



# EAGLE'S CLAW LAKE

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Excerpt of three chapters

## CHAPTER ONE

Timber Wolf Air did not even have a counter in the terminal at Felts Field Municipal Airport but Reid Tucker eventually found a sign directing prospective customers to an office a hundred yards beyond the building. At least the sign shaped stylized timber wolf looked professional.

"Well, I'm at the right airport this time," he muttered to nobody in particular and headed outdoors. It was early morning and still quite chilly with a drizzle hanging over the airport. He grinned at the expectant look of his Black Labrador waiting, without even a leash on, at the corner of the rental car lot and noticed his trolley filled with his luggage had been left untouched. Cinders was a placid creature but when asked to guard something, she did it with vengeance.

Reid rubbed the dog's ears, spoke a few kind words and pushed the trolley along the pavement. With his wild black beard, over six foot height and two hundred pound frame of tanned muscles, he seemed to compliment the Black Labrador that followed him through the throngs of people. Most hastily stepped aside to let him through but one irate businessman stopped in front of him.

"Can't you read?" he glowered. "Dogs are not permitted in the airport grounds. I have a good mind to report you to the authorities."

Reid stopped and fixed his eyes on the man. "My Dear Sir," he replied in a surprisingly cultured voice. "If your safety is affected so adversely by my companion here, by all means go ahead and do it. You will find a security guard just inside the main entrance."

The man flushed when a couple of bystanders chuckled and turned away. "Damn hippy," he muttered and disappeared.

Reid returned the grins of the small group around, patted Cinders on the head, and continued towards his destination. In his eyes, Cinders was worth a hundred of the stupid bureaucrats he'd just spoken to. Oh, he'd had his day of wearing suits and ties but he doubted if he ever would do so again.

The covered walkway stopped without any sign of the Timber Wolf Air Terminal so Reid pulled his jacket collar up and strolled on until he came to a second sign and arrow pointing towards a hanger with a small float plane parked on the apron in front. This looked hopeful.

Adjacent to the hanger was a small office with the now familiar stylized wolf painted above the door. Reid told Cinders to stay with the trolley and entered the building. A buzzer sounded, the interior smelt of fresh paint and had the appearance of being recently renovated. He was about to knock on an inner door when it opened and a young woman glanced out and smiled. She looked about twenty-eight, was quite tall, slim and had short dark hair. More unusual, though, was the baseball cap and mechanic's coveralls she wore and a smudge of grease across her cheek.

"You aren't the pilot they're sending me?" she asked.

"Sorry," Reid replied. "I was told you could help me. I was redirected here

from Spokane International Airport. I had tickets with Resolution Air but it seems they've just disappeared."

The woman grinned. "Well, I'm all that remains of Resolution Air. They went bankrupt and I bought two of their airplanes and ground facilities." She nodded around. "That's this." She smiled again. "So how can I help you Mr. ..."

"Reid Tucker. Call me Reid."

"Hi Reid. I'm Kate Meltz, managing director and chief pilot of Timber Wolf Air." She held out a hand that had a strong grip.

"I need to get to Eagle's Claw Lake. I've rented a cabin on the north arm for the summer season."

"I know it," Kate replied. "The place is somewhat remote..."

"It's what I want," Reid replied with a shrug.

"Okay," she replied. "You're in luck, Reid. I'm flying the Canadair out to the Elf Commune on the south arm after lunch."

"Elf?" Reid queried.

"Eagle Love Family is the commune's full title," Kate replied, screwed her nose up and added, "Strange lot. They'll be your neighbors but I doubt if you'll see much of them. They're one of these self-sufficient places, a hundred or so men, women and kids. I fly them in supplies once every couple of weeks and bring out stuff they have to sell, mainly cheese from their farm and hand-woven rugs, you know the sort of stuff." She stopped and shrugged. "As I said, you're lucky. I was due to fly in yesterday but my plane has been held up. This will be cheaper for you than a special flight in the Beaver." She smiled again and nodded at the aircraft out the door. "I honor Resolution Air tickets, too."

"Great," Reid replied. "What time?"

"Noon," Kate replied. "That's if my plane arrives. It's been up in Vancouver BC getting an overhaul and was promised back today. Yesterday, actually, but now it's today."

"And you don't mind flying my dog?"

"Reid," laughed Kate. "I fly anything. Half my passengers are hunters with dogs."

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When Reid returned just before noon he was pleasantly surprised. A bright orange amphibian aircraft sat in front of Timber Wolf Air's hanger. The Canadair CL-215 had high wings, twin piston engines and was the size of a commuter airliner such as Saab or a vintage DC 3. The fuselage, though, was squarer in design with the underside shaped like a cabin cruiser. Floats extended down from the wing tips. Two wide doors on the nearest side were open and ground staff were loading piles of equipment from a small tractor and trailer unit. Reid spied his luggage wedged between the gear.

"Well Cinders," he said to his dog who stood beside him with her tail lashing and wide brown eyes gazing up as if she understood every word. "It looks as if we'll be in our new home tonight, after all."

However, Kate Meltz looked worried as she walked out from the hanger and changed direction towards him. "No pilot's come, I'm afraid," she said. "I couldn't even entice the ferry pilots to stay around a few days. I think the idea of landing on water scared them away."

Reid nodded at the Canadair. "It's bigger than I expected. I suppose it needs two pilots."

"Usually," Kate replied. "I would take the Beaver but the Elf Commune has heavy stuff they want transported that won't fit in the smaller plane. I'm licensed to fly the Canadair solo but would prefer a co-pilot, especially now I have a passenger."

"Oh, I don't mind," Reid replied and broke into a grin. "I would imagine you're quite capable." He was becoming impressed with his chatty companion.

"Okay," the young woman replied. "The weather will be closing in later this evening so we'll head out as soon as everything's loaded."

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Eagle's Claw Lake did, indeed look like a claw with three long narrow forks of water joined at one end in a mountainous valley filled, except for the lake, by endless fir forest. As Kate dipped the CL-215 and approached the nearest fork, Reid noticed an area of cleared land at the upper end of the fork. Half a dozen buildings, cultivated gardens and several green fields hugged the steep hillsides and smaller triangular flat section intersected by a mountain stream. A road or track followed the river to the apex of the triangle before disappearing into the firs. At the lakeshore, a cross road followed a small beach area to a wooden jetty that reached out over the water.

"It's like a small town," Reid commented as the view disappeared when the amphibian circled down.

"Military camp, more like it," Kate replied with a touch of cynicism in her voice. "You know the whole area is ringed in a eight foot high fence topped in razor wire. " She stopped talking for a moment as she concentrated on levelling the amphibian off ready to drop onto the lake. "They told me it is to keep the bears and other wild animals out but it is more to keep the locals in." She shrugged. "Not that there is anywhere for them to go even if they decided they wanted to leave."

"As bad as that?" Reid observed.

Kate glanced across at him and smiled. "Oh, I guess not. They're friendly enough when I come but never invite me up for a cup of coffee. The head guy gives me the creeps. Anyhow, you can see for yourself in a few moments. Take my advice and don't tell them you're shifting into old Shelton's place."

"Shelton?"

"The old hermit whose place you're renting. He died a couple of years back. As far as I know, it's been empty since then. I would imagine some relation owns it now."

"You could be right," Reid replied. "I rented it through this reality firm and have an option to buy."

