

Joe Pilot

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Chapter One

The sun shone brightly, a rare spring afternoon on the southwest coast of British Columbia. Thick clouds stuck to the mountain ridges covering the many giant glaciers that lived between the peaks.

Dr. Bryan Joseph Doyle, or Joe as his friends knew him, was polishing Rain-X onto the windshield of the Cessna Caravan on amphibious floats that he flew most weekends. The late Joseph S. Doyle, Joe's father, had donated the plane to the British Columbia Ambulance Service (BCAS) with the stipulation that his family-maintained control over its use. His brother Keith, a medevac pilot who flew both airplanes and helicopters, piloted the plane during the week. The Cessna was a vast improvement over the Beaver aircraft it replaced.

The interior of the cabin looked like a well-equipped ambulance. An aluminum-framed gurney snapped into place on top of well-marked removable medical suitcases that in turn snapped into a specially designed aluminum frame. The suitcases were made of lightweight, high-impact plastic and chalked full of medical and surgical supplies. The plane was a flying emergency room. Joe spent many weekends flying medevac missions like transporting critically injured car accident victims or sick children from small rural hospitals to more significant medical Centers throughout British Columbia. These weekends allowed him to combine his two loves - flying and

medicine, not to be eclipsed by doing everything with his trusty furry friend Harley. He couldn't guess how many lives had been saved because of this floatplane.

Every flight was different. The never-ending challenge being weather, and today would be no exception. The last half hour of this trip would be the most difficult, 50 miles through the Inside Passage, a seaway that snaked through a group of rugged islands scattered along the British Columbia coast, presently hidden in the fog. However, the weather forecast was for the fog to lift, and Joe was counting on it.

The telephone in his earpiece alerted him to an incoming call. "Go for Joe," he commanded his phone. The voice-activation system connected him immediately. "Joe speaking."

"It's me," said Dr. Tony Chung, Joe's closest friend. The two young doctors had worked with each other throughout med school, often in competition. When the weather was nice, Tony would fly with Joe, always bringing naive nurses who believed they were needed. After graduating, and when they weren't entertaining in the sky, they worked together on a cardiovascular team at St. Paul's and Vancouver General Hospital. When Joe was flying, Tony would cover for him at the hospitals. Over the years, they had flown together many times and always departed from a rented hangar at Vancouver International Airport. "I have good news and bad news. What do you want first?"

"Give me the bad news," Joe said without hesitating.

"Your passenger is not happy. She's been waiting for almost an hour downtown at the floatplane dock," Tony announced swiftly, then paused.

"She? I thought our new doctor was a HE," Joe said, surprised. "What's up, Tony?" He gave his dog, who was sitting on the float beside him, a puzzled look.

Tony began to ramble, "That's because she uses the name Alex, short for Alexandra. Wait until you see this woman!" he was speaking rapidly, not giving Joe time to respond.

"I interviewed her yesterday, and she is the most amazing person I've ever met! She's Russian, speaks perfect English, 34-years old

with a body to die for," Joe could practically see the look on Tony's face. "The government fast-tracked her, an immigration program to get more doctors working in the north."

"And," Joe added while his friend took a breath, knowing that Tony needed no prompting to carry on.

Tony's tone changed from enthusiasm to dread. "One problem, for most of the interview, all she talked about was *Dr. Bryan Doyle* and how she looked forward to working with you and on and on."

Joe began to listen more intently, devoting less of his attention to the scenery and more to what his colleague said.

"She made you sound like a rock star, Joe. Now, if she goes to your hangar with all your pictures and certificates on the wall, she'll know you're YOU," Tony paused briefly. "I think it's a good idea that she doesn't know who you are. Just for a while. Can you help me out here, Joe? She is my kind of woman!"

Joe laughed. "If she's breathing, she's your kind of woman. Tell me you're kidding!"

"It's not like that," Tony explained, "We have a lot in common, and she was amazed to find out who my uncle is." Joe looked at Harley, the two of them equally impressed by this story. "I'd be good for her, and I think she likes me, but she's already got this image of you in her head. So, I'd like to at least have a chance," Tony trailed off, hoping for Joe's approval.

"Let me see if I've got this right; you want me to lie to a doctor I'm going to be working with!" Joe shook his head. He would do almost anything for Tony, but Joe didn't like lying, without good reason.

"It's not really a lie!" Tony shot back almost instantly. "She doesn't know that Bryan Doyle will be picking her up. She thinks you're just the pilot, Joe Pilot, a paramedic, and you're late," Joe knew he was being painted into a corner but allowed his friend to continue with his plan. "All you need to do is let her think that for a while. And

think of this. By not coming right out and saying who you are, you can find out what she's really like."

"This is a bad idea, Tony," Joe growled in a low tone.

"No, this is perfect! You get to see her the way she is. You always say it's so hard to know what a person's like. Think of this as an amazing opportunity to get to know her. You get to meet the real person."

"Joe Pilot, a paramedic?" Joe spit out unenthusiastically, "Tony, this amazing opportunity isn't a good idea," The last thing Joe wanted to be called was Joe Pilot, a sarcastic name reserved for an unprofessional pilot.

"It's a great idea, and you don't have to lie," Tony continued his sales pitch as if Joe had already agreed. "Just don't volunteer any information. It's just for the weekend. Give her feelings for me a chance to solidify."

"Her feelings to solidify?" Joe chuckled. He knew it was futile to argue with Tony. "You're right about one thing, Tony, this WILL give me a chance to find out what she's like as a doctor," Joe could almost hear the grin forming on Tony's face, "For that reason, I'll play along but Tony when she must know who I am, I'm going to tell her. Understand?" Joe felt it very important at that moment to remind Tony that his scheme may have consequences subtly.

"Of course, no problem, no problem," Tony uttered carelessly.

"And what are you going to say when she finds out the truth?" Joe sharply replied.

"Joe, It's no problem!" Tony shot back, "When she finds out, I'll say it's a misunderstanding. I'll tell her I thought she knew you were Bryan Doyle," Tony's creativity never failed to impress Joe.

"Oh yeah, that'll work," Joe uttered sarcastically. "Why didn't I think of that?" Joe asked, then continued before Tony could answer, "Call her and tell her my ETA is thirty minutes. By the way, you owe me big. I mean huge!" Joe said, shaking his head as the words left his mouth.

"Anything Joe, you name it, and it's yours!" Tony said with enthusiasm.

"I will, soon, goodbye," Joe said before quickly terminating the phone call, not allowing Tony to impose any more 'favors.'

In disbelief, Joe shook his head again, jumped off the float, and turned his attention to his German Shephard. Harley was looking sharp in her custom-made body harness, waiting for instructions. "Harley, you don't want to miss this one. Get in."

Harley immediately leaped off the large float through the door and took her place in the co-pilot seat. A short four years ago, as Joe was riding his Harley-Davidson in the countryside that surrounded Vancouver, he came upon a young girl selling puppies on the side of the road. When Joe pulled up to have a look, all but one of the pups ran for cover from the noisy motorcycle. After parking the bike, he picked up the brave little puppy, who was so excited she peed on Joe. The young girl selling the puppies said, "That dog loves you," Joe paid her for the dog and took her home inside his leather jacket with only the puppy's head peeking out.

When he pulled the motorcycle into the barn, he was swamped by his two young nieces, Sarah and Chloe, who immediately claimed the dog as their own. Joe lived in a nicely furnished loft at the far end of a large barn on a family-owned parcel of land. There were two houses on the property. Joe's mother, Mary, lived in the first house. His brother Keith lived with his wife Sandra and their two girls in the second house. This property had been in the family for years.

The little puppy could not have been happier. When Joe was working, and the girls were at school, Harley was cared for by Sandra or the ranch hand, Charlie. They also took care of two quarter horses which Harley thought of as big dogs, and her newest best friends.

Except for when Joe was working at the hospital, Harley was his constant companion. Harley's tail gave away her excitement for the weekend trip. Following Harley's lead, Joe made his way into the cockpit and attached their seatbelts. After completing the preflight checklist, he placed his finger on the starter button, and the Pratt &

Whitney whined to life. Joe taxied the Cessna to a holding area to do his run-up. The sound of this turboprop never got old. When he finished his run-up, he radioed Vancouver ground for taxi clearance.

After taxiing to the runway, Joe switched to tower frequency and was cleared for an immediate takeoff. He pushed the throttle all the way forward, smiling when he heard the whine become a smooth howl as the turbine climbed to full power. When the airspeed indicator passed through 60 knots, Joe gently pulled back on the control column. The Cessna purred as it effortlessly clawed itself into the cool air. In less than three minutes, Joe had raised the landing gear, reduced the power, and leveled her at 2500 feet, his cruising altitude for the short flight to Vancouver Harbor.

The afternoon had brightened. The flight to the Harbor took them over the West End of Vancouver. Skyscrapers dominated the downtown area leading to Stanley Park. After passing the park, Joe turned right and flew over the Lions Gate Bridge. Then he descended to 1000 feet and received his landing clearance from Vancouver Harbor Tower.

He landed on the rough water then taxied the airplane alongside a large pier. He saw a woman with a small suitcase approaching as he slowed to a stop. Joe leaped from the airplane, grabbed the docking line that was attached to the front of the float, then jumped onto the pier. With the rope in his left hand, he pushed his right hand forward. "Hi, I'm Joe."

While they shook hands, he took a good look at her and remembered what Tony had said. Now he understood what his friend was talking about. She was beautiful, and her beauty took his breath away. The wind swirled her long brown hair around her flawless face. Her lips were full and rose-colored, and her skin was as smooth and white as porcelain. She wore large, dark-framed Clark Kent-style glasses. The tinted lenses made it hard to tell what color her eyes were.

She looked Joe over for a good minute before speaking. "My name is Dr. Sharapova," After a moment's hesitation, she asked, "Have we met, Joe?" The man before her looked a lot like Dr. Doyle, whose

lecture she'd attended at Harvard three years back. She quickly dismissed the thought. A lot of people looked alike.

Joe sensed something familiar about her too. He took a moment to steady himself before he answered. "I think I would have remembered," he said slowly. "How long have you been in Canada?"

"This is my second week," She answered casually.

"Then we definitely haven't met," Even as the words left his mouth, he started to doubt them. There *was* something familiar about her. Unable to place her, he asked, "Did Dr. Chung tell you to meet me here?"

"Dr. Chung said we would be leaving from the International Airport, but after he learned that I was living downtown without a car, we agreed this would be better," She explained, then inquired, "Why? Is there a problem?"

"I prefer taking off from the airport. It's easier on the airplane," he said softly, trying to show his professionalism as a pilot. "It's alright this time. What else did Dr. Chung tell you?" Joe was curious as to how Tony described 'Joe Pilot.'

"Dr. Chung said he taught you personally," She stated, "That you were way past a normal ambulance driver and that I can trust you."
Laughing, Joe exclaimed, "Ambulance driver, who he taught personally! This is getting better by the minute; did he tell you anything else?"

She smiled for the first time. "Yes, he said you're a real cowboy."

"A cowboy. Tony said I'm a cowboy?" Then, with a comical tone, he asked, "Did he tell you what a cowboy is?"

Dr. Sharapova's smile turned into a grin. "I know what a cowboy is. It's a man who drinks too much beer, watches too much TV, listens to country and western music, has a motorcycle, drives a pickup truck with his dog and a rifle, eats poorly, and farts a lot."

