* None the less, Jules tried to ease Alex’s apparent embarrassment. “De ja vu, huh?”

Alex attempted a smile, but failed, thinking, *why am I so nervous around this woman?* Back on the trail again, Alex regained her composure and joked with Jules about her ‘wake up’ calls. Not stopping at the small clearing halfway down the hill, an hour and forty minutes later, they arrived in front of the barn and led the horses in. “Damn,” muttered Alex. “There’s no one here to take the horses. Looks like we’ll have to unsaddle them and rub them down ourselves.” She took a quick look at her watch and groaned just as she heard Jules say,

“Hi, do you work here?”

Matt had come into the barn and said, “Yes. I’m Matt, who are you?”

Alex butted in. “I’m Sophie’s niece and this is my friend Jules. You must be new.”

“Yeah, I started work here about two months ago.”

“Matt, we’re in a real hurry to make a four o’clock appointment, so could you unsaddle the horses and rub them down? We’d appreciate it.”

“Anything for the boss’s niece.” Taking the reins from Alex and Jules, Matt led the horses to their stalls.

“Thanks, Matt. We’ll put in a good word for you,” shouted Alex over her shoulder, as she and Jules raced to the house. They got to the house at 3:35 p.m. and didn’t stop to see where Sophie was. Racing through the great room,

thundering up the front stairs and bursting through the doors of their respective rooms, they hustled to get cleaned up. Alex was scrambling for her tape recorder when Sophie stuck her head in and asked if everything was ok. Still needing to wash up, Alex told Sophie that everything was fine. Sophie saw that Alex was harried and told her that she'd see her at dinner.

Once Alex found the tape recorder, she knocked on the bathroom door and getting no answer, went in to wash her hands and face. By the time she got downstairs, it was five minutes to four. Jules was already in the office, still in her jeans and boots, but she had changed her oxford to a clean polo shirt. She looked up at Alex. "Do you want me here while you're talking to Dr. Metuchi?"

Thinking about it for a minute, Alex told her yes, then asked if she wanted Metuchi to know she was in the room. Jules bounced the question back to Alex.

"Sure, why not? I think her guard would be down, since she knows you," replied Alex.

"Ok, let's go for it," taking out a phone card and dialing, she waited for Metuchi to answer. Alex spent an hour asking Metuchi questions. She finished the call with the sense that Metuchi was a competent, though conventional psychiatrist. She had taken a very conservative approach with Claire's therapy and on the face of it, there had been progress. Alex and Jules debriefed each other and shared impressions agreeing to listen to the tape again later in the evening.

Both wandered into the kitchen where they found Sophie rubbing three rib eye steaks with olive oil, garlic powder, salt and pepper. She set them aside to warm up to room temperature. Sophie was of the opinion that a cold steak never liked a hot grill.

"Hi, you two. Just us girls for dinner tonight. Thought I'd grill us some steaks and Alex, if you want, I can make the salad you like with grilled potatoes, goat cheese and fennel."

“Yum, want me to slice the potatoes?” offered Alex.

“Do you remember how to season them?” quizzed Sophie.

“Olive oil, rosemary, salt, pepper, and balsamic vinegar.”

“Jules, how do you like your steak?”

“Medium rare, please”. She asked if she could do anything and when both Sophie and Alex said no, she excused herself and headed back to the office, over her shoulder winking at Alex.

“We’ll call you when dinner is ready,” Sophie called out.

“Thanks. Looking forward it,” answered Jules from the Great Room.

Sophie and Alex continued to work in silence until Sophie couldn’t contain herself any longer. “You like her, don’t you?”

“I think so, Aunt Sophie, but I get a little nervous around her.”

“You do? Do you know why?”

Role reversal, thought Alex, *Sophie’s playing shrink again*. When Alex didn’t answer, Sophie plunged on. “Honey, are you attracted to her?”

“Oh, for gosh sakes, Aunt Sophie, just because I’m gay doesn’t mean I’m attracted to every beautiful woman I meet!”

“So, you think she’s beautiful?” asked Sophie enjoying making Alex squirm a little.

“That’s not what I meant, Aunt Sophie. She is beautiful. Actually, she’s stunning, but that isn’t what attracts me.”

“Then you are attracted to her?”

“Aunt Sophie, enough! I’m not attracted to her. *Liar*. She just makes me nervous, ok?” Alex was frustrated with Sophie and wasn’t taking the teasing in stride. Maybe she was attracted to Jules, but there was something else and it was something she couldn’t verbalize.