Kate caught his eye but made no comment. She reached across to the twin throttles and, with the casualness of an expert, lowered the amphibian onto the lake. The craft surged forward, bounced a couple of times and came to an almost abrupt halt in the water. Kate opened the throttles a little, the nose rose and they surged forward like a boat with white wake fanning out behind them. A moment later the amphibian circled around, engines were cut and it drifted the last few feet to the jetty where a man reached for an unseen handle and tied the

nose to a pole. The rear of the craft was pulled in and they were parallel to the jetty with the port wing stretching across the wooden decking. The outer float cleared the surface by a mere couple of feet.

"I'll give them this much," Kate grunted. "They built this new jetty to handle the CL-215 perfectly. This section floats on the surface so I can come in close no matter how high or low the lake level is." She glanced at Reid. "Remember, don't mention you're going to be a neighbor."

"Sure," Reid replied.

He followed her to the front loading hatch and opened it. Two men stood there and, with a minimum of conversation, unloaded their gear into an ancient trailer hitched to a tractor of similar vintage. Reid was introduced and was met by cold eyes but firm handshakes.

"New pilot for Miss Meltz?" one man asked.

"Yes," Reid lied. The man was quite unlike what one would expect. In the remote hinterland, visitors were usually welcomed and regarded as a source of information. These two were as grim as guards at a top-secret military establishment.

He jumped down onto the jetty and offered to help load the trailer.

"Thank you but no," the eldest man replied. "We don't require an assistance."

"Okay," Reid shrugged and stepped back. This was when he noticed the women. They were across the gravel road behind the tall chicken-wire fence Kate had mentioned on the way in. Most looked as young as the men were old and wore identical dark blue skirts that reached below their knees, white blouses and had long hair tied back under blue hair scarves. Their faces all looked similar, thin with no make up and large hollow eyes. They stood silently in a line with children ranging from babies to teenagers. Only two of the youngsters gave a quiet smile and one girl wiggled her fingers in a secret wave.

Reid caught Kate's eyes and saw her briefly shake her head. He nodded but still caught the young girl's eyes and smiled. Inwardly, though, he fumed. He'd seen refugees like this from a stint he'd had as a medic in Bosnia, even down to the thin frames and soulless faces, the faces of people with no control over their lives. In disgust, he turned, climbed back in the CL-215 and strolled back to where Cinders sat mournfully in her animal cage.

"No, Girl," he said. "I know you hate the cage but you wouldn't want to get out here."

Somehow, the beautiful lake had become sinister and foreboding, the blue water looked black and the silence, ominous.

He turned and saw Kate's head appear in the door. "Got to you, did it?" she whispered. "I thought it might."

"Yea," Reid responded.

"Look, I'll be about ten minutes. There's a small back load of stuff on the jetty if you wouldn't mind loading it then you can shut the rear door. The Elf commune always pays me in cash, always exactly the right amount and always in crisp new bills." She chuckled at Reid's raised eyebrows. "No it's genuine money. I checked it the first time. Damned if I know where they get it from, though. I suspect they have a float plane of their own but I have never seen it. There's no other access. The nearest road would be twenty miles away and that is only a

forest access road."

"Interesting," Reid replied.

He watched as Kate slipped out of her coverall. Beneath she had a neat maroon jersey and dark skirt that covered an attractive, quite buxom figure. She saw Reid's gaze and flushed.

"More of the protocol," she explained as she reached for a pair of black low heeled shoes and replaced the boots she had been wearing. "They don't like women in trousers or jeans beyond the main gate. It was only after my third visit they even let me inside their compound and that was only when I wore a skirt."

"You look nice," Reid said.

Kate appeared annoyed for a second until she noticed Reid's genuine expression and smiled back. "Thanks," she said in a whisper. "I'm not used to compliments nowadays."

The ten minute wait became twenty, then thirty. Reid loaded the boxes of cheese, several large cardboard boxes the size of a refrigerator and two crates of fresh vegetables. He shut the back door and sat down beside his dog to wait.

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It was Cinders who heard the noise first. Her ears shot forward and she gave a low growl .

"What is it, Girl?" Reid asked .

The dog was looking at a closed hatch, not the door Reid had recently shut. This was a smaller opening about three feet square on the starboard side away from the jetty. Reid frowned and listened. A slight tapping sound reached his ears. "You're right, Girl," he said. "Perhaps a log has drifted in against the plane. I'll check it."

He walked across to the hatch and gazed through the tiny porthole built into it. Outside was nothing except water and distant trees across the inlet. He was about to turn back when he jumped in fright. A sharp knock rung out from the metal at the bottom of the structure.

He frowned and swung the hatch up on its overhead hinges.

"Help me, please!" shivered a voice.

Two enormous blue eyes stared up at him from the water. A tanned face, long wet blonde hair and full lips were those of a young woman, hardly more than a girl. She clasped a small handle below the hatch and appeared to be having difficulty treading water.

"Your other hand!" Reid snapped, grabbed the frozen hand and yanked the surprisingly heavy girl up.

She came out, fully clothed in clinging blouse and skirt, and managed to get a bare foot on the bulkhead and propel herself inside. For a second she lay down gasping and shivering before she turned and gazed at the cargo door and jetty beyond.

"They mustn't find me," she cried. "If I'm found I'll be thrashed or worse. I can't..." A rush of tears replaced her words.

Reid nodded grimly. He searched around for something to help, spied Kate's coveralls and wrapped them, like a towel, around the girl's shaking shoulders. Her lips were shivering from cold and her eyes looked anxious.

"Please," she whispered. "If they know I've gone, they'll search the plane. I need to hide!"

"Your name Lass?" Reid asked as he slammed the hatch down and stepped across to shut the other door. Somehow it seemed safer with the view of the jetty shut out.

"Lorie," the girl replied, "Lorie Somerville." she gulped.

"Okay Lorie," Reid replied, his voice like steel. "You are safe with me. Nobody will hurt you." "They will," the girl cried. "They'll forcibly remove me and even a big guy like you can't stop four or five of them."

"And you risked a beating and freezing water to swim out here?" Reid replied.

The girl nodded miserably with her eyes downcast. It was as if her courage had evaporated.

"Okay, so we hide you," Reid replied in a soft voice.

He searched around. The interior was half filled with his gear and the boxes he'd just loaded. With a few heaves he pulled the boxes forward so there was a gap in front of the rear wall. "Get in there, Lorie," he said.

She nodded and sprung into action and within seconds was squatting behind the cargo. Reid shifted it back but grimaced. It was an obvious place to search but what else could he do?

"Cinders," he gasped and opened the dog's cage door.

Cinders bounded out all licks and wagging tail.

"Sit, Girl" Reid ordered. "Guard Lorie, Cinders. Understand!"

The brown eyes stared up and the Black Labrador sat on her back haunches in front of the cargo. The tail stopped wagging and remained straight out behind her. Nobody would touch a thing unless she was called her off. Cinders was a pet but also an excellent guard dog who had been trained with military precision.

They were only just in time. Without even a knock, the jetty door swung open and three men walked in. "We need to search the plane," the old guy who had originally spoken to Reid said. He glared around. "Why is the floor wet?" he hissed.

Reid, though, was not intimidated. "Can I help?" he asked.

"One of our flock is missing," the same man replied.

"So why would he come here?" Reid snapped purposely using the wrong gender.

"Your visit is too much of a coincidence. This girl is a highly neurotic young lady. She can not survive on her own."

"So she's gone for a walk along the shore or to the back of your farm? I have not seen her."