"Wow! Did Tony say all of that?" Joe asked eagerly.

"Almost, I added the eats poorly and farts a lot from personal experience," she said sarcastically.

Shaking his head, Joe pointed to the door. "You'll need to climb in through my side. If you can persuade my dog to sit in the back, you can have her seat," Joe paused as her attention turned to Harley. "She won't bite; at least I don't think she'll bite. Her name is Harley, ask her nicely," Joe didn't believe for a minute that Harley would give up her seat to a stranger without protest.

Alex stepped onto the float and stuck her head inside the plane to meet Harley face-to-face. She bowed her head to show she wasn't threatening and spoke softly. "Hello, Harley," She slowly pushed her hand forward for Harley's inspection. With her other hand, she massaged the back of the shepherds' neck. Harley lowered her head, enjoying the touch. Next, she carefully released the buckle that held her harness and asked, "Would you mind sitting in the back, Harley? I get motion sickness if I'm not in the front. Will you do that for me? Please," The dog turned and jumped between the seats to the padded platform that was her sleeping area. Smiling, Alex climbed into the right seat and buckled in.

Joe picked up her small suitcase and opened the back door. To his amazement, there was Harley, sitting on her pad wagging her tail and devoting all her attention to Alex. Joe shook his head. "You too?" he said to Harley. He attached her harness to a lanyard that would allow Harley enough room to poke her head between the two front seats.

With the back door shut and the docking rope released, Joe entered the airplane, buckled in, and prepared for takeoff. There was a wind, which helped, but the heavy waves from the many boats that used the Harbor irritated him. The takeoff roll was rougher than what Joe liked to put his plane through, and the disgusted look on his face as they pounded through the waves gave away his feelings.

Dr. Sharapova watched him closely throughout the takeoff run. Once the airplane had pounded its way into the air, she stated, "That was nasty. I see why you prefer taking off from an airport."

Looking at her brought a smile to his face. He remembered his conversation with Tony and chuckled. Being an optimist by nature, Joe started to think this might be fun. After all, what could go wrong?

He engaged the autopilot and turned to Alex. "So, what do you think of Dr. Chung?"

"Nice man," She answered casually, "You two must be good friends for him to help you out so much," she said with a grin. Her tone puzzled Joe.

"Yeah, Tony's something special," Joe paused before changing the subject. "Where did you learn to speak English?"

"My mother is a doctor who trained in the United States. She knew that to get the best education, I would need to know English. So, I have been in English schools since I was three. Many of my instructors were from Canada. They raved about this place," She looked out the window, then turned back to Joe. "Now I see why. It's beautiful."

Because he flew over this coast so often, Joe sometimes took the beauty of the place for granted. Together they enjoyed it now for at least twenty minutes. Then Joe broke the silence. "What does your father do in Russia?"

"My father's a pilot," She smirked, "He's a real pilot, but not in Russia."

"Oh, a real pilot... Not like me?" Joe said defensively.

"Well...yeah," Alex turned toward the window, but Joe could see her expression reflected in the Plexiglas. She was smiling, satisfied with herself.

He waited a couple of minutes and then asked, "Where did you get your medical degree?"

She smirked again. "Harvard. Ever hear of it?"

Joe cleared his throat noisily. He had lectured at Harvard, the number one school of medicine in the United States, a few years ago. Patrick Dryden, the Dean of Medicine, was a friend of his. He made a mental note to phone his friend to find out more about Alex. But for

now, he would continue the game. "Harvard, Harvard...?" He scratched his head. "Is that in Europe?"

Alex clicked her tongue. "Really? You expect me to believe you don't know where Harvard is?"

Joe glanced at her. He couldn't decide whether her smile was playful or shrewd. But the time would soon come when she would find out he was Dr. Bryan Doyle, and then she might not think his bantering was so funny. Joe glanced at her again. Or did she already know? The less he said about himself, he decided, the better. "Tell me about Dr. Sharapova?"

Her brows descended. She looked puzzled. "What do you want to know?"

"Are you married?" Joe said without hesitation.

"Wow, you don't waste any time," Alex responded, clearly offended, "I've known you for less than an hour, and you want to know about my personal life? Who do you think you are???" She spoke bluntly, with a disgusted tone. "All you need to know about me is that I'm the doctor in charge, and I don't discuss my personal life with strangers. Especially you!" Her sudden change of tone made Joe wonder if she was playing with him. There was only one way to find out.

"Especially me? Does this mean you don't like cowboys?" Joe had a big smile on his face, like a happy school kid. He couldn't help himself.

"That's right - I don't like cowboys," she said. "Sorry to have to break it to you, but I have no time for men in my life. Relationships are nothing but time-consuming trouble."

Alex turned and looked out the window. She had set things straight, which was okay with Joe. Since losing his wife five years earlier, he had found working professionally with women much easier when there weren't emotions involved.

Trying to lighten the mood, Joe (who was still smiling) asked, "Do you play tennis?"

She turned to look at him. He was unbelievable. She sighed, shook her head, and turned back to the window.

"I guess that means you get that question a lot... Touchy."

Alex continued to ignore him. The rules of the game they were playing had become ambiguous, and she didn't feel like playing anymore.

The flight to Bella Bella, the hub of the central coast, was just over two hours. From Vancouver, it required flying north to Port Hardy, the most northerly community on Vancouver Island and an exceptional emergency facility. After Port Hardy, they would continue north over the open Pacific for 70 miles, the roughest part of the trip, before entering the Northwest Passage.

After a long period of silence, Alex mumbled, "It's a shame Dr. Doyle isn't traveling with us." Joe glanced at her. Her blasé expression puzzled him. He turned to Harley and whispered, "Is she playing with us?" The noise from the turbine kept his question private.

Chapter Two

They flew for an hour and a half before reaching a wall of impenetrable clouds that had descended upon the ocean. They were only 50 miles from Bella Bella by then, but this was as far as they would be going until the clouds lifted. Joe picked a small, sheltered bay that he knew, called Fury Cove. He landed the floatplane, and after it had settled, taxied onto a sandy beach that was littered with driftwood mixed with an assortment of plastic garbage. It was almost 5:30 PM, but there would be daylight for at least another five hours because it was late June in the north.

"We'll wait here for the clouds to lift. It shouldn't be too long," Joe said as he tied the floats to a large dead tree half-buried in the sand. Then he used his satellite phone to call Pacific Radio (Kamloops FIC) to cancel his flight plan and advise them of his location.

He opened the back door and released Harley from her harness. The German Shephard quickly jumped from the plane and ran off to examine the beach. Joe brought out a stainless-steel cooler and a plastic bag from under the gurney and placed them on a log. Inside the plastic bag was a two-sided container with dog food and water for Harley. As soon as Joe popped open the lid, Harley returned to dig into her food. Inside the cooler was dinner, two-foot-long Subway sandwiches, one tuna, and the other roast beef, both loaded with vegetables on whole-wheat buns. In addition, there was bottled water, a Tupperware container full of green grapes, and on the bottom of the cooler mixed with the ice were six bottles of Joe's favorite beer. Alex joined him at the cooler after a lengthy silence, and, without asking, she reached into the cooler and took half of the tuna sandwich.

They ate in silence, staring out at the surroundings avoiding eye contact. Joe was finishing his roast beef sandwich when the clouds started rolling over the trees and down upon them. They were thick, cold, and full of moisture. He punched in some numbers on his satellite phone, calling the Flight Information center. "Can I get the latest weather for 50 miles south of Bella Bella?" he asked. He listened

intently and then asked, "When is that expected to change?" He listened a little longer, and then, with a disgusted look, he pressed the off button on the phone and put it down on the cooler lid.

The clouds were filling the bay now, and as they rolled in, they created many optical illusions. The surrounding trees turned into monsters that appeared and disappeared as the heavy fog rumbled through them. The amazingly rapid temperature drop added a creepy chill to an already upsetting situation.

"Bad news?" Alex asked as she buttoned up her light jacket. She couldn't believe she had to ask him, that he hadn't offered the information on his own.

"Yeah, it's bad. An Arctic front is pushing this cold, moist air south. The forecast for the next eight hours is for the fog to stay the same or get worse," Joe wasn't impressed with the situation. "It looks like we're stuck here for now. If it doesn't lift, we'll have to stay the night."

"Seriously, I'm not staying here overnight!" Alex said intently, "Let's get in the airplane and fly to the nearest airport before it gets any worse," She ordered.

"Not in this fog," Joe tried to explain, "The temperature is just about freezing. The moisture will turn to ice on the leading edge of the wings and the floats," His hands gesturing toward the Cessna. "Without de-ice equipment, we don't go. Worst case, we camp here overnight," he said with a smile.

Alex couldn't hold back her frustration. "Are you kidding me? Do you call yourself a pilot? Well, Joe Pilot, you must think I'm stupid! This airplane has the latest de-ice equipment," She said, pointing at the airplane and continuing to voice her assessment, "There IS no reason we can't go. My second week in Canada, and you want me to sleep on a cold beach in an airplane...with YOU?!? Again, I'm not stupid, JOE. I know you did this on purpose."

"It's not what you think," Joe said. "Wait, give me a second," Before she could say anything more, he climbed into the airplane and returned with a piece of paper, which he handed to Alex. It was the tag

that he'd removed from the control column before the flight. It said in big red letters *De-Ice Inoperable during float operation*. Unfortunately, it didn't explain why. "Even if the wings were clear, the floats are not de-iced. And because of their size and shape, ice accumulates very quickly on the front, destroying the airflow and adding weight. Can you guess what happens next?" Joe lifted an eyebrow assuming his point was made. "I won't fly this plane into heavy icing conditions. No way."

In disgust, Alex threw the paper to the ground, then grabbed the satellite phone from the top of the cooler and jumped to her feet. She talked to herself loudly in Russian as she strode away. Then, with her bag over one shoulder, which seemed to be permanently attached to her, and her newest best friend Harley, who happily abandoned Joe for an adventure along the beach with Alex, she stormed away from the plane.

Joe didn't understand Russian, but he was fairly sure her rant was all about him. He laughed. Tony was right; he was seeing the real Alex. Intense, beautiful, impatient, and demanding.

Alex walked quickly down the beach until she was sure she was out of earshot and, because of the fog, almost out of sight as well. She brought up the menu on the phone and pressed "CONNECT" beside Tony's number.

Tony saw the caller ID and thought it was Joe. He answered immediately. "Joe, everything okay?"

"Not even a little bit OK," Alex snapped. "Your friend Joe Pilot parked the plane on a beach in the middle of Jurassic Frickin Park, and now he tells me we're staying overnight. What did you get me into, TONY?"

Tony hesitated a moment, uncertain how to answer. He sighed. "Dr. Sharapova, trust me. I have flown with Joe many times, and we have been stuck on beaches at least a dozen times (twice, really) waiting for the weather to clear. You have nothing to fear when you're with this man. You can trust him," Tony found himself panicking. He had hoped Joe and Alex wouldn't become too friendly, but now it

looked like the charade had gone way too far. The consequences of his actions were choking him. He babbled, not giving her a chance to interrupt. "Believe me; Joe's not like that. He would never touch a woman like you or any woman. He's not like that!" He stuttered.