“Does it have to do with you thinking you’ve met her before?” Sophie added, trying to diffuse Alex’s frustration.

“Maybe. I just can’t verbalize it yet, Aunt Sophie. Can we talk about something else?”

“Sure. Why don’t you sit down and have some coffee with me? I made brownies, said Sophie, conceding that the teasing was over. They continued to chat about the condition of the trails, the lean-to needing repairing and the new guy, Matt, while they both munched away on brownies with pecans, Alex’s favorite.

Dinner was terrific, the steaks perfect, the grilled potatoes, goat cheese, fennel and spring mix of greens was as gourmet as one would find in any fine restaurant. They sipped coffee on the porch and watched the sun give up its last hold on the western sky, its apricot hue fading gracefully until it settled below the mountains for forty winks. With the disappearance of the sun, the temperature quickly slipped into the forties. Ruby and Rowdy lay at Alex’s feet, sleeping with one eye open, just looking for an excuse to be unruly. Sophie offered to get blankets for the three of them, but Alex and Jules declined, saying they had more work to do.

“All right you two. Go do your work. So much for showing gratitude to an old woman for such a fine meal. At least you washed and dried the dishes. Come on babies, let’s go inside. My bones are getting too old to sit out here in this cold.” Responding to “Come on babies”, the two dogs followed Sophie in, haughtily looking at Alex, then giving in, planting kisses on her dangling hand.

On the way upstairs, Alex told Jules that she was going to get a shower first. About forty-five minutes later, Jules knocked on Alex’s bedroom door.

“Come in.”

Alex was seated on the bed, wearing a ‘Go Marines’ T-shirt and boxers. *Cute*, thought Jules. *Very cute*.

Looking up from a yellow pad, Alex saw that Jules had gotten dressed again, sweatpants and a T-shirt. Her hair was still damp. “Are you ready?”

“Whenever you are, doctor,” quipped Jules.

“Ok, here is what I thought we would do. We are going to listen to the tape again and write down anything that seems to be inconsistent, anything that might lend itself to one of our theories, or something that just strikes us oddly. Handing Jules a pad and pen she turned on the tape recorder.

They listened twice and nothing jumped out to either of them.

“Alex, are her opinions and conclusions about Claire sound?”

“They seem to be, unless we consider the possibility of Munchhausen. She’d be way off base then.”

“So, in your mind, did she pass the muster?” Jules watched as Alex pulled up a blanket to cover her bare legs.

“Nice and neatly, but I’d still like to know what your operatives dig up concerning out of office contact.” Jules nodded her head in agreement.

Alex leaned over to stow her pad and tape recorder in the nightstand when she asked Jules, “So what is on the agenda for tomorrow?”

“Do you still want to talk to the medical doctors about Claire’s injuries?”

“No, I think your analysis is sufficient.”

“Why thank you, Dr. Martini,” teased Jules.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” answered Alex, slightly annoyed.

“I know. I just couldn’t help teasing you.”

“Great,” said Alex, her insides twisting.

“Alex, tell me something. Do I make you nervous?”

Terrific, thought Alex. *First Aunt Sophie, now her.* She fidgeted, trying hard not to leap from the bed and start pacing. “Yes. Yes, you do.”

“Why is that?” questioned Jules.

God, if this is a bad dream, let me wake up, implored Alex. But god wasn't listening.

Jules asked again. "Why, Alex?"

"Jules, I'm tired. Do we have to do this now?"

"Classic avoidance, huh, Alex?"

"Everyone wants to be a shrink," jabbed Alex. "I can see you're not going to leave me alone until I answer."

"Correct, so you might as well get it over," smiled Jules.

"Gee, thanks. Let me ask you a question first."

"Shoot," said Jules succinctly.

"I assume that if you did a background check on everyone here, I was probably included. Am I right?"

"Yes, you're right," answered Jules evenly.

"Then you know about me," responded Alex.

"I know lots about you Alex," mildly taunted Jules. "To what are you referring specifically?"

"Oh, let's cut the dance short," said Alex with great annoyance.

"If you mean the part about being a lesbian, it doesn't concern me in the least," said Jules.