The man glowered and stepped towards the boxes. However, a low growl interrupted his intentions.

"I wouldn't," Reid snapped. "Cinders there is protecting my gear."

"Call it off," the man ordered but stopped as Cinders rose to her four feet and growled again.

"You are on my employer's airplane," Reid stated in a cold voice. "This is our property, not your land. I respected your customs on the jetty. Here, you can respect mine. I have not seen your missing girl. She is not here. Surely if she had

come to look over the plane, your man would have seen her." He glowered at the second man who had, he now realized, been watching the plane since their arrival." As for the wet floor, I opened the door and got some water for Cinders to drink." Reid then decided to bluff and gave a casual shrug. "However, if you wish to move all the boxes, I'll give you a hand." His eyes held the older man's gaze.

For a moment the cold stares held before the man spoke again. "And you never saw a young woman in our uniform on the shoreline or outside the fence?" he asked.

Reid never flinched. "Only the group watching us unload," he said, "but they were all behind your gate."

"Perhaps I was wrong then," The man turned to the other two who returned from inspecting the cockpit. "Joseph, go and search the barn; Jacob, the shoreline."

"Right, Peter," both men replied. Reid was sure there was a sadistic gleam in their eyes as they departed.

Peter turned to Reid and now sounded almost friendly. "If you see her, please tell us," he said and held out his hand. "As I said, she is a highly disturbed young woman half way through her treatment. To stop at this stage could be very detrimental to her health."

"Sure," Reid replied as he gripped the hand.

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He watched as Peter walked away and smiled when Kate appeared a moment later and scrambled aboard. "Trouble?" she asked.

"You are perceptive. Why would there be trouble?"

"Peter Littlejohn and his henchmen are always trouble," she replied. "Also you look tense about something."

Reid grimaced. Usually he had complete control over his emotions but this young woman seemed to be able to read him like a book. "I'll tell you when we're in the air. Shall we go?"

Kate frowned but said no more.

A moment later, they were racing forward across the lake's surface with engines screaming at almost maximum revolutions. Water cut out behind until the violent shuddering stopped, the lake sunk away and they were airborne.

"Oh shit!" Kate muttered above the howling engine noise, mere seconds later.

"What's wrong?"

"Look at the clouds," she yelled.

Reid stared out the front windshield and saw the object of Kate's concern. The sky to the north was an inky black and already large drops were hitting the amphibian.

"I don't think I'll be able to get you down and get off again," Kate yelled. "We need to climb up above the mountains and head back to Spokane."

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The storm hit the Canadair with a fury. Rain turned to hail so violent, the wipers could barely cope while the craft bucked and rocked. Reid could only nod and put his trust in his pilot.

Kate held onto the controls and turned the craft ever so slightly into the storm, one wing lifted and she succeeded in turning in a semicircle. The wings shook and both motors screamed as yet another squall hit them.

"What's wrong?" a frightened voice called from the door.

Kate frowned but never moved her eyes off the scene outside. "Who the hell is she?" she screamed.

"Our passenger," Reid replied with a slight grin. "I never got around to telling you. Kate, meet Lorie Somerville. She's hitched a ride back to Spokane"

Kate glanced back for a second and suddenly burst out laughing. "Oh My God, Lorie. You did it!"

"You know each other?" Reid asked.

"Sort of," Lorie shouted as she pulled herself into the third seat in the cockpit and held on with knuckles that were almost as white as her face. "It was Kate who suggested we go up the beach and swim back to the plane. She said you would help us get aboard."

"We?"

"There were two others but they chickened out."

Conversation was interrupted as the sky ahead lit up in blue streak lightning that cut across their nose. Mere seconds later the thunder rumbled, the Canadair CL-215 shook like a leaf and, even worse, the port motor spluttered. Kate frowned and reached forward to a different control, the engine roared for a second, spluttered and cut out.

"Hell!" she muttered.

For five minutes the two passengers could only wait as their pilot did everything possible to control the airplane. The starboard engine continued to function without even a cough but two attempts to restart the port one failed. Another streak of lightning lit the cockpit but the thunder took slightly longer to rattle their ears.

"What can you see below?" Kate screamed to Reid. "My instruments tell me it should be water. I can't make any height and the starboard engine is overheating."

"Water!" screamed Lorie. "I can see white caps."

"Hang on," Kate yelled back. "We're going down."

With infinite care she throttled the good engine back and manipulated the controls so the amphibian dropped. It hit the water with an almighty bump, Lorie screamed and Reid felt something snuggle between his legs. It was Cinders who must have decided his company was necessary at the moment. Kate opened the throttle but the plane pulled sideways and the offside wing dipped. She changed tactics, cut the throttle and the plane dropped sickeningly into the choppy waves.

"We're down," Kate gasped and edged the throttle forward. "What can you see?"

"Trees," Reid yelled. "About twenty yards away to our left."

"Just water on my side," Lorie shouted from immediately behind Kate.

"Good. Thanks!" the pilot replied. "You two are as good as any second pilot."

"I doubt it," Reid answered as he gazed out through the bucking side window. "Oh My God!"

"What is it?" Kate replied.

"There's cabin and jetty in a sort of inlet."

"Your new home, Reid," Kate replied. She grinned for the first time and wiped a strand of hair out of her eyes, "and it looks as if you're going to have a couple of guests for the night."

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## CHAPTER TWO

Whoever had chosen the site of the jetty and accompanying building had done it well for, although the lake itself had choppy swells buffeting the amphibian, once they had taxied around the tiny headland the water was calm. Even the rain stopped as fast as it had arrived and a gap showing in the black sky. The sun appeared and a gigantic rainbow glowed across the cloud bank.

"This often happens," Lorie explained to Reid. "We have a downpour and half an hour later the sun is shining." She gulped. "In summer that is. It's always snow during the winter and the lake freezes over."

Kate interrupted. "I'll get in as close to the jetty as I can and will shut down," she shouted but never turned her face away from the outside view. "There are two coils of rope hanging by the front cargo door. One is tied on at this end so it can be used to pull the plane in. The other can be tied to the front and the jetty. With one engine out of action I haven't got my usual maneuverability."

"I'll do it," shouted Lorie when the pair gazed at the water outside the opened door. Though the small shingle beach was just beyond the CL-215's wing tip, the water was deep.

"You will not!" Reid replied. Not after your last freezing swim. "I will."

"Let me!" Lorie pleaded and before an argument could develop she placed the loose coil of rope around her shoulder, grabbed the other rope end and jumped. It was deep. The young woman disappeared beneath the surface and came up spluttering with her blue skirt ballooning up around her. Her eyes caught Reids; she smiled and kicked backstroke style to shore. In a moment she scrambled up the small bank and pulled the rope in until it was taut. She next walked the few yards to the jetty with the amphibian swinging slightly around so the tail pointed to shore.

"That young lass has got guts, you know" Reid shouted at Kate, realized that without the engine noise, this wasn't necessary so continued in a normal voice. "She was terrified before but gritted her teeth and kept going."

Kate's voice came back from the cockpit. "You either become that way or become completely servile at that commune," she replied. "If the others had

Lorie's guts we would have three of them right now, instead of one."

".. . More likely there would have been three caught," Reid added. "I doubt if I could have hidden more than one."

"True," Kate called back.