After a short pause, she asked, "What do you mean; he's not like that?" Her tone had changed. "Is he gay?"

Now would be a good time to come clean. But instead, Tony said, "Let me put it this way. In the last five years, he has never been with a woman. Other than that, I don't know," It wasn't a lie. Since Joe's wife had died, he had not so much as gone out on a dinner date with anyone except Vivian, the hospital administrator. As far as Tony could tell, that relationship had been in limbo since its inception.

Relief swept over Alex's face. In Boston, she was well known in the gay community. Her best male friends were gay. "So, this is normal?"

"Oh yes," Tony said, doing his best to sound calm. "Very normal."

Alex took a deep breath and gave a sigh of relief; her greatest fear was evaporating. "Sorry to have bothered you, Dr. Chung. Goodbye."

"Bye," Tony said, relieved that the conversation was over.

She felt better about Joe after talking to Dr. Chung; the last thing she needed was a one-nighter with a cocky pilot on a deserted beach in a thick fog. But as she looked around at the grey wall that seemed to be closing in on her, she found herself still nursing a vague feeling of impending disaster. She reached into her bag and removed a 10mm Glock pistol. She pushed the eject button on the handle and watched the clip-marked *rubber bullets* fall into her bag. She replaced it with a clip-marked *exploding shells*, then placed the gun back in her oversized purse. Alex kept a tight grip on it as she and Harley walked back along the beach.

Joe had turned the plane around, so the front of the floats faced the incoming waves and the back part of the floats on dry sand, making it easy to enter the airplane without getting wet. "Next time

you decide to take a walk alone, take this with you," Joe said as he tossed a large can in her direction. She caught it and lifted it near her face to see it in the dimming light: *Counter Assault Bear Deterrent* in a spray holster. She placed it in her shoulder bag alongside her Glock.

Joe, who liked to be prepared for almost anything, pulled two oversized down-filled winter jackets out from the back of the plane. He put one on and then jumped off the float and took the other one to Alex, who was already shivering from the cold. She took it and put it on without saying a word.

The latest forecaster was correct; the weather did not improve. Over the next three hours, it got worse. The clouds became darker and colder. When total darkness had set in, Joe knew there was absolutely no possibility of them leaving. He built a fire using the limitless supply of dry driftwood that lay in rows upon the beach. In no time, the flames were shooting high into the air, illuminating the area around the airplane. He found himself thinking about the many times he and his father had taken fishing trips in their Beaver floatplane to beaches just like this one, those cold evenings beside a fire, talking and laughing. Now it was almost as if he was alone. Alex was giving him the silent treatment, which was fine by him. For the last half hour or so, she'd kept herself busy throwing a piece of driftwood for Harley's entertainment. It didn't matter where or how far she threw the stick; Harley would find it quickly, bring it back and place it at her feet. Then she would crouch and look into Alex's eyes, her way of commanding her to throw it again.

With a beer in one hand, Joe pulled a fishing rod from the back of the Cessna with the other. With any luck, he could land a salmon.

Alex gave the stick of wood one last throw. Then she sat down on the end of the float and tried to explain to Harley that she didn't want to play anymore. But Harley was having no part of it and kept bugging her by picking the stick up and dropping it on her feet. Finally, after a while, she pretended not to notice him.

When she finally spoke to Joe, it was to ask in a pleasant tone, "How well do you know Dr. Doyle?"

Joe turned to look at her, puzzled by her change. She looked at ease. She was smiling slightly, looking into his eyes, waiting for an answer. He began to feel guilty about the game they were playing. Finally, it occurred to him that now would be an excellent time to tell her the truth. But somehow, his response to her didn't reflect that admission.

"I know him very well," he said, "I fly with him all the time," He smiled. At least his answer hadn't been a lie.

"I've read quite a bit about him," Alex explained, "I know he's an amazing surgeon, but what is he like, as a person?" She paused for an answer that didn't arrive. "Is he married? Does he have kids?"

Joe stared at the fire, suddenly feeling tired and sad. He had kissed his wife the morning she'd left on a mercy flight to a nearby island. He kissed her every morning, but somehow, he could only remember that last kiss. Her plane had crashed into the water on approach. Her body was never found. Joe spent over a month searching the surrounding villages and beaches in the never-ending hope that she was still alive, somewhere. It seemed like a long time since he'd thought about that kiss, and he felt guilty; the more time passed, the less he thought about her.

"Are you okay?" Alex asked. She could see he was upset.

He answered bluntly. "What's up with you? Whenever you talk about him, you light up like a Christmas tree. You're fascinated with a man you don't even know," He realized he was taking out his misery on Alex, but it annoyed him to think that she'd been thinking about Doyle all this time that she'd been giving him the silent treatment. The fact that he *was* Doyle only made him feel more affronted.

"You're so wrong. I know a lot about him," she answered defensively. "He lectured at Harvard three years ago, and I had a front-row seat."

Joe's memory flashed back to the lecture at Harvard. He drew a blank when it came to the date, but now he remembered her—not in the seldom-used pull-down seats in the front row, but the second row, in an aisle seat. Back then, he had long hair and a mustache.

"A front-row seat at a lecture doesn't qualify as getting to know someone," he said softly. "Mark my words. You won't like him. He's just like me, a real cowboy. No wife, no kids, and like you, no time for a relationship," Joe couldn't help but let his frustration choose his words. "When you meet him, you'll think he's a smart-ass, guaranteed," He hoped he was preparing her sufficiently for the inevitable meeting with Dr. Bryan Doyle.

Alex had more questions for him, but before she could ask them, his rod bent, and the reel screamed. He'd hooked a fish.

It took almost ten minutes to land the salmon. Smiling the whole time, Joe finally pulled the fish from the water by the gills, released the hook, and turned to Alex. "Wow, look at that. It must be ten pounds." Joe looked in the direction of the trees. "I should throw it back," he said half to himself. "Bears."

Alex looked where he was looking, then back at him. "No," she cried. "Please don't. I'll cook it."

He thought for a moment. He found a piece of driftwood and set the squirming fish down on the sand and conked it once on the head. Then he climbed into the back of the plane and returned with a 45-70, a lever-action rifle that had once belonged to his father. This rifle was a favorite among serious hunters in the area. Joe's dad had been one of them. Joe himself was not much interested in hunting—though he did hunt occasionally and had cherished accompanying his father on hunting trips as a kid.

"This," he said to Alex, "is a necessity if we are going to cook that fish. Grizzly bears love salmon and can smell a cooking fish from miles away."

"Tony was right. You are a cowboy, and now you're going to kill a grizzly?" Alex responded with disgust.

"No, I'm not going to kill a grizzly," He pointed to Harley. "She's our alarm. If she starts with a panicked bark, it means real trouble."

"What's does a panicked bark sound like?"

"It's the combination of a bark and a howl. The only time I've heard this sound from a dog is when a bear is too close, and the dog is terrified. I've only heard Harley do it once, and believe me, it's a sound you never forget. *If* a bear comes, it will be for the fish, which we're going to let it have. If that happens, we back into the plane quickly and leave it alone. He will take the fish a safe distance and eat it. If the bear comes back again, then we use the bear spray. The rifle is for a worst-case scenario."

"May I see it?" Alex asked, indicating the rifle.

He handed it to her, saying, "Be careful. It's heavy."

Alex smirked. She turned the weapon on its side at once and cocked the lever, and watched a bullet fall into place. Then, the gun was ready to fire with a shell in the chamber, and the hammer cocked. She pushed the safety on before handing it back to him. "It's ready to go...*if* we need it," she said.

Joe was impressed. He laid the rifle against the float but didn't say anything. Instead, he got busy cleaning his fish expertly, and he hoped she noticed. Once he'd filleted the salmon, he threw the head and guts as far as he could into the water. He found a piece of shale and placed it over the fire to heat. He opened a bag of barbecue potato chips just enough to let the air out, then crushed the bag with his hands to crumble the chips inside. He coated the fillets with the salty mix and placed them on the hot shale to cook. While they were cooking, he opened another beer and handed it to Alex. Then he got one for himself.

They didn't speak while eating, but the fish was good, perfect, and neither could help to emit little moans of appreciation. Harley ate her share in less than 10 seconds. They kept their eyes on the tree line, but no grizzlies emerged to fight them for their dinner. When they were done, Joe cleaned up and put the cooler, Harley's food and water

dishes, and his fishing rod back in the plane. He threw the shale rock that they had cooked the salmon on as far as he could into the water.

It was time to sleep. Knowing the routine, Harley jumped into the airplane and curled up on her bed, waiting for Joe. Alex removed her winter jacket and climbed into the plane and onto the gurney. She used her jacket as a blanket.

Joe pulled out an oversized down comforter from one of the cabinets and asked politely, "Could you please move over a little bit? There's lots of room for both of us."

"Are you kidding me? There's no way we're sleeping together!" Alex said bluntly.

"Well, where am I supposed to sleep?" Joe replied almost sarcastically.

"You can sleep in the pilot seat. But, don't forget YOU are the pilot, and I am the doctor. I need a good night's sleep, and that won't happen with you beside me."

"But this is my plane," Joe said, trying to hold back a smile, "and there's no way I'm going to sleep in the seat when there's lots of room for two on the gurney. Besides, I've only got one blanket, my blanket, and you'll freeze without it," He lifted an end of the billowy comforter and snickered.

Alex's feet were already feeling the effects of the cold, damp air, and she was shivering. She considered that Dr. Chung had all but promised that Joe was gay and wouldn't bother her. "Under one condition," she said, "we sleep back-to-back."

"Of course," he answered as he closed the door to the airplane and climbed up on the gurney beside her, throwing the large blanket over both of them. "Good night."

Alex was still shivering. She moved her body closer to Joe's, seeking his heat but not wanting to get any closer than necessary. Finally, feeling safe and somewhat warmer, she said, "Good night."

They fell asleep to the sound of the waves as they rolled up against the floats. The cool fresh air combined with the plane's gentle rocking carried them both into dream-induced states. Without

consent, their bodies were giving off hormones. By morning their bodies had melted together...like those of lovers.

Half-awake but still dreaming with her eyes closed, Alex shuffled against Joe, enjoying the feeling of her dream lover holding her tight. Although still asleep, feeling her gyration sent Joe's hormones raging, involuntarily, his body started to move.

Feeling him moving brought her out of her dream. She felt Joe's erection rocking gently against her derrière. The pleasure of his movement was replaced with panic when she remembered where she was and who she was with. Her body exploded in protest. Like a cat, she turned in an instant, pushing Joe off the gurney, yelling, "Get away from me, you jerk!"

Joe was lucky to land on his feet, half-awake, standing in his shorts with his erection tenting. Then, startled, he looked around, asking, "What, what happened?"

"You were spooning me with THAT!" She pointed to his erection.

He looked down, somewhat surprised. "That was involuntary. I was asleep, and THAT..." he pointed to it, "...is morning wood, it has nothing to do with you!" He added disgustedly. Joe turned away from her, trying to compose himself. He opened the door and stepped out onto the float. Harley was one step ahead of him, bouncing off the float and onto the beach.