"Well it might, if I told you what my Aunt Sophie thinks about my nervousness with you." Once it was out of her mouth, Alex couldn't believe what she had just said out loud. *I just left a blatant invitation for her to ask me what Sophie thought! Self-sabotage at its best!*

"Do you want to tell me, or should I guess?" said Jules without emotion.

"Christ, you are a pain," shot back Alex.

"So, I'm told. What does your Sophie think?"

Swallowing hard, Alex blurted it out. "She thinks I'm attracted to you." Alex purposefully held Jules' eyes, though it took a great effort.

Jules, cool and deliberate, without a trace of sarcasm or apprehension retorted, "Well, we now know what your Aunt Sophie thinks; what do you think?"

Alex thought Jules's answer was masterfully clever, so clever her stomach lurched. "I think it has to do with this gnawing sense that I know you or maybe because you saw me when I was vulnerable from the nightmare."

"Why would either of those make you nervous?"

"Oh, come on, Jules. I know you've only spent a few hours with me, but a smart woman like yourself certainly has an idea who I am. For better or worse, I like to be in control."

"That's evident, but it's not a sin. Being in control is fine, but surely as a psychologist you must realize that being vulnerable isn't a sin either."

"Yeah, of course, I know that. It's just not comfortable for me," retorted Alex.

"So, you were embarrassed about your flashback?" Jules tried to steer away from Alex's sense that she knew her.

"Not about the flashback, about you seeing me like that," moaned Alex.

"Like what, Alex?"

"Vulnerable, unable to help myself."

"And, when I woke you up on the mountain today, why were you so jumpy and embarrassed?" Jules had already connected what happened this afternoon with the flashback.

"Well, that's more complicated," groaned Alex

"Is it?" Jules patiently said.

"Fine. I was worried about you watching me sleep."

"I *was* watching you sleep. I noticed by your eye movements that you might be dreaming and wondered if you might have had another flashback," Jules offered.

Alex was trying to get her head around this woman's direct, penetrating, matter of fact style. It didn't dawn on her that she used this very style when talking to patients or suspects. She was just too agitated right now.

"We don't have to talk about this anymore Alex. It's just that I wish I didn't make you nervous, that you could relax

around me. We're going to spend a lot of time together and I want you to be comfortable."

The 'we're going to spend a lot of time together' wasn't missed by Alex. She was on the brink of self-confession and was teetering. She jumped. "Jules, up there on the mountain, it was intimate, the way you touched me, it was intimate."

"That's what made you embarrassed; that I woke you up by stroking your cheek?" questioned Jules, truly surprised.

Alex jumped in. "I didn't mean that it was, ah, sexually intimate. I just meant it felt, I don't know, like an intimate connection I don't understand."

"It wasn't meant to be sexual. I wanted to make sure that I awoke you gently and not send you into a flashback by startling you."

Jules signed heavily to which Alex responded, "No, no. I didn't feel it in a sexual way. Don't you see? I could go out and screw someone and not feel a moment of intimacy, but you are virtually a stranger and your concern was very intimate. I don't understand why it spooks me so."

Jules wanted to tell her, to ease her emotional distress, but held back. In Alex's current state, she would jump to conclusions. That already happened once or twice today. She sighed deeply, and Alex took it as a sign of Jules' frustration with her.

Trying to get back into her professional comfort zone, Alex addressed Jules. "Let's call it quits for tonight, sleep on what we heard on the tape and revisit it tomorrow."

Jules got up off the bed and started to leave, but before she reached the door, turned, and went back to the side of the bed. "Listen, Alex. I'm not going to change how I interact with you, so you had better get comfortable with me." She took Alex's head in her hands and planted a chaste kiss on her cheek. "Sleep on that!" She strode to the door, closed it softly and promptly bumped into Sophie.

"Everything ok?"

"I think so."

“Ok, good night, then,” called Sophie as she knocked on Alex’s door and heard a cranky, “Now what do you want?”

Sophie opened the door and saw Alex in a heap on her bed.

“Oh, Aunt Sophie, I didn’t know it was you. Sorry.”

“Jules getting to you?”

“I don’t want to talk about it right now. We just finished listening to an hour-long tape twice and I’m really, really tired.”

Sophie walked to the bed, gave her niece a light hug and said, “If you need me, I’ll be up for a while.”

Alex thanked her aunt, said good night, climbed into bed, and vowed not to think about the case until the morning. She was successful. She didn’t think about the case once. She spent the night thinking about Jules.