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Lorie used her initiative and tied the rope to one of the jetty supports and scrambled up on the jetty itself. She reached up, grabbed the port wing and walked up the jetty with it. The amphibian swung around so the fuselage came in parallel to the structure and bumped against three old tractor tires tied to the planking. Reid stepped off without even getting his feet wet and smiled at the shivering girl.

" You did well," he said, reached out an arm and gave her a tiny hug.

It was obvious this small gesture made Lorie pleased. She placed wet hair against his chest for a moment and glanced up at into his eyes. "At the commune we were just expected to do the right thing," she whispered. "Nobody ever touches us." She stopped and swallowed. "I mean we are not we allowed to touch anyone without it being sinful?"

"Is that so?" Reid replied.

"My girlfriends and I used to just hug and hold each other at night when we were lonely and it felt so nice to be held but..." Again she stopped but still remained in Reid's arms.

"Come on," Reid said quietly. "Let's get the plane tied up, shall we? You must be freezing again."

"Who cares," Lorie replied. "I'm away from there. I'd swim the length of the lake to get away, if necessary. Thank you, Reid. You just don't know what it is like to be just a thing."

Suddenly she swung around and kissed him on his bearded cheek, flushed a bright red and almost skipped away to tie the remaining rope onto the steel eyelet under the nose of the airplane. She lopped the other end around a jetty pole and, with Reid's help, the plane was securely tied to the jetty.

Reid now examined the cabin that was to be his home. It was more modern than he anticipated with a steep A frame roof like a Swiss chalet. There was a door to the right, one window on the left and a pentagonal attic window above. A wooden decking was linked to the jetty itself by half a dozen steps. The whole cabin was wooden with only the window, door frames and roof facing boards painted white. Everything else was stained a natural brown. Faded red curtains were pulled across the downstairs window while, at the rear, fir trees boughs grew over the roof.

Though smelling musty through lack of use, the inside was surprisingly clean. The whole front was an open plan room with a stone hearth on the right. Sitting on this was an enormous potbelly stove with exposed cylindrical chimney that stretched up through the ceiling. The far end of the L shaped room was a kitchen with the usual facilities. Off this was a tiny bathroom and toilet and steep stairs leading up, Reid guessed to bedrooms. The floor was bare but covered in several large oval shaped mats while sheets covered the furniture.

"It's lovely," Kate remarked.

"They told me there's a generator in a cellar at the back," Reid said. "If you two would like to get things sorted here, I'll go and see if I can get it going then I'll light the stove." He nodded at the pile of dry wood stacked neatly on the hearth.

"Can I?" Lorie asked with her eyes almost shining.

"Of course," Reid replied and caught Kate's eyes. Lorie would be about sixteen, he guessed but seemed to be very young in her mannerisms. But no, he was wrong. In others she seemed old before her time.

"Like the commune she's got to you, hasn't she?" Kate remarked an hour later when the potbelly stove was blazing away and the pipes behind it had heated enough water for Lorie to have the first bath.

"The opposite," Reid replied. "The commune felt foreboding and ominous. Lorie is like a breath of fresh air or a butterfly released from a cocoon."

"A good description," Kate replied. "Do you know she just told me she has never used shampoo before? Luckily, I always carried an emergency bag of clothes in the plane so I shampooed her hair and have given her some shorts and top. Her size isn't too different than mine." She glanced at Reid. "Her hair was quite dirty and she has a nasty rash over her body, too."

"I see," Reid replied. "Perhaps I can help there. I'll get my bag."

He walked across to where his gear had been piled by the kitchen sink and pulled out a very professional bag. Inside was a whole selection of medical supplies from tablets and ointments to a stethoscope.

"That's handy," Kate commented. "Have you a doctor as a friend?"

"Well actually, I was a doctor," Reid replied in a whisper. "Still am, I guess."

"Are you?" Kate replied. "I knew you weren't just a drifter, Reid. And how long have you had your beard and scruffy hairdo?"

"A few months," he replied. "Oh, I used to be so prime and proper, short hair, daily shaves, twice if I had an important meeting in the evening; even a flash house and wife to go with it."

"But now?"

"Gone," Reid replied with a shrug. "I have Cinders." He smiled at the dog stretched out asleep in front of the pot-bellied stove. "She's all I need for a while."

"How do I look!" squealed a happy voice that interrupted the pair before Kate could reply.

Lorie stood in front of them all red from the hot water. She was dressed in shorts and top with her hair wrapped in a towel. As they watched, she pulled the towel aside to reveal damp hair just touching her shoulders rather than waist long as it had been.

"I gave Lorie a haircut," Kate said in a modest voice. "It was so long and tangly."

"You look just like a film star," Reid laughed.

"Do I?" Lorie replied and again seemed to absorb compliments like blotting paper. She flushed, "You're just kidding me, aren't you?"

"No better than a film star," Reid continued. "They're always too painted up."

"And my clothes fit you quite well," Kate added.

Lorie bit on her bottom lip. "I've never worn shorts before. It was another great sin at Elf. Are you sure it is okay?"

Reid noticed for the first time that the girl's arms were only tanned from her elbow and legs from below the knee. The rest of her skin was as pale as a European gets after a long, cold winter.

"Far better than I look in them," Kate said and changed the topic. Reid said he's a doctor who may be able to help with that nasty rash you have."

"A doctor?" Lorie gasped and frowned.

"Is something wrong with that?" Reid replied quietly.

"No, of course not," the girl replied. "We weren't allowed doctors, that's all."

"And if people got ill?" It was Kate who spoke.

"The elders prayed for them and they got better."

"And if they didn't?" Kate persisted.

"They died," Lorie whispered. "My Mom died. She was all I had." Her face contorted and tears bubbled from the corners of her blue eyes. She turned and ran, sobbing into the bathroom.

"I'll go," Kate said and placed a hand on his arm Reid. "I think this is why she wanted to leave the commune."

Reid nodded. "Poor kid," he said and wondered what other deprivations the youngster had been exposed to at the commune. He'd read about these places but this was his first direct contact with anybody from one. During his time as a doctor he'd seen many abused patients and Lorie showed every symptom of emotional and even physical abuse."

He sighed! Even out here in the wilderness one couldn't get way from the corruptions of human behavior.

He shook his head and wandered over to the smaller bottled gas stove in the kitchen where a large pot of stew was bubbling away. The smell premeditated the room and he realized how hungry they must all be.

"Your turn," Lorie's voice again interrupted his thoughts. Reid turned and saw the girl, red eyed but smiling, looking intently at him.

"What for?" Reid replied.

"Haircut. If I can have one why can't you?"

Reid grinned. "Oh, I don't know, " he protested.

"I'll do it," Kate cut in. "Just the hair, though. You can sort your beard out yourself."

"You don't mind?" Reid replied.

"My dear Doctor Tucker, when you get to know me a little better, you'll find out I never say anything I don't mean." She smiled.

~~~

Nightfall, with the recently arrived daylight savings, arrived quite late in the evening and Lorie was asleep on a massive old couch with an arm around a Cinders. Reid, with haircut and trimmed beard was helping Kate complete the washing up of dishes.

"So what is your story, Reid?" Kate asked in a quiet voice. "You're too nice a person to squander your life out here in the wilderness. What happened to

you?" She stopped and placed a hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry, it's really none of my business."

"No, I don't mind," Reid replied. "In fact, like our young friend here, it is nice to have someone who is interested. We all keep our little secrets don't we?"

"We do," the young woman replied.

"It was just burn out, I guess," Reid sighed. "Let's finish the dishes, I'll make us a cup of coffee and tell you."

"I'd like that," Kate replied as she dried another plate.