Alex knew he was right. Now she was sorry for overreacting. Joe walked to the front of the float where the water was deep to take a pee. Just as he finished relieving himself, he felt the back of the door hit him from behind. Alex had pushed it with her feet in an attempt to get onto the float feet first. Because Joe was off-balance, it didn't take much to make him fall off the float. He took a deep breath just before hitting the cold water. Shocked by the cold water, included the potentially warm layer of urine he'd fall through and his clothes that would be soaked afterward.

As he entered the water, he remembered the many times as a young boy when he'd jumped into frigid waters of one lake or another

for the pure pleasure of it. He moved quickly in the cold water, pushing his pants off, taking his boxers with them. With his bottoms gone, he pushed himself deeper, sliding out of his shirt. Now he could swim. Holding his clothes at his side, he headed to the surface. Joe surfaced, swimming to the side of the float and smiling at the thoughts going through his head. After popping out of the water like a naked cork, Joe started thrashing about, yelling, "Help me, I can't swim!"

First and foremost, Alex was a doctor, and when someone called for help, she reacted accordingly and without judgment. While Joe bobbed up and down, thrashing one arm in the frigid water, she found the wood paddle attached to the float and pulled it free, throwing it towards Joe. The end of the paddle landed on his head with a whack. He grabbed it and let Alex pull him to the float. As he climbed out of the water, he laughed because now he was nude and shivering slightly, his morning woody long gone. He dropped his wet clothing on the float as Alex reached into the plane, grabbed the blanket, and moved quickly to Joe. She wrapped the blanket around the both of them, hugging him tightly, sharing her body heat, as any good doctor would, saying over and over again, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Her hands moved over his body in an attempt to stimulate his circulation. But there was nothing wrong with Joe's circulation.

As much as he wanted to continue the hug, it had the same effect as the last time he hugged her in his sleep. He lifted Alex in his arms and spun her around so now she was at the front of the float, allowing him access to the back of the plane. He left her with the blanket, reached inside the plane, and pulled out a two-gallon water jug. He splashed freshwater all over his body. With the salt rinsed off, he used a large beach towel to dry himself quickly.

Joe was six feet tall, 185 pounds, and in shape; Alex couldn't help but notice. His blue eyes were lit up by the morning sun. She didn't take her eyes off him until he had covered his birthday suit with a dry jumpsuit. Then, finally, she turned away, hoping to stop the erotic thoughts running through her head. After all, the man was gay. And she had no plan to seek a partner in the foreseeable future anyway.

Still, that didn't mean she couldn't look and allow herself to enjoy what she saw.

Chapter Three

As the sun rose, it became apparent that the weather had broken. Joe used the satellite phone to confirm that fact and filed a flight plan for the short trip to Bella Bella. After stowing the satellite phone in his jumpsuit, he brought out breakfast: pickled garlic eggs, cheese buns, and orange juice. After breakfast, they piled into the airplane and started the motor. With the preflight complete, he applied just enough power to pull them off the beach, then pointed the nose into the wind and used full power.

Leveling off at 1,000 feet, Joe engaged the autopilot, and after a thorough check of the engine gauges, he sat back and relaxed. He looked over at Alex. She had replaced her Clark Kent-tinted glasses with a pair of Ray-Bans. He caught himself staring and had to look away. Her beauty was intoxicating.

Twenty minutes later, Joe smoothly put the Cessna down on the calm water in front of Bella Bella. When the plane slowed, he lowered the hydraulically operated landing gear into position then taxied it up a long ramp, coming to a stop a mere ten feet from R.W. Large Memorial Hospital's emergency entrance.

After deplaning, Harley ran off to investigate the shoreline, chasing anything that moved. The action there and his makeshift doghouse would keep her busy for hours. Then, finally, Joe and Alex headed for the ER and were greeted at the door by Dr. Heather Swift, a woman in her early forties whose pragmatic ponytail bounced whenever she moved her head. Heather worked with Joe at Vancouver General Hospital. Years ago, he recruited her to work part-time in these remote areas, and she had fallen in love with them. Yesterday, she flew in from Vancouver on a commercial flight, relieving the resident doctor for two weeks.

"You're late!" Heather cried, but she was smiling. "And you wonder why I don't fly with you anymore!" Before Joe could say anything, she turned her attention to Alex. "You must be Dr.

Sharapova. I'm Dr. Heather Swift. I read your file, very impressive," she said genuinely.

Heather turned to Joe. "Rooms five and six are empty. You can use the shower there."

"I'm good," he said. His gaze slid toward Alex, and he couldn't help smiling as he added, "I had a bath this morning."

Nothing about Joe ever surprised Heather. Shaking her head, she brought them up to speed as they walked back into the hospital. "We have a 16-year-old boy in room one. He crashed his BMX bike while performing flips off a jump, landing on his left side. As a result, his blood pressure is way too high. The resident doctor thinks a concussion caused his high blood pressure. But I'm not so sure."

"I'll have a look," Joe said happily. He had known Heather for a long time, and as far as he could remember, she had never been wrong in diagnosing a patient. Joe pulled a stethoscope from a nearby cupboard and headed off to room one.

"Rough night?" Heather asked Alex.

Alex nodded but didn't answer; she wondered why Joe, a paramedic, had been summoned to see a patient and not her.

"Come with me," Heather continued, already leading the way. "I'll show you the doctors' lounge where you can freshen up," As they walked, Heather went on, explaining, "We have six acute beds, seven continuing care beds, and a three-bed emergency department open 24/7. There is always one resident doctor here, three RNs, and four practical nurses. We also have a laboratory and the latest diagnostic imaging equipment. Within the hospital is a medical clinic, pharmacy, and air and land ambulance services are dispatched from here as well."

Alex was impressed, but she was still wondering about Joe. Keeping her thoughts to herself, she thanked Heather and entered the doctors' lounge.

Danny smiled when he saw Joe enter the room. Joe smiled back. Four months ago, he had put a cast on Danny's left leg after a high-speed biking accident, and that wasn't the first time Joe had

patched him up. After that, he was almost a regular customer. “Danny, I wasn’t expecting to see you so soon. What happened?”

“I don’t know. All I remember is riding my bike towards the new jump. Then I woke up here. My brother said I went over the jump and missed the landing, but I don’t remember anything. I think someone hit me on the head when I wasn’t looking,” Danny said with a grin. Joe was listening while his initial assessment had already begun. “I’m fine now, but they won’t let me go. Please, Joe, you gotta get me outta here. The food is terrible! I think they’re trying to kill me!”

“They’re not trying to kill you,” Joe chuckled, knowing Danny was serious. “Let me have a look. Then we can discuss food.”

Joe took his time examining Danny. After checking his blood pressure history on a monitor that recorded his vitals every fifteen minutes, he too was convinced there was more to this than a concussion. Using his stethoscope, Joe listened to Danny’s chest. Then he moved down to his abdomen. The more he listened, the more serious the look on his face became. “Danny, I need you to breathe through your mouth and stay as still as you can. Can you do that for me?”

“Why?” Danny asked.

“I think I hear something in your abdomen, but to be certain, I need you to be quiet because the sound is very faint.”

Danny thought of Joe as the best doctor in the world and immediately froze, breathing quietly through his mouth. When Joe placed the stethoscope back onto his abdomen, he could hear a bruit, a sound caused by turbulence as blood rushes past an aneurysm, a distinct sound he had heard only a few times before. Joe continued probing with the stethoscope, listening until he was sure this was the only spot. Then he turned his attention back to Danny’s chart. Halfway down the first page, he found what he was looking for. Danny’s brother Paul had described the accident to the first responder saying, “He hit the jump going way too fast, tumbling in the air. He came down on top of the bike on his left side.”

“Yep, that’ll do it,” Joe’s head bobbed up and down slightly as he spoke. Then, he turned to face Danny, saying earnestly, “don’t move, I’ll be right back.”

Before Danny could say anything, Joe was gone, and then almost as quickly, he reappeared, pushing a cart with an ultrasound unit. He spread cold lubricant onto Danny’s stomach and then glided the transducer over the area where he had heard the bruit. There it was, an aneurysm on the renal artery. Joe went over the area from every different direction, including using the transducer on Danny’s back. He estimated the aneurysm was the size of his fist. The good news was it didn’t appear to be leaking. Not wanting to scare Danny with the seriousness of the situation, Joe pointed to the image on the ultrasound screen. “See this dark spot?”

“Yeah, what is it?”

“That’s an artery. Think of it as the tube on your bike with a bulge. So, what I do is cut it out,” Using his finger on the screen, Joe made an imaginary line at each end of the aneurysm. “Then I stitch the two ends back together, and that’s it. I fix these things all the time.”

“Good thing it’s nothing serious,” Danny said, relieved.

Joe smiled. A relaxed, positive attitude was going to be very important. The truth would scare him and worsen the situation by raising his blood pressure higher than it already was, causing the aneurysm to leak or possibly break. If it were to break outside of a well-staffed operating room, chances of survival would be slim. “The bad news is that we have to keep you on a restricted diet until we fix this. Then you can have whatever you want.”

Unconcerned about the aneurysm but very troubled about his stomach, he pleaded, “I thought you were my friend, Joe?”

“I am your friend, Danny, and to prove it. As soon as you’re better, I’ll take you fishing in my floatplane.”

“Wow, are you serious, Joe?”

“Absolutely, and if you’re nice to the nurses and doctors, we’ll go to my secret spot where I guarantee you’ll catch a salmon.”

“Done deal!” Danny said, getting excited as he imagined himself fishing with Joe.

Seeing Danny’s reaction, Joe mumbled, “That backfired,” The last thing Joe wanted was for him to get all fired up. He opened an alcohol swab pack and rubbed it on Danny’s arm, then pulled a well-hidden syringe out from under a small towel on the ultrasound cart. “I’m going to give you a sedative to bring your blood pressure down,” he said as he pushed the needle into Danny’s shoulder, filling the muscles with a healthy dose of morphine.

Within seconds Danny was asleep. His blood pressure dropped from 190/105 when Joe first entered the room down to 116/72. He was safe, for now.

The overhead speaker came alive. It was Heather’s voice. “Joe, there’s a phone call you need to take,” That was her way of telling him he had an emergency without alerting the other patients. This was a common occurrence because Bella Bella was the base for tele-health service for all surrounding areas. He quickly headed to the nursing station to take the call.

Picking up the phone, he announced, “Dr. Doyle speaking, please state the emergency.”

“Joe, it’s Fred Beck,” Fred was a paramedic serving the tiny community of Ocean Falls. In spite of the fact that Ocean Falls could only be reached by boat or floatplane, it had once been a thriving locale with a population of about 5,000 people, most of whom worked at the pulp mill. However, when the mill closed in 1973, people began to leave. Now there were only 50 full-time residents, and Fred was all they had in the way of medical personnel. Joe had flown to Ocean Falls many times and knew Fred well. “I have a young man 30-years old who cut his left hand almost completely off with a table saw,” Fred continued. “He’s lost a lot of blood. Joe. He’s conscious but lethargic. Without immediate surgery, he’ll lose the hand.”

“Have you stopped the bleeding?” Joe asked.

“Yes, I’ve stopped the bleeding with a tourniquet.” The fear in Fred’s voice was palpable.

“Fred, I’ll be there in 20 minutes. Ice the hand, start him on oxygen and keep him warm. How long ago did this happen?”

“Just 10 minutes ago!”

“That’s good. Elevate his legs. Pull his records and find out his blood type. Then find three people who have the same blood type and get them down to the clinic and start IVs. Have someone meet me at the dock. I’m on my way.”