~~~

The court trial was in its fourth day in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Defence Attorney Jonathan Mossop tugged on his black robe and faced the jury with his final summing up. "Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury, you now have to weigh up the evidence of this case and decide whether Doctor Reid James Tucker is guilty of the crime of manslaughter by failing to provide adequate supervision of staff, wilful negligence for the same reason, lesser charges or, indeed, is innocent. The prosecution's case is based on the accusations of Consulting Surgeon Marcus Kalmus, at the Northern Lights Hospital whom, you know has already been proven guilty of negligence and causing the deaths of Mary Anne McAlfir and Josephine Elizabeth Smaus.

My client was a not accomplice, Ladies and Gentlemen. In fact, if it was not for his astute observations, the unlawful operations performed by Kalmus and the other surgeon who is awaiting trial may never have reached the light of day. Kalmus has accused my client of being an accomplice in a crude attempt to defend his own actions and seek revenge. His statements to this court have not been substantiated by facts." Mossop paused and purposely glanced at the jury.

"Reid Tucker was appointed managing director and head surgeon of Northern Lights Hospital three years ago and, in that time, built the hospital from one that the locals avoided, if possible, to a vibrant hospital with an excellent reputation and surgical department. As character witnesses told us, this was against tremendous odds with the Board of Trustees continuing a long standing feud on whether to provide a general facility for the local citizens or to concentrate on more exotic surgery for, what I would call, wealthy customers. I'd hardly call them patients.

Reid would not let this feud overflow into the wards and was highly regarded by all except a few who found their powers in the hospital community eroded. This included Doctor Marcus Kalmus, a man who wanted to use the hospital's facilities for personal gain. When discovered his unethical operating procedures were discovered, he attempted to shift the blame onto the hospital in general and my client in particular."

The Defence Attorney stopped and eyed every jury member in turn. "This trial should not even be happening, Ladies And Gentlemen," he said. "Everything is based on the statements of a convicted man who found he had lost his standing the medical profession and has set out to get his revenge on the one person who, in his warped eyes, caused his downfall. It will not work, Ladies and Gentlemen. Reid is not guilty. He did not participate in this crime in which these unfortunate women lost their lives.

Ask yourselves this. Where was his motivation? Why would he tear down the reputation of the establishment he was trying to build up? Why would he rip apart the social structure of the hospital community he was trying to cement together?' The attorney paused for almost a full minute. "The answer, of course, is that he wouldn't.

Remember, too, unless it is proven beyond doubt that my client had full knowledge of the methods being used by these surgeons and gave his approval or even, as my learned colleague was quick to suggest turned a blind eye at their practices, he must be found not guilty. I charge there is no proof at all, merely an accusation from a man already proven to be dishonest. Remember too, the crimes committed by Doctor Kalmus dated back five years, that is two years before my client was appointed to the position at Northern Lights Hospital." Jonathan rolled his eyes in disgust. "I don't see the previous chief surgeon on trial here."

The Defence Attorney waited again in the hushed courtroom before continuing. "Reid Tucker should be given accolades for his efforts to built a viable district hospital against tremendous odds, not standing here accused of a crime he was instrumental in stopping. He is innocent of all accusations and that is the only conclusion you can make. Thank you."

He strolled across in front of the jury bench with his piercing eyes portraying his concern, turned, gave Reid Tucker a brief smile and sat down.

"Thank you, Mr. Mossop," The judge stated. He turned his head to face the jury. "This is a difficult case, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury, based mainly on circumstantial evidence and the reliability or otherwise of the conflicting statements of Doctor Kalmus and the defendant. " he began. "You must weigh up the evidence presented to you over the last week....." The judge continued his summary for another fifty minutes before ordering the jury to retire and reach a verdict.

Reid Tucker grimaced and glanced at Jonathan Mossop. The case against him was quite damning with the circumstantial evidence built up and made plausible by the outright lies made by his former colleague, a man hell bent on sabotaging every improvement he'd made in the hospital.

He shrugged. It was too late now, anyway. He'd never go back to the place. Sure, he had friends there but it had wrecked his career and his marriage but for what?

"Don't worry, Reid," Jonathan interrupted his client's thoughts. "I'm sure it will turn out okay."

Reid's sad eyes turned to his attorney as he replied. "It is too late, Jonathan. Quite frankly, I don't care any longer."

The tall meticulously dressed, clean-shaven man stood and walked out of the courtroom towards the holding cells. His career of fifteen years was over. Even if let free his reputation was in tatters. All the good he'd done or tried to do would be forgotten. It was as if his efforts over the years had never happened.

Society in heartland America could be very unforgiving.

~~~

Eight hours later the jury filed back into the courtroom with the jurors' eyes

avoiding Reid so there was no way he could read any message. After the usual formalities, the chairperson stood to announced the verdict.

"To the charge of Manslaughter of Mary Anne McAlfir and Josephine Elizabeth Smaus we find Reid James Tucker not guilty, Your Honor," she said in a clear precise voice. "To the charge of Failing to Provide Adequate Supervision we find the defendant not guilty." The woman coughed before continuing. "To the lesser charge of Failing to Account we find the defendant guilty, Your Honor."

Reid just stood and stared ahead without any outward sign he had even heard the verdict and only his eyes fluttered when the judge started to speak.

"You have been found guilty of the charge of Failing to Account," he stated after the usual preamble. "Throughout the trial I have been impressed by your fortitude, compassion and complete frankness. Also I am impressed by the effort you put into your position as administrative head as well as practising physician of an inner city hospital reflecting the multitude of problems prevalent in our community. However, you unwisely, shall I say, failed to account for the operations being performed illegally at the Northern Lights Hospital. I don't believe you intentionally broke the law but ignorance of the law cannot be a defence in itself."

The judge's eyes linked onto Reid who never noticed compassion in the gaze. "Reid James Tucker you are hereby convicted of the crime of Failing to Account and discharged. Court is dismissed."

That was it. Reid frowned and glanced at his attorney. "What happens now?" He asked.

Jonathan Mossop smiled. "It means you can go, Reid. Even though you are convicted on that lesser charge, the judge decided not to impose any punishment."

"I see," replied Reid, He knew he should be thankful but wasn't. In some ways it only continued the state of limbo he had been through for almost a year. All he thought was that, Ashleigh, his wife had not even bothered to attend the court that day; nor any other day, actually.

He turned and walked away, a lonely figure with no penalty to pay to society but with a shattered life ruined because he had tried to help others.

~~~

Reid drove home, walked in the door and glanced at the woman waiting by the living room door.

Ashleigh Tucker was a woman with enormous hazel eyes that always reflected her personality. Reid remembered when they sparkled and laughed as they ran along the Florida beach together. They would chase each other through the surf and cuddle on the sand. He always loved holidays at the beach. But in the last few years, the eyes had turned cold and impersonal. They were like that now.

"They let me go," Reid shrugged.

"I see," Ashleigh answered in a neutral voice. "I'm pleased for you, Reid."

"Are you?" he replied. "If they'd put me away it would have solved your problem, wouldn't it?"

The woman's eyes turned hard. "That's not fair, Reid," she retorted. "I stuck by you through everything. Hell Reid, it affected me, too you know? That horrible hospital.."

She glanced down, walked across the room and sat on a kitchen chair. When she looked up her eyes brimmed with tears. "When I walked in the market opposite the hospital, the woman would turn their trolleys and find another aisle. I suffered, too, you know."

Reid found another chair by the table and also sat down. "I realize that, Ashleigh," he said. "I tried ..."

Ashleigh reached across and took his hand. Her eyes looked into his and a softness Reid hadn't seen for years returned. "I know, Reid," she replied. "You tried. You've always tried. Right throughout your career you tried and the more you tried the more you got trodden on. These last two years have been sheer hell. I can take no more."

"I'm resigning from the position," Reid said.

Ashleigh stared at him. "It's too late Reid," she whispered. "Perhaps if we'd had children.." She stood up and walked over to gaze out the window.

Reid shrugged. The present conversation wasn't unexpected. He knew it was only out of mutual loyalty they'd stayed together until the trial. Without it, they would have probably departed when the trouble first began, or even earlier.

"What now?" He continued.

His wife turned. "I'm moving out Reid. I've won a teaching position in Rochester that starts in September. I was going to tell you last week but..."

"I know," Reid replied. "I saw the letter. Perhaps it's the best way."

"It's the only way, Reid," Ashleigh replied. Her eyes found his again. There was a flash of kindness before the old cold stare returned. "The packers are coming tomorrow."

Without another word, Reid turned and walked into the back yard to be immediately greeted by a bark. Cinders, his Black Labrador dog rushed up to him with her tail wagging and large brown eyes staring into his.

"Well, Girl," Reid said as he squatted down and rubbed the dog's ears. "I guess there's only us now. I think we're going to be close companions for a while."

~~~

Reid glanced up to see not only Kate's but Lorie's eyes fixed on his. "It's a pity humans aren't as loyal as pets," he said.

"The cow," the teenager snapped. "She could have stuck by you."

"I guess," Reid replied, "but our marriage had really been that in name only for a number of years."

"Like ours," Lorie snapped. "Peter has two wives and is about to select his third. The man disgusts me but I've been told he likes me. The other women just laugh at me and said I should be honored to be able to bare his child."

Kate looked aghast. "And how old are you, Lorie?" she asked.

"Sixteen, come June," the girl replied. "We are untouched until our sixteenth birthday and after that we are regarded as women."

"What's that?" Reid said, his eyes hard.

"The men can select us for, well ... you know." She flushed and rolled her

eyes. "Oh it is all well organized. We are told it is our duty." She frowned. "It's all prescribed in The Oracles. Everything is prescribed in The Oracles."

"What's that?" Kate asked.

The book that explains the Bible. We have the Bible and The Oracles. Peter wrote it when he became leader."

"It's disgusting," Kate snorted. "They should all be arrested."

"... so you're still a virgin?" Reid said in a quiet voice.

"Yes," the girl replied without even a hint of embarrassment. "We have what is called a Womanhood Celebration. It's the only birthday we're allowed to celebrate."

"..and the boys," Kate asked, in spite of herself

"They have to wait until they're eighteen before they're allowed to be a man and can mate. I don't know why they have to wait two extra years."

"The bosses don't like the competition," Reid spat with such anger in his voice even Cinders looked up in alarm.

"One of the last things Mom told me was to escape before I turned sixteen," Lorie added in a sombre tone. "The others who tried are usually caught and given a public caning. One girl disappeared and they brought back her body weeks later. It seems she got lost in the forest and froze to death." She stared wide-eyed at Reid and on to Kate. "I can never go back. I'd rather die first. Please let me stay with you two."

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## **CHAPTER THREE**

Reid smiled when Lorie screwed up her nose and rubbed the arm where an injection had just gone in.

"And you say that will stop me getting a whole multitude of diseases?" she asked. "How does it work?"

Reid gave an explanation of the procedures and reasons behind them and was amazed how Lorie understood quite sophisticated details. On many topics, she was very knowledgeable while on others she remained completely ignorant. One of these was medical items. Apparently no medicines or drugs of any sort were used at the commune so, at least, the place appeared to be drug free. She had, though, none of the normal children's immunization programs such as those for smallpox or polio. Luckily, her rash appeared to be no more than an allergy to wild berries they gathered and ate with abundance.

"I'm giving you some general supplementary tablets to take, Lorie," he said. "They'll build up your iron intake."

"Iron? she asked. "You mean like nails?"

"The same chemical," Reid laughed, "but we won't have you swallowing nails."

"I'm dumb aren't I?" Lorie said with a pout. "I know nothing. I've never

seen television and don't even understand things first graders know all about."

Reid said nothing but handed a medical book in his hand over to the girl. He pointed to one paragraph. "Can you read it?" he asked.

Lorie nodded and read the paragraph out orally with amazing expression and only stumbled over a few of the medical terms. "See, I told you I was dumb," she said after the second stumble.

"That passage," Reid said quietly, "could not normally be read by an eighteen year old and even I have trouble pronouncing those words you stumbled over."

"Really?" Lorie replied with a smile. "I've always loved reading and we'd often make up and write little skits together." She giggled. "Some were quite naughty and us girls only shared them together in our quarters. No men were allowed there, not even Peter."

"So you are not dumb, Lorie" Kat, who had been listening to the conversation, interrupted.

Lorie smiled. "Can I ask one thing, Kate," she asked.

"Sure."

"Those shortie pajamas. I noticed you had in your bag. Can I wear them tonight?"

"Sure can," Kate laughed. "I was going to wear the heavier ones, anyhow."

Reid grinned and stood up from the bed where he'd been sitting. "I'd better leave you two ladies and retreat to my room," he said.

"Why?" asked Kate. She gave Reid a searching look.

Reid flushed. "I'll go and make us all a cup of coffee," he said. "Do you want me to bring it up?"

"At the very least," Kate replied.

"Oh, and switch your flashlight on," Reid added. He glanced at his watch and saw it was after eleven. "I'm going to check the generator. I may have to turn it off until the morning."

He disappeared downstairs and found Cinders waiting, all eyes and wagging tail. "Hi, Girl," he chuckled. "You've been asleep for hours. Now I suppose you want supper, too?"

Ten minutes later, he went back upstairs to find Kate and Lorie sitting up in bed.

"How do we look?" Lorie giggled as she wrapped bare arms around her knees sticking up under the blankets.

"Beautiful," Reid breathed but he was looking at Kate and was sure she had applied some fresh makeup and there was a distinct whiff of perfume in the air.

~~~

That night Reid dreamed which was not unusual, as everyone dreams. His dream though was different. For the first time in months he dreamed of pleasant things, of running along a summer beach and kissing in the surf. He woke with the memory of the dream floating through his mind. The woman in it wasn't Ashleigh when they were sweethearts but the young pilot only a few yards away

through a thin wall.

He reached out and felt someone with him.

"Oh hi, Cinders," he said and stoked his dog.

He chuckled, rolled over and went back to sleep. At dawn, he awoke feeling more refreshed than he could remember and thought of the previous day. Funny, this time yesterday he didn't even know Kate or Lorie existed. It was funny how one's life could suddenly change.

"Come on, Girl," he said. "Our morning walk. Okay?"

It was a tradition that every morning he'd take Cinders walking. They'd spend an hour together before the world awoke doing things a lonely man and his dog enjoyed; walking, chasing sticks or even a swim together. Afterwards they would return home to breakfast, ham and eggs or crunchy variety dog food, none of that namby-pamby hamburger type stuff.