Because of Ocean Falls’ remote location, the Ministry of Health kept impeccable records, including blood type, just for these kinds of emergencies. After placing the phone in its receptacle, Joe turned to Heather, who had been listening in on the call. “Walk with me to the plane, please.”

The two doctors moved quickly through the door toward the plane. “Danny has a renal aneurysm on his left side. I gave him 5mg of morphine, brought his BP way down. I didn’t see any hemorrhaging on the ultrasound but have Dr. Sharapova do a CT scan on his entire body to be safe. He hit hard; there could be more trauma. Keep him sedated and call for a medevac plane to transport him to Vancouver as soon as possible. I’ll give Tony a heads-up as soon as I can.”

Dr. Swift understood the seriousness of Danny’s condition. “Will do. What else?” she asked.

Joe jumped onto the float and into the plane. As he fastened his seatbelt, he gave his final instructions to Heather. “Keep an eye on Harley and Alex. I haven’t read her file. I don’t know anything about her.”

“I have, trust me. She’ll be fine... Go!”

Heather turned and quickly moved a safe distance away from the front of the plane. Then, holding both hands forward, she gave Joe a two-handed thumbs up. Seeing the all-clear signal, he engaged the starter, and the turbine came to life.

Chapter Four

Joe spun the plane around and headed down the ramp into the saltwater. As soon as the wheels were retracted into the floats, he

applied full power. In less than a minute, they were airborne. He kept the nose low and the power high, knowing that a few minutes could make the difference between life and death. During the ten-minute flight to Ocean Falls, he made a mental list of what he would need from the back of the plane.

After a smooth landing, Joe lowered the wheels, then taxied the plane up a ramp to the tie-down area in front of the marina. He recognized Eric Alder, the mayor of Ocean Falls, who started tying the aircraft to ground anchors before the propeller stopped. With the airplane secured, Joe quickly went through a few of the cabinets in the back and emerged with two cases. Then he and the mayor rushed to a Chevy pickup that doubled as an ambulance for the short ride to the hospital.

Ocean Falls Hospital had opened in 1916 when the population was at its peak. It was only a one-bed facility, occupying a small building on Front Street, but it had a decent emergency room. The word that one of their own needed blood had spread quickly. At least ten volunteers were waiting outside when Joe arrived. He moved past them hurriedly and entered.

One look at the patient confirmed that he had lost a lot of blood. Joe was pleased to see that Fred had IVs running wide open, collecting blood from three volunteers. Joe checked the man's legs. They were purple with a faint pulse. He gave a sigh of relief, believing the young man would live. The challenge Joe faced was not just re-attaching the hand but making it functional. Working in remote places like Ocean Falls necessitated being ready for anything. Joe relished the challenge.

After two units of warm blood, the young man's color returned. "What's your name?" Joe asked.

It took a minute for the young man to answer. "Andrew Johnson, am I going to be okay?"

"Well, Andrew Johnson, today is your lucky day. My name is Dr. Bryan Doyle, and I'm a surgeon. If you permit me, I will put your

hand back on and make it work,” Joe said confidently. Experience had taught him that getting a patient’s permission had a relaxing effect.

“You have my permission,” Andrew said groggily. Joe had already administered a sedative, which was starting to take effect.

“Do your friends call you Andy?”

“Yeah, but I prefer Andrew,” his speech was slowing. “My wife calls me...” He was asleep before he could finish.

Joe went to work re-attaching the hand. Fred, under Joe’s guidance, acted as the anesthetist. Four hours later, Joe was satisfied that there was nothing more to be done. Andrew’s left hand was bandaged, and he was still heavily sedated.

Joe took his first real break. After devouring sandwiches and homemade soup brought in by one of the locals, he used the satellite phone to call Patrick Dryden in Boston.

After three rings, Patrick answered. “Dr. Dryden.”

“Pat, it’s Joe from Vancouver. How’s the Far East?” Joe asked sarcastically.

“Very funny, Joe. How’s the rain forest?” Pat shot back.

“I see you still haven’t gotten over your last trip,” Joe quipped. On his last visit to Vancouver, Pat agreed to fly in Joe’s airplane to Bella Bella only because Joe had promised they’d catch some fish. But the weather was terrible; it was rainy and windy, with turbulence so bad that Pat was airsick the entire time. The worst part is that they didn’t catch any salmon.

“Well, Joe, if you’re suggesting another fishing trip...”

“This would be the time for it. It’s the dry season. It only rains once a day. But listen, I’m calling about Dr. Alexandra Sharapova. What can you tell me about her?”

“I was wondering when you’d call. Dr. Sharapova is the best I’ve seen in a long time,” Pat said without hesitation. “When she finished her residence as a vascular surgeon, the hospital offered her the moon to stay, she declined. Said she wanted to work with Dr. Bryan Doyle. Quote unquote.”

Pat's words sank into Joe's head for a moment before he could respond. "What am I supposed to make of that?" Joe asked.

"It's not a sexual thing, of that I'm certain, no offense to you - it's more like she's a little overly enthusiastic about learning. She's a bit anal; one of those people who has to excel at everything they do," As Pat spoke, Joe reflected on what he knew about Alex. "She thinks you're one of the best surgeons in the world, and for her to become the best, she believes she needs to work with you. Again, her words, not mine. You're lucky to have her. She's a little strange but good. Once you get over her looks and treat her like a doctor, you'll be fine."

"Why did you emphasize that it's not a sexual thing? Are you trying to tell me something?" Joe inquired.

"I'm not sure if I should mention it or not. I'm inclined not to because it's no one's business. But, on the other hand, if you're going to be working closely together, it might make sense for you to know..." Pat seemed to be getting lost in his own words.

"Pat, you're going in circles. Just tell me what it is. I'll keep it under wraps," Joe paused, "Is she gay? That's no big deal."

"No, an attempted rape and a shooting," Pat replied. Joe felt his heart sink into his stomach.

"Wow, I wasn't expecting that," Joe found himself at a loss for words. He had treated patients before who had survived these types of attacks.

"Back in Russia. She met a man at a museum reception. He told her he was a representative of the museum and escorted her through the collection that was being exhibited. It seems that he gained her trust."

"I don't like this story, Pat. You're making me nervous," Joe knew this wouldn't end well.

"It gets better," Pat continued, "when she was ready to leave, he told her he's leaving too and would be taking public transportation since his Mercedes was in the shop," Pat took a breath. Joe dreaded hearing the rest of this story. "So, she offered him a ride home, and

when they got to the back road where he claimed he lived—of course, it wasn't his street—he tried to rape her.”

“You said *tried*. Does this story have a happy ending?” Joe asked hopefully.

“Do Russian stories ever have a happy ending?” Pat replied.

“Not the ones I've heard. Go on.”

“She had a .38 in her shoulder bag which was custom made so that she could holster it in there, out of the way,” Joe remembered the bag Alex carried with her at all times. “As this guy was dragging her out of the car, she got her hand into her bag and shot him through it,” Pat wasn't known for sugar-coating his stories.

“Wow, how do you know all this?” Joe asked.

Without answering, Pat continued. “Most women would have frozen in a situation like that, but women who train for medicine over there also get military training,” Joe had heard of this practice in Russia. “After she shot him in the leg, she used her blouse, which he had already ripped off, to make a tourniquet. Then she drove him to the hospital.”

“She should have left him there,” Joe muttered callously.

“The irony is that he had a story all ready to go by the time they arrived at the hospital. He went in screaming, ‘She shot me! She shot me!’ The police were called, and she was arrested,” Joe was beginning to understand Alex's demeanor. “When they went before the court—this guy, he had to be something—he said they'd been dating, and he broke it off. He claimed she wanted to know why; so, she drove him out into the middle of nowhere to ‘talk,’ and when he confessed that he was seeing someone else - she shot him and tried to cover it up by ripping off her blouse. That was at the preliminary hearing.”

“I imagine she was facing serious time,” Joe said as a half question.

“For sure, the judiciary system there is not what it is here,” Pat continued, “His uncle was an Oligarch and friend of Putin. There was no doubt the court would have bought his story over hers. The guy had a hole in his leg, and there was blood all

over her car. He must have been a great actor. From what I understand, the Russian Mafia was threatening the whole family, so one night the family packed up and left for the US where they were granted political asylum.”

“How did you find out about this in such detail?” Joe asked again.

“I got a visit from the National Security Agency shortly after the family arrived here. Apparently, the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service was looking for the family. When she applied at Harvard the FBI visited me and told me this story. When I asked for more information, I was told, in no uncertain terms, that was all I needed to know,” Joe knew that to draw this kind of attention something big was under foot. “The lady likes guns; and has a concealed weapons permit, they made that clear. She loves medicine and weaponry and excels at both,” Pat’s tone became almost a warning, “I kept my eye on her after that, and I could see how, for good reason, she was keeping her distance from straight men, especially the arrogant ones, and Joe I’m not sure Alexandra Sharapova is her real name. There’s so much more to this story that’s a mystery.”

Joe laughed. “That’s funny because Tony told her my name is Joe Pilot, long story. It’s because the most arrogant guy in Vancouver has already fallen in love with her.”

“Not Tony?!?” Pat shouted.

“Yes, Tony,” Joe replied ominously.

“Tell him not to waste his time,” Pat responded promptly. “She was here for seven years, and the only men I saw her with were from the gay community. They were the only people she associated with outside of the medical department. She might be gay herself. I don’t know, but it’s understandable judging from the story the FBI told me,” Joe sensed an imminent wrap-up to his conversation. “What I do know is that this woman is an amazing surgeon. You’re going to be impressed. I’d love to talk more but now’s not a good time. Seventeenth hole, and I’m up.”

“Thanks, Pat. I'll call you Monday,” Without waiting for his reply Joe disconnected the satellite phone.

He was upset with everything that had happened to Alex, but he also felt guiltier than ever for playing games with her. He pressed the call button beside Tony's name on the phone. As soon as Tony picked up, Joe said, “Tony, I've got good news and bad news. Which do you want first?” Joe laughed; it had been almost 24 hours since Tony had said the exact same thing to him.

“Give me the bad news,” Tony said hesitantly.

“She's not interested in you or me,” Joe explained, “I just got off the phone with Pat Dryden, the Dean of Medicine at Harvard. I'm sure you remember him from our fishing trip?” Joe continued before Tony could answer, “He was Dr. Sharapova's mentor. He tells me she's not interested in men at all,” Joe saw no reason to talk about what had happened to her. “Now, we don't have to play any more games.”

“What's the good news?” Tony asked, his disappointment evident.

“She was the top vascular surgeon in her class. Pat said he's never seen anyone this naturally talented. He thinks we're lucky to have her. That's good, right?” Tony didn't reply. “Oh, and I'm sending a 16-year-old male with a renal aneurysm your way. Let's fit him in on Monday and schedule Alex for the surgery. That'll be a good test.”

“Any other good news?” Tony asked hesitantly.

“No. That's it,” Joe set the phone down and thought about Dr. Sharapova. Nothing good would come from continuing the charade. This woman was tough; Joe was sure that she had experiences in Russia beyond anything he could imagine. The crassness of their game was getting too heavy. It was time to tell her the truth.

It had been two hours since Joe finished the surgery. Andrew was awake but far too groggy from the anesthetic to walk on his own. It took four of the larger volunteers plus Joe and Fred to get Andrew from the hospital and into the plane.

They got lucky. The air was smooth on the short trip back to Bella Bella. When they were about five miles out from the hospital, Joe

pulled the power back and started his approach. For the second time that day, he landed on the smooth water, lowered the wheels, and taxied up the ramp, stopping beside the hospital. As soon as the propeller stopped, Joe was out of the plane. He pushed a set of stairs that pivoted on two large wheels up to the door of the aircraft, then hustled up the stairs to assist Andrew, who was now slightly less groggy.

At the bottom of the stairs, Joe and Andrew were met by Dr. Sharapova, who guided Andrew into a wheelchair. Harley joined them, wagging her tail frantically. Joe introduced Andrew to Alex and Harley. As Alex pushed the young man into the hospital, she asked Joe, “What took you so long? You were gone almost seven hours.”

Joe thought for a few seconds before answering. “Well, first, I had to get him blood. Then, when he was stable, I connected the ulnar artery. Lucky for him, it was the only major artery severed. Once I had blood flow, I connected the major veins, and you know how long that can take. Then I had to put the ulna back together with a plate and two screws; he’d cut the bone clean through. It took a lot of time to get the bones together and straight,” Like a proud schoolboy, Joe smiled. “I attached both tendons, but what took a lot of time were the nerves, and I think I got lucky because he can move his fingers.”

Alex, with a skeptical look, said. “Pretty impressive for an ambulance driver.”

Joe shrugged and headed off to the cafeteria, where he loaded two bowls with beef stew before returning to his plane with Harley on his heels, who was ready for her dinner.

Alex, meanwhile, wheeled the young man into radiology, where she conducted a CT scan. When the high-definition pictures came up on the computer screen, she nodded her head. “I knew it,” she muttered in Russian. The images showed the ulna, the smaller of the two bones in the forearm, with a plate and two screws holding the bone aligned and tight. The scan also showed the arteries. She could see that blood was flowing freely, and the repairs weren’t leaking. The repair was as good as or better than a team of specialists could do. She

turned to the young man and asked nicely, “The doctor who operated on your hand, did he tell you his name?”

“Yes, yes he did. Ah... Dr. Bryan... I don't remember his last name.”

“Dr. Bryan Doyle?” Alex asked casually.

“Yeah, that's it,” Andrew answered enthusiastically.

Her stomach knotted immediately. She smiled politely at Andrew and said softly, “You're going to be fine. Try not to move too much. I'll be back in a few minutes,” She needed to make a phone call. It was her turn to talk to Dr. Patrick Dryden.

Chapter Five

With the sun dipping under the horizon, Joe sat on the float and opened the last beer from his cooler. As Harley quickly emptied her bowl, Joe explained how much trouble he had gotten himself into in the previous 24 hours. Harley was paying attention, but not to Joe's story. She was far too worried about the stew left in Joe's bowl.

It was almost dark when Dr. Sharapova appeared at the door to the hospital wearing a neatly buttoned white lab coat with white tight-fitting pants. She began walking the short distance to Joe with her arms crossed. The closer she got; the more Joe's heart raced. He knew the gig was up. He had to talk to himself to calm himself down. Finally, Alex came so close that he could feel her warm breath as she spoke. "Why?"

Joe went rigid like a schoolboy caught goofing off in class. He shook his head in disgust. "Ahhhh, I just wanted to see how you would perform on your own. You know, without having someone like me to lean on. This type of Medicine isn't for everybody. But you're doing great, fine, better than expected; you'll be great. Sorry, I doubted you," He was almost mumbling.

"I don't believe you. What's the real reason?" Dr. Sharapova asked bluntly, still without any expression.

Joe was taken back by her honesty; this lady didn't give an inch. He remembered the story that Pat Dryden had told him about her. "Look, I'm sorry for the hoax. It was a bad idea," Joe felt guilty. "But it all worked out, no harm, right?"

Alex wasn't laughing. Her beautiful angry eyes were locked onto his. Slowly, so that he would understand every word she said, "I think I might have made a mistake coming to Canada. You see, I came here expecting to learn from an amazing surgeon. Instead, what do I get? A cowboy, but mostly just the boy," She turned back toward the hospital.

"Please stop; there's something I need to tell you," Joe said quickly. She stopped, then turned to face him. "You weren't in the front row. You were in the second row, aisle seat. Your hair was blond,

and you wore a yellow dress with a grey blazer over it,” Joe could see that he had sparked something in Alex. “It’s because, well, your beautiful and mysterious, and that scared me. Give me a chance, I won’t lie to you again. I promise.”

Alex’s face turned glowing red, but not from the phony complement. She walked back to where Joe was standing and stopped in front of him, wanting to know what he meant by ‘mysterious,’ but afraid to ask.

“Don’t be mad,” Joe said, trying to lighten the moment. “You owe me one for this morning when you tried to drown me.”

Alex smiled a fake smile, thankful that the mood had changed, “I’ve been thinking about that too, how a drowning man is calm enough to get out of his wet clothes, then hold them in one hand as he swims to the surface. I’m sure drowning people always hold onto their clothes... in case they survive,” She smiled sarcastically. “You were right about one thing; Dr. Doyle is a smart-ass... and a showoff.”

“Smart-ass, okay,” Joe knew he asked for that. “But a showoff, how so?”

“Parading in front of me naked? What was that all about?” Alex’s face was still red.

“None of that would have happened if you hadn’t pushed me in.”

Their eyes locked, and neither of them spoke for a moment. Then Alex’s expression softened. She lifted her chin and asked. “Do you always go by Joe, or was that just for me?”

“It’s a boring story,” Joe said.

“Go ahead and bore me,” Her smirk had become a slight smile.

“My father’s name is Joseph Charles Doyle. Almost everyone called him Joe. So, for as long as I can remember, I was Little Joe, and then when I got older, I became Joey. Then, when I started junior high school, Joey became Joe... except for my mother.”

Alex laughed. “Wow, you’re right. That was boring. But Joey, I actually like that. You don’t mind if I call you Joey, do you? JOEY?” she said arrogantly.

He could see that she was busting him, and he deserved it. “You can call me Joey for one day, and then we’re even. After that, we start over. Deal?” Joe took her unbroken stare as a signal of agreement. He was alarmed to find himself wanting to hug her and didn’t quite understand why. Was it because her beauty was overpowering? Was he that superficial? Or was it because he was glad to have gotten the game behind them and back to the truth? He reminded himself that she’d told him emphatically that she didn’t want to be in a relationship, and thanks to his conversation with Patrick, he knew why. He didn’t want to be in a relationship either. If he had, he’d have succumbed to Vivian’s charms by now. She hadn’t been shy about telling him how she felt. He was drawn to Vivian deeply; she was sexy and mysterious and brilliant. But in the end, he still considered himself a married man on some psychological level. Taking a deep breath, he asked, “When did you know?”

“I recognized you on the docks in Vancouver,” she said without hesitation.

“No, you didn’t!” Joe spat out immediately.

“Seriously, you think I would get in an airplane not knowing who the pilot was? Not a chance, Dr. Bryan Joseph Doyle, commercial pilot, multi-engine, instrument, and floatplane rating. Born in New York, dual citizen, graduate UBC school of Medicine. There’s more, but you’re right, Joey; you’re boring.”

Joe wasn’t sure if she was telling the truth, but he wasn’t going to push it. After all, he’d started the deception.

She smiled a little. “I just got off the phone with Dr. Dryden. He ratted you out big-time. But you still haven’t told me; why?”

“This might be a little hard for you to believe, but because I’m so ruggedly good-looking, it creates a lot of problems with women. In this part of the world, women love cowboys,” Joe said, grinning.

“Really, Joey? You’re not serious, are you?” Her eyebrows began to lift in disbelief. “Well, let me assure you that your rugged good looks and redneck cowboy attitude won’t have a positive effect

on me. Quite the opposite, Dr. Doyle. I'm hoping we will be able to keep our relationship on a professional level."

"No problem, from now on, it's strictly professional," Joe said reassuringly.

"Are you going to tell me the real reason now?" Alex asked, persisting.

Joe was embarrassed, and it showed, "Have you ever done anything foolish, not thinking clearly of the consequences, and regretted it later?"

"Not since I was eight," she said with a hint of a smile. "One more thing. No more overnight camping, ever," Alex said emphatically before changing the subject. "Danny's still with us; the medevac plane will be here tomorrow at eight," Having had the last word, she turned and disappeared into the hospital.

In the north at that time of year, the days seemed to last forever. The laundry room, where Joe's cot and Harley's bed were located, had blackened windows. Alex and Heather slept in the staff bedroom, which had heavy polyester/cotton-lined curtains to keep out the light. But the windows in both rooms were open to let in the breeze. There is something to be said about sleeping at sea level beside the ocean with a breeze of clean, fresh air flowing through the room. They all slept well.

The King Air touched down on Bella Bella's 3,700-foot paved runway at 8:00 a.m. on the dot. Wisely the government had chosen this small turboprop that could handle the remote short landing strips that dotted the province. Danny, who was still sedated, was carefully moved by ambulance the one mile from the hospital to the airport. Dr. Sharapova would travel with him to Vancouver. While Danny was being buckled in, Joe asked the pilots. "Coming over, what altitude had the least turbulence?"

"It was rough right up to 30,000 feet. Spring in the mountains is always rough," the captain said apologetically. "The good news is that we're light and can get up to 30,000 feet quickly at a very steep angle. We're good at finding smooth air."

“Excellent. The young man has an aneurism that isn't leaking. I think he'll be okay. He's heavily sedated and well wrapped,” Joe was referring to the snug tensor bandage around Danny's abdomen. “still, the less turbulence, the better.”

With Danny firmly belted down on the airplane's gurney, Alex took the seat beside him. Between them was the BP-heart monitor. Before Joe exited the small plane, he checked the monitor. Danny's vitals were all in the green. Then, as he turned to leave, he came face to face with Alex, with less than an inch between them. Alex leaned forward and kissed Joe fully on the lips. Then, surprisingly, he pulled away. But for only a second before returning for a more passionate kiss.

They slowly separated, “What was that?” Alex asked, her face glowing red.

“That's for good luck,” he said as he quickly left the plane, asking himself. ‘What was that?’ While he was driving back to the hospital to restock his cases with medical supplies so they would be ready to go at a moment's notice, the kiss was all he could think of. He couldn't stop smiling.

Alex thought the same thing. She touched her lips with her fingers tracing where Joe's lips had just been, opening a flood gate of emotions she had held back all her life, her tears started flowing. It took her a couple of minutes to gather herself.

The co-pilot closed the door, and within minutes they were airborne.

Joe was standing on the Cessna's massive float, just opening the door to his plane, when the King Air blasted over him. With the kiss still on his mind, he smiled as the small jet prop disappeared into a cloud going almost straight up. Danny would be at Vancouver General Hospital in just over an hour.

About halfway to Vancouver, the airplane ran into extreme turbulence. They were traveling at 30,000 feet, where the jet stream can act like a cyclone, rotating with winds up to 300 mph. And they flew right into it. The plane dropped like a rock. There was nothing

the pilot could do but hang on. This was an aggravating inconvenience for the pilots, causing the co-pilot to spill his coffee all over his lap. For Alex and Danny, it was a lot worse.