They were sixteen minutes along the shoreline on a small animal track when the real world returned abruptly to Reid. He heard it first, and then saw a high-powered motorboat appear from the direction of the lake's northern fork.

"Oh shit!" he hissed to Cinders "Come on Girl. We're going back.

Even as they zigzagged through the firs, Reid heard the boat come closer and stop. He stole a glance through the boughs and noticed it was on their side of the tiny peninsular. The cabin was across the opposite side. If the occupants of the boat came ashore here, he'd be cut off from the girls.

"Damn," he whispered and held Cinders by the collar.

She sensed his tension and stood as silent as a statue but with all senses on full alert.

There were at least four men aboard and one was Peter. His silhouette was recognizable anywhere. A jumble of voices crossed the water but no words could be distinguished. However, their intentions became clear when the men brought oars out and began to paddle the motorboat around the point.

My God, if he hadn't taken this walk the men would have been on them before they even realized a boat had arrived.

"Come on, Girl!" Reid whispered and headed home.

After a steep climb and equally steep descent over the peninsular, Reid arrived gasping for breath, scratched and sweaty at the front deck. It had taken only a few minutes and he hoped he was in time.

"Guard the door, Girl," he ordered. "If anyone comes bark, Girl. Bark like hell. Understand!

Cinders ears, eyes, lolling tongue and thumping tail showed she did.

"Good Girl," Reid said. He glanced out but the inlet was still empty and silent. In seconds he was upstairs shaking Lorie and Kate, just as Cinders began to bark.

"Kate," he whispered after he explained what was wrong. "Get downstairs and remove anything that could be Lorie's, especially her clothes. I think they're in the washing machine."

"Right, Reid," she replied.

"What about me, Reid?" Lorie stuttered. Her face showed she was terrified. "They'll come up here, I know."

"But you will not be here, Sweetheart," Reid said. "Put on Kate's coverall. You're going to climb a tree."

Lorie's reaction was as fast as Kate's. Without asking why or where, she jumped out of bed and slipped into Kate's clothes.

"Okay," she whispered. "I'm ready."

Reid moved to the small balcony at the rear of the cabin. The tiny deck outside was overgrown with fir tree branches. One had grown so close they could barely squeeze out the door.

"Can you climb it?" he whispered.

Lorie nodded.

"Climb up as far as you can but stick to the main trunk. Don't take any risks. When you are as far up as you can get, move around the outside, away from the cabin. Make sure your feet aren't showing."

"Right, Reid," the girl whispered, squeezed his hand and, within seconds, was out of sight.

Reid shut the door, returned and pulled up the blankets on Lorie's bed so it looked unused in and headed down stairs. Meanwhile on the other side of the building, Cinders continued barking and growling.

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"Call your God damn dog off or I'll shoot it," Peter snarled at Kate who had opened the door.

He looked mean and one of his henchmen lifted an ominous handgun up ever so slightly.

"She won't obey me," Kate replied in a cold voice. "It's Reid's dog. "

"Get him and the girls while you are at it," Peter hissed. "It will save an awful lot of unpleasantness."

Kate stood deviant but her mind raced. Girls! Why had he spoken in the plural? "Only Reid is here," she replied. "Wait one moment. I'm sure he is awake after all Cinders' barking."

"I'm here, Kate," a husky voice cut in and Reid stepped out.

"We're coming in," Peter snapped. "I told the girlfriend, here I'd shoot the dog if you don't call him off." He leered at Kate still dressed only in floral pajamas and made no attempt to disguise his gaze.

"Shoot him and the National Guard will be swarming over your commune before the day is out. That's a promise." Reid replied in a slow determined growl that sounded a little like Cinders. His eyes bore into Peter and the fists clenched at his side were so tight, muscles on this neck throbbed. "I am a captain in the local reserve unit and we look after our own. You may be able to intimidate your so called flock, Mr. Littlejohn, but don't try it with me."

"The airport authorities know my CL-215 is here," Kate added. Her voice was also strong with only the slightest quiver noticeable. "If I don't call in by before seven thirty this morning, a search plane will be over looking for us."

"We want our girls," Peter hissed. "Call your dog off."

"Hush, Girl. Come here!" Reid whispered.

Cinders immediately stopped growling and ran to stand beside Reid. Both eyes moved from Littlejohn's face to stare at the man holding the gun. Teeth bared and hair still stood up on the Black Liberator's back. She was quiet but ready to protect her master.

"There is nobody here," Reid said. He stood aside and Cinders followed.

"Search the place if you wish, then get out and leave us in peace."

"We will," Peter replied but made sure he avoided Cinders on the way in. One man went with him and the third stayed on the deck. The fourth, Reid assumed, had stayed by the boat. For a religious group, they were amazingly militant in their methods."

Kate avoided Reid's eyes but her hand went out and squeezed his.

~~~

Forty minutes slipped by before Peter returned to the veranda where Reid, Kate and Cinders remained.

"It appears I was wrong," Peter stated. "There is no evidence of our girls. I apologize for the inconvenience."

"So that's it," Reid replied. "You leave a nasty taste in my mouth. Anyhow, why is it so necessary for your girls to be returned?"

"This is a hostile wilderness, Mr. Tucker. "

"I agree but your methods are despicable. If you'd come asking our assistance instead of threatening us at six o'clock in the morning, we would have only been too pleased to help find these young women. My advice is to call the state police and report their disappearance. Search crews and aircraft can cover a far greater area than you can in your boat."

"How did you know we had a boat?" Littlejohn asked suspiciously.

Reid never blinked. "You never came by airplane, it is too far to walk so how else could you have come?" He replied.

"True," the man acknowledged. "I only hope they never left the lake shore. One of our girls died when she was lost in the forest only a few months ago. We don't want it to happen again."

"So how many are missing?" Reid asked. "Back at your commune, you told me there was only one girl."

Peter frowned, glanced at his men and turned to face Reid again. "A few," he muttered. "We believe they had planned to leave weeks ago and would attempt to approach your aircraft. In hindsight, I think your plane was a diversion and they went inland. There is a trail leading back to a forest road but it's at least a day's walk," he said with almost a smile. "Don't worry, I have a jeep checking that route. The chances are they have all been found by now."

"So if they are found and want to leave your commune, will you let them?" Kate asked.

"If you had a fifteen or sixteen year old daughter, would you let them just leave your home, Miss Meltz?" Peter replied. "It is a vulnerable age."

"No, I guess not," Kate replied innocently. "It's a big world out there."

"Exactly," Peter replied. " I hope this small incident won't spoil our contract for airlifting our supplies."

"It shouldn't" Kate replied. "You're one of my few regular customers."

"Good. I hope your aircraft can be repaired and you can get our produce to market before it spoils."

He turned, nodded to his men and they left. Moments later the boat started up and roared away.

"And how did he know the CL-215 was crippled?" Kate said to Reid.

"A thoroughly evil man," Reid replied. "I wouldn't put it past him to have sabotaged the airplane."

"My thoughts, too," Kate replied. Her frown turned into a smile. "My God, I expected them to return dragging a screaming Lorie with them at any time. Where is she?"

"And I thought they'd find her clothes," Reid replied after explaining where he'd sent Lorie.

"They're in the toilet cistern," Kate laughed. "I'm glad none of them flushed it as I doubt if there was much water left. It's the only place I could think of at such short notice."

"Oh Kate, I could kiss you," Reid laughed.

"Then do it," she replied in a soft voice.

Their eyes met and Reid stepped forward and gathered the young woman in his arms. Lips met and the tiny soft peck became more passionate as she clung on and responded. He held on for an eternity before Kate looked into his eyes and stepped back.

"I'm not usually like this," she whispered. "I'm sorry, Reid. You must think I'm some cheap trollop."

She backed away and, without another glance, walked inside.

Reid licked his lips that still held Kate's taste and stood in silence. "Come on, Girl," he said and walked out to search the jetty and shoreline. It was not beyond Peter to drop a man off to spy on them. However, even with Cinders' help, nobody was found and he returned to find Lorie and Kate both dressed and waiting expectantly for him.

"Nobody around," he grunted and avoided Kate's eyes.

She however smiled, walked across to him and kissed him again, fully on the lips. "I just realized I like kissing men with beards," she said and turned to the girl. "You don't mind, do you Lorie?"

"Me," the girl said. "of course not." She and stepped back and turned serious. "You know, they were right under the tree I was in. If they had looked up, I'm sure they would have seen me. God, I was terrified but I remembered to keep my feet in out of sight."

"And you're safe now," Reid replied. "We're all going to look after each other until we're safe and back in Spokane," he said. "That's a promise."