Immediately Danny's blood pressure dropped to almost nothing, leaving Alex no choice but to assume that the G-force from the downdraft had caused his aneurysm to rupture—and now he would bleed to death if she didn't act quickly.

Joe and Harley were in the air by then, too, on their way to Duncanby Fishing Lodge, a resort with almost 50 employees. Heather had received a call minutes earlier from the first-aid attendant at Duncanby to say they had a young pregnant woman there who had been in labor for more than 30 hours. The mother's blood pressure was extremely high, threatening both her life and the life of the baby. An immediate C-section was required.

It was noisy in the plane, so Joe put his headphones on. When he was about ten minutes out from his destination, he gave in to his apprehension and called Tony. He wanted to make sure the airplane had landed safely, and that Danny was doing okay. Tony answered immediately. "I just spoke to her," he yelled into the phone before Joe could pose his question. "They hit turbulence, and the kid's aneurysm ruptured," Joe was too stunned to reply. Tony continued. "I'm on the helicopter pad now. They're on their way in. Alex had to open him up on the plane. She called me from the air after clamping off the artery. She must have been covered in blood because the phone slipped out of her hand while we were talking. She couldn't bend over to grab it, so she just kept talking, only louder, giving me his stats and what she needed when the helicopter arrives."

"Slow down, slow down," Joe yelled. He felt nauseous. He kept seeing Danny's face, the way it lit up when he promised to take him for a ride in his plane.

"I have to go," Tony cried. "They're touching down now. Don't worry; I'll handle..."

The rest of Tony's conversation was drowned out by the noise from the approaching helicopter. Joe closed his phone, "Don't worry,"

he mumbled to himself. And he couldn't because he was just about to land and had to be focused on the pregnant woman who was in danger of losing her baby and possibly her own life. Controlling his emotions was a big part of his job.

Joe landed on the water and taxied in. He was met by dockhands who received the many floatplanes that visited here. The lodge was right behind the dock. As they secured the plane, leaving Harley behind, Joe grabbed the bag he'd readied earlier when Heather had first alerted him to this new hurdle and began to run up the dock following the panic-stricken first-aid attendant. A young woman with tears in her eyes saw him coming and opened the first-aid room as he approached it. He rushed past her, and a second later, Joe burst into the makeshift delivery room. As he headed for the patient, the midwife who was assisting her backed away to give him access. What was supposed to be a natural childbirth had gone terribly wrong.

Within a minute, Joe had checked her blood pressure, which was dangerously high. He washed and donned a Tyvek suit that he'd brought along and was ready to begin the operation. The last thing he did was approach the husband, a very young man not much older than Danny, who was sitting in the corner. His face was a mask of confusion and fear. "What's your wife's name?" he asked.

"Her name is Chelsea," the young man said. One of the nurses bent over the young man and then said a few words into his ear, and a moment later, he was being escorted out of the room. Joe waited until the door closed behind him to begin.

"Chelsea, I'm here to help," Joe said anxiously, not expecting a response. After administering a local anesthetic, Joe skillfully cut across her lower abdomen. The skin peeled away as the scalpel sliced through it. On the second pass, the baby's bottom appeared. Joe lifted the baby, a boy, out enough for the feet to pop free. He then wrapped a towel around the baby's torso and, with one hand, applied back-pressure. With his other hand, he gently wiggled the baby's head from the birthing canal. Once the head was free, the baby burst forth into the cool air. After wrapping him in a second towel, Joe used a syringe

to clear his breathing passages. Immediately the newborn started to scream. Joe smiled; it was music to his ears. Only a healthy baby could produce such a sound. After cutting the umbilical cord, he placed the baby between the mother's side and her outstretched arm. The midwife came forward to clean the perfect little guy.

Now was the most critical time of the operation, removing the placenta. Again, Joe was lucky; the placenta was released without excessive bleeding. When he had finished stitching the incision, he told the nurse to let the father in to meet his son. The look of wonderment on that man's face filled Joe with joy.

The baby had been successfully delivered. An hour after the birth, the mother's blood pressure returned to normal. The young woman went into recovery with her sister, the woman who had been waiting for Joe to arrive at the first-aid room door, at her side. The young father was sent to the lobby, where he was immediately surrounded by family members congratulating him on the birth of his first child. They were all joking and slapping his back when Joe walked in, and no one paid attention to him. He stood there for a moment, watching them. His job was done.

Flying back to Bella Bella following the successful C-section, Joe's thoughts turned once again to Danny and Alex, who had cut him open at 30,000 feet. Joe shook his head, imagining it. Talk about jumping into the fire with both feet. Welcome to the wilds of British Columbia, he thought to himself.

* * *

In the operating room, Alex had expanded the incision she'd made on the plane so that it now ran from just below Danny's breastbone down past his belly button. She replaced the section of the artery that contained the ruptured aneurysm with a long tube made of synthetic cloth. Tony, who was assisting, was holding a small mirror in Danny's stomach cavity. This allowed Alex to see and stitch the fabric to the back of the artery. Of course, the sewing had to be perfect; poor stitching would cost Danny his life.

“You’re very good at that,” Tony said when she signaled him that he could remove the mirror.

“Dental school,” she mumbled without making eye contact. “in Russia, they send all medical students to dental school for one year.”

The operation took close to six hours. When it was over, Alex collapsed in a chair beside Danny's bed in the Intensive Care Unit. It would take a good three days until Danny was out of the woods, but she was determined to stay at his side for as long as she could.

She hadn't given Joe a single thought for hours since they'd hit that patch of turbulence in the plane. Now she found herself thinking of him all over again and the kiss. Her cell phone was in her pocket. One of the pilots had found it on the plane's floor and slipped it in there for her while she was overseeing Danny's transition from the airplane to the waiting helicopter. She hadn't had the time to clean it. It was still covered with Danny's blood. She made a mental note to clean it. In the meantime, she put her head down on Danny's bed, planning to close her eyes for just one minute, and immediately fell asleep.

Chapter Six

On the way back to Vancouver, Joe called Tony again to find out how the operation had gone. Tony reported that Alex was very persuasive. She took charge, and Tony played a supporting role. He seemed pleased with himself as if Alex's prowess was a reflection on him. Tony thought Danny would be fine, though he had lost a lot of blood during Alex's makeshift operation on the plane. They didn't talk very long, and Tony had the good sense not to inquire about the identity scheme that he had initiated two days earlier.

Joe parked the seaplane in its hangar at Vancouver International. Then, he and Harley drove his red club cab Ford pickup to the family ranch. His wheels had barely stopped turning when the oldest of Keith's girls, Sarah, a sixteen-year-old with a student driver's license, opened the door to the pickup. She asked her uncle. "Do you want me to park the pickup for you, Uncle Joe?" Sarah had the driving bug and took advantage of every opportunity to get behind the wheel.

The truck was parked just fine, but if Sarah thought it needed to be moved, that was okay with Joe. "It's all yours, Sarah, but don't go off the property," Joe said as he and Harley jumped from the vehicle. Harley was all over Sarah in an instant, wagging her tail and demanding attention. Whenever Joe was working or away where he couldn't bring Harley, the girls took care of her. Harley was as much theirs as she was Joe's. Sarah gave Harley a quick pat on the head and then pointed to her sister, who was riding the family horse out near the corral. "Go to Chloe," she said, and Harley ran off. Sarah jumped into the truck and started the motor. Joe smiled as she backed the truck up ten feet and then pulled it forward to almost the exact spot where it had been. She hopped out, gave Joe the keys, and with a big smile said, "That's better."

Joe shook his head. You would think parking the truck would be a big yawn for her because she was also learning to fly. But she loved driving and flying equally, and she was determined to excel at both.

After saying hello to Chloe, the youngest, who was demonstrating her riding skills on a grassy area in front of the house, Joe retreated to his loft. He took a quick shower before going to bed, replaying the kiss into his dreams.

The following day Dr. Sharapova arrived early, anxious; today was her first day as a surgeon at Vancouver General Hospital. She was met at the front door by Vivian, the hospital administrator, and her tour guide. As soon as they were alone in the elevator, Vivian asked. "How was your weekend with Joe?"

Alex was surprised at her bluntness and the scowl that came with it. "Interesting, the countryside is beautiful," She didn't like to give up information

"I was more concerned with what you think of Dr. Doyle. How do you feel about working with him?"

Alex laughed, "Both him and Tony are like little kids. They're going to take some getting used to, but we'll be okay."

This was music to Vivian's ears as she found Dr. Sharapova's beauty more than a little intimidating. Since Joe's wife had disappeared, Vivian had made it known to everyone that she wanted to be the next Mrs. Doyle. "If you have any problems, my door is always open," she said with a smile before turning back towards her office. Satisfied for the moment that Dr. Sharapova was not a threat.

Alex entered the doctor's lounge, where she had a quick shower before putting on the wrinkled green khakis she would wear for the upcoming surgery. All the while, she thought about Vivian, wondering what that short meeting was really all about. Finally, she moved into the scrub and glove room where she met Rebecca and Colleen, who she had worked with yesterday assisting as they repaired Danny's aneurism. As they scrubbed, Alex asked them about Joe. "How long have you known Dr. Doyle?"

“Just over three years,” Colleen said skeptically. “What do you want to know?”

Then, with the kiss still on her mind, Alex asked. “Is he gay?” She didn’t believe he was but wanted confirmation.

“Wow... Where did that come from?” Rebecca asked, giving her a puzzled look.

“I just thought his behavior over the last weekend was a little bit... strange,” Alex said.

Rebecca laughed. “Oh. Don’t worry about him; he always acts strange. But gay? No. Joe just isn’t over losing his wife. He can be a little bit immature... but... he’s been better lately.”

“And Tony,” Colleen laughed. “Watch out for him. Just two months ago, he was dating four nurses at the same time!” Her contempt for Tony was palpable. “I was in the cafeteria when they found out about each other. Tony walked in to find them sitting at the same table. I will never forget the look on his face; he turned and ran. The gossip still hasn’t settled down.”

Rebecca added, “What’s funny is that Tony is still seeing two of the nurses at the same time.”

With a curious smile, Alex asked. “How do you know this?”

“Tony got caught in the doctors’ private shower,” Colleen explained, “Yah! The security guard was responding to an alarm activated because a shower was running for too long. The story is that when he unlocked the shower door, he caught all three of them by surprise. I haven’t seen the recording from his body cam, but from what I hear, it’s amazing,” Colleen loved gossip and laughed as she told the story.

“Ok, so Joe’s not gay, and Tony’s... whatever. Does Joe date?” Alex asked.

“Never. Why?” Both women said at the same time.

Without knowing it, Alex was glowing as she talked about Joe; both women noticed.

Joe arrived early at the hospital that day to prepare for multiple scheduled operations. After scrubbing up, he entered the operation suite with his hands up before him, ready to have his gown and sterile gloves placed on him by the operating room head nurse. From another door, the one that led to the women's scrub room, Alex emerged, her hands raised as well. They smiled at each other as nurses came forth to finish suiting them up.