~~~

The shock came forty minutes later when Kate walked out to check the amphibian.

"The Bastards!" she howled.

The CL-215 wasn't floating beside the wharf but was instead at a grotesque angle with the nearest wing tipped up at an angle of eighty degrees and the far one below the surface. Even as Kate watched, the craft shuttered, there was a groan of stretched ropes and the fuselage sank beneath the water.

Kate jumped down the steps, tore along the jetty and was about to leap in the still open rear cargo door when two powerful arms grabbed her.

"Leave it Kate!" Reid said in a quiet voice.

"Let me go! I have to get to the radio," the woman screamed. She flung

an arm out but was held and could only stand, ashen face as and watch her airplane slide beneath the surface.

"The water is deep," Reid continued in a kind voice but he still held her in a vice grip. "Climb aboard and you'll be trapped inside."

There was another eerie groan of ropes followed by an enormous twang. The rear mooring rope spun off the top of the small pole it had been looped over and whiplashed across the fuselage. In the same instant, water reached the cargo door and water poured inside.

"See, you would have been caught," Reid said quietly.

Kate stopped fighting but instead, turned slightly and let Reid hold her trembling body. They watched as the orange fuselage dropped beneath the surface, a gigantic bubble rolled out the door and the wing over the jetty hit the decking. There was a scream of metal against wood, the wing slid away. The nose was held still by the forward rope but water now covered the entire fuselage and wings that shimmered beneath a few feet below the surface.

"The rope is holding the nose up." Reid continued as he held Kate.

The pilot was dry eyed but her lips trembled as she continued to stare at the sunken plane. "How could they?" she finally whispered. "What harm have we ever done them?"

"Because you stood up to Peter," Lorie replied. Their youngest companion had followed them down to the jetty and now stood beside them with a white face and trembling lip. "He is insane, I am sure. He bends people's minds but cannot accept that he is a mere man." She put out an arm to also hug Kate. "Anyhow, that's what Mom told me not long before she died."

"I sunk everything into that plane, my entire a fortune," Kate whispered. "Everything! I sold my home and raised two mortgages to buy it and start the company. When Resolution Air collapsed, I was told I was wasting my time and money trying to run a profitable business but I thought I could do it." She stared up at Reid. "I was a bloody fool, wasn't I?"

"No," Reid replied. "Anyhow, I'm sure the plane can be salvaged and you must have insurance."

Kate nodded. "Our radio has gone, though. Nobody will worry about the plane being overdue for at least two days. When I last reported in I confirmed we were safe and it would probably not return for a couple of days. I thought, I could get the engine sorted out today and would fly out. Serves me right for being so arrogant. I should have asked for a rescue craft yesterday."

"This is an entirely different situation," Reid added. "We couldn't predict the plane was going to be sabotaged."

"And they'll be back," Lorie whispered. "They wrecked the plane to keep you here. When they don't find me, they'll know I'm with you. There's nowhere else I can be."

"But the others!" Kate said

Lorie flung around so quickly her newly cut hair swung out. "What others?" she gasped.

"Peter said they were looking for others who were missing."

"Oh My God, Jennifer and Sassy did it! They told me if I got onto the plane they'd run away and try to get to the cave."

"Where's that?" Reid asked.

"We found a small cave in the middle fork," Lorie explained. "One thing we were allowed to do was to go out in kayaks in the weekend. I guess they knew there we couldn't go too far. One day we set out on an all day expedition and followed the shoreline right around into the middle fork. Half way along was this tiny cave sort of hidden behind rocks. It became our secret place and we said if there was ever any need we could meet there." She stared at the other two with wide eyes. "I'm sure nobody at the commune knows about it and that's where the others would head."

"I see," Reid replied and turned to his companions. "Let's go inside, sit down and get everything sorted out," he said quietly. "The last thing we want to do is to panic and do something we may regret afterwards."

"The plane's stopped sinking," Kate replied. She gazed out at the stationary aircraft. The top engine mounting, propeller blades, tail and nose were above the water but the wings and fuselage were submerged. "I guess we're lucky the water wasn't too deep near the shore."

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"It is no good worrying over the things over which we have no control," Reid said to the others as they sat around the kitchen table a few moments later. Cinders had been left on the jetty with instructions to bark if anything appeared. "We cannot fly out nor can we contact anyone. However, it won't be too long before the lack of radio messages alerts someone back in Spokane something is amiss." He turned his eyes to Kate. "Is there anyone at your base or home who would be likely to contact authorities when you don't radio in?"

"There's nobody at home," Kate replied. "I live in an apartment by myself. At work there are only the two part time ground staff who are new and Merve. He's the mechanic who came across from Resolution Air with me. He's an older guy who is somewhat laid back." She grimaced. "Don't get me wrong. He's an excellent mechanic but doesn't worry about the administration. He has been doing quite a large job on the Beaver's engine. My guess is, he'll just keep doing that and not worry too much about my non-appearance until at least tomorrow."

"And the airport authorities?"

"The same. There are dozens of smaller airplanes that fly in and out of the airport. I never had a commercial airport as my destination and there are seven or eight lakes and ranch airstrips where I could have landed. Again, tomorrow will be the earliest any one would suspect the CL-215 is down."

"And at that time, will they come here first?"

"Oh yes," Kate continued. "They knew I had landed here. That was confirmed when we arrived."

"One day is a long time to just wait," Lorie added. "If Peter comes back we'll only get ten minutes warning at the most."

"Not if we're on the opposite shore," Reid replied. "My suggestion is we go across to the other side of the northern fork."

"How?" Kate replied. "If we paddle those kayaks stored under the deck, we could be caught in the middle and it must be miles to walk around the shoreline."

"A small cabin cruiser goes with the place," Reid replied. "I was told it is

quite ancient but has an outboard motor that the reality agent had serviced. I think the firm holds a trust over the property. I know they said they had also upgraded the generator and filled the oil tank.

"So we a can go and look for Jennifer and Sassy!" Lorie interrupted. Her eyes looked excited.

"We'll see," Reid replied. "First things first. I have a small tent and a sleeping bag. I had intended to do some overnight hikes but I never guessed I'd have two pretty companions with me."

Both Kate and Lorie smiled.

"So let's do it," the older woman replied. "I get nervous just sitting here. "

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