The patient was a 68-year-old man in relatively good health. Like Danny, he suffered from an aneurysm, but his was small and not in danger of rupturing anytime soon. Therefore, the operation was preventative and routine. Although the anesthesiologist, Carl Rockport, checked the patient's IV, he would stay throughout the procedure. The assisting nurses, Rebecca and Colleen, rolled the various tool trays into place as Joe and Alex moved to opposite sides of the operating table.

This was usually the cue for the nurses to begin conversations about who had done what over the weekend, or sometimes even a little harmless gossip. But, Joe guessed, as the nurses didn't know Alex yet, they were reluctant to chat in front of the new doctor from Russia. Everyone played their part in the operation in silence. Finally, when the procedure was complete, and Joe had finished applying the last of the sutures, Colleen couldn't stand it anymore and broke the silence by saying, "So, Joe, how was your weekend?"

Joe glanced at Alex. "Um, okay, I guess," he mumbled. Unfortunately, he was tongue-tied and couldn't say anything more.

But then Alex barked a laugh. "Just okay?" She sounded gleefully sarcastic. "Sleeping with me on a deserted beach was just OK."

Silence filled the operating room.

After a moment, the nurses laughed awkwardly, embarrassed by Alex's outburst. Finally, Colleen turned to Rebecca and asked, "Did I miss something? That was supposed to be a joke, right?"

Colleen shook her head but didn't answer.

Joe finished bandaging the patient, and while Colleen rolled him into recovery, Rebecca helped Joe and Alex out of their robes and gloves. Then each retreated through the doors they'd used to enter the room. Joe couldn't stop shaking his head in disbelief. Thankfully she had not mentioned the kiss. She might not have realized it, but it was only a matter of time before everyone in the hospital believed they were sleeping together.

Later in the day, when Joe was downing a fruit smoothie in the staff room, Alex apologized. "I don't know why I said that earlier. I'm still upset with you, I guess. You lied to me all weekend, kissed me, and then you never called, even to see how Danny was."

Joe put down his cup. "Wait a minute. I called twice. Once when you were coming in on the helicopter, and later that night, after I finished an emergency C-section. I spoke to Tony both times. Didn't he tell you?"

They stared at each other for a moment, icily. Joe was wondering why Tony had not mentioned either call to Alex. Joe had failed to convince his friend that Alex was unlikely to want to become his paramour anytime soon.

Alex dropped her head. "Well, then I'm sorry. Dr. Chung didn't tell me you called," When Joe didn't answer, she looked up at him and added, "The damage is done. It's too late to take it back. Besides, people think you're gay, so my little outburst isn't likely to tarnish your reputation," She gave him a hopeful smile.

"That's funny," he said, though his expression was entirely grave. Tony was the only one who would have said such a thing, Joe realized. Apparently, he was prepared to go so far as to tarnish their friendship for the sake of getting what he wanted. "In fact, Dr. Sharapova," he continued, "for the record, I'm not gay; I just don't date. I lost my wife five years ago, and I haven't had a desire to," Joe's tone was low and grim. He couldn't help but try to mask his emotions when discussing his personal life. "Pretty much everyone who works here knows that. I've got a reputation alright, but not the kind you

imagine,” He picked up his cup and simultaneously reached for a magazine from the pile on the table.

Alex could feel tears rising to the surface. She was sorry again, confused, and deeply embarrassed by her behavior. Though he wasn't looking at her, Alex nodded as if to agree that what she had done was immature. Then, she turned and left the room before she managed to discredit herself even more.

* * *

Ironically, this was a turning point in their relationship. They did not become intimate but became closer after that, in the way two devoted doctors can when they are working together frequently. They ran into each other several times in the next few days in Danny's room. Danny was recovering fast, and already he wanted to know when he would be well enough for his floatplane ride and his day fishing with Joe. The second thing on his mind was when he'd be able to eat. Joe and Alex laughed each time he asked. Finally, Alex summoned the nutritionist to come to the room and go over the list with Danny of foods and drinks he could begin to take.

At the end of the week, Joe asked Alex if she wanted to continue to work with him on the weekends. Without hesitation, she accepted the invitation.

Though they didn't talk again about Alex's outburst in the operating room—or the kiss in the plane—it was obvious to both that they were being talked about. A few words exchanged between them in a corridor, or the staff lounge was enough to elicit stares and sometimes knowing smiles from the other staff. As soon as they saw what was happening, they agreed not to talk to each other at all in the hospital unless, of course, it was to discuss a patient. Not surprisingly, when they were off, flying to Bella Bella and other islands with Harley the next few weekends, they carried over some of their reserve. They were now doing just what they'd both agreed they had intended from the start; they were trying to keep it professional. They were colleagues, and they were damn good doctors who could be perfectly happy

discussing the nuances of the surgeries they performed. Or so they believed.

When Danny was well enough to travel, they flew him back to Bella Bella together, stopping at Wallace Bay to fish. “You can have the rod,” Joe said, handing it to Danny, “But if you get a really big one, you’re going to have to hand it to me, Danny. I don’t want you to put a heavy strain on the incision.”

“That’s not fair,” Danny protested.

“Yes, it is, Danny. Because if you don’t actually get to reel in the fish today, that means I still owe you a fishing trip.”

“So, you mean we would have to do this again? I’m good with that,” Danny agreed, all smiles.

Alex stepped between them at the edge of the float. “I’ll take the rod if he hooks something,” she said to Joe.

Joe put his hands up. “Whoa. Okay. I didn’t know you knew how...”

He drifted off. No one was listening. Danny was setting his drag, and Alex was right by his side. Only Harley was looking in Joe’s direction.

Sure enough, Danny hooked one that afternoon, and Alex immediately took the rod from him, released the safety clip, and let the fish run out while she gently elevated the rod tip. Joe was tempted to tell her that salmon had soft mouths and that she shouldn’t yank, but he suspected that she already knew by the way she handled the rod. As she began to reel the fish in, very slowly, very expertly, she also began muttering to herself in Russian. As the fish came closer, her Russian got louder. She was cheering him in, and so was Danny, who was all but jumping up and down on the edge of the float beside her.

Laughing, Joe went into the back of the plane to get the net. After they’d landed it, a good fifteen-pounder, all three did several rounds of high-fives, and even Harley got into the act for a few.

With Alex’s help, Joe was able to visit most of the remote islands on the outskirts of Bella Bella before the heavy rain and fog of autumn set in. He and Alex vaccinated children, did routine diagnostic radiographs and ultrasounds, rescued injured tourists, and even

extracted a few teeth.

But Joe paid the price for his ongoing alliance with Alex, even if it was purely platonic and primarily professional. Since graduate school, Dr. Tony Chung, his best friend, no longer had much to say to him. However, Tony was polite when they had business together, and he was even humble when Joe tried once to explain that he and Alex were not involved romantically.

“I don’t know what I was thinking,” Tony said. “I’m not her type, and frankly, she’s not mine. I guess I got carried away by her looks,” But Joe knew Tony long enough to know when he wasn’t being honest, and there remained a tension between them that had never been there before.

Chapter Seven

On her first trip into the interior of the province, the navigation was easy. After takeoff, they climbed through a narrow valley of clouds to 11,500 feet and flew east for two hundred nautical miles. Alex was amazed at the scenery as they approached the rugged ridges of Mount Baker, a once-active volcano that still on occasion vented steam from its lava pipes. They could not have picked a more excellent day to fly over the southern part of the province. The air was cool and clear. They had a slight tailwind and very little turbulence. After passing Mount Baker, Alex noticed a straight line cut through the woods over the mountains and into the valleys for as far as she could see. "What is that line all about?" she asked.

Joe smiled. "That line is what separates Canada from the United States. Pretty amazing, isn't it? It's over twenty feet wide and straight as an arrow for as long as you can see."

"How do they keep it cleared?" She asked.

"Both countries take part in keeping it clear. They employ summer students and goats," Joe said without looking at her.

Alex laughed. "Goats?"

"The students cut the large brush, and the goats eat the small brush. I'm sure we'll be visited by some of them in Grand Forks," Joe paused as the words he just said echoed in his brain. "The kids, that is, not the goats," He laughed. "I mean the students," He smiled at Alex and went on. "Last year, a rattlesnake bit a young man who was clearing the line. By the time they got him to me, he was pretty sick. Lucky for him, we have a variety of anti-venom at the hospital."

"You have rattlesnakes in Canada?" It was clear to Alex that Joe not only loved this country but that he knew far more about it than most people did. She had to admit she was falling in love with Canada too.

They were now over the Okanagan Valley. Joe banked the plane to the left so Alex could get a better view. "This part of British Columbia is desert. There are rattlesnakes and scorpions for the next

hundred miles. Are you worried?” Joe asked.

“No, I’m not worried, just a little surprised. After all this time we’ve spent together, you must have noticed I don’t rattle easily,” They both laughed at her pun. “So, what else do I need to know to stay alive in the British Columbia interior?”

“Well, now that you ask, there are grizzly bears and black bears. Some of the biggest cougars in the world are around here, and just recently, wolves have been making a comeback. And of course, there’s Bigfoot,” Joe was trying to be serious, but he couldn’t contain himself and started to laugh again.

“What’s so funny?” Alex asked. Her expression hinted that she might be a believer in the urban legend.

“There’s one more thing, but you won’t have to worry about it,” Joe chuckled as the words left him, “Indian legend talks about a large snake that lives in the Okanagan Lake. Many people claim to have seen it. There’s even a statue of it in downtown Kelowna. It’s called the Ogoopogo. People describe it as dark and snake-like, with green, black, brown, or grey skin. Some say its head looks like a snake. Others say it looks like a horse crossed with an alligator. Some eyewitnesses say it has ears or horns. Scary?”

Alex found it difficult to talk because she was laughing so hard. Finally, when she regained control, she asked, “Do you really expect me to believe that? You have an amazing imagination, Joe Pilot.”

“This is not my story, Doctor Sharapova. Many people claim to have seen something, and many will not swim in that lake,” He glanced over at her. “But if you don’t believe me, you can check it out for yourself,” Joe added with a smirk.

“Right, I’ll get on it. You’re such a kook,” She shook her head. As a young girl in Russia, there were many stories about monsters, both animal and human, and parts thereof. Her parents had taught her not to believe everything she heard but to search out the truth for herself. So, she wasn’t buying Joe’s story even a little. But then she remembered that she had her tablet with her, which she’d only just

purchased, and that it had a satellite internet connection. Still chuckling, she got it out of her bag, turned it on, and looked up Ogopogo. “Lake Monster allegedly seen by First Nations people since the nineteenth century,” she read aloud. She drifted off and read the rest to herself. Joe glanced over for a second and caught a few words, something about Ogopogo being 40 to 50 feet long. He couldn’t help but smile.

Alex turned off her tablet and looked out the window. “That’s ridiculous,” she muttered. “Who in their right mind would believe in such a creature?” She changed the subject. “What a difference between here and the coast,” she marveled.

“This province is very diverse. You haven’t seen anything yet,” Joe reduced power and started a slow descent over Grand Forks to Christina Lake. Alex had her eyes glued to the changing scenery passing below.

Grand Forks was once home to a massive copper-gold mine that produced enough ore to keep two large smelters running for years. Black slag piles along the river were reminders of those days. Other industries had come and gone as well. The population, slightly less than 4000, had remained about the same throughout the years, though it was growing on the outskirts of the town. Because of government cutbacks, Joe explained as they flew over the area, there were no doctors in the city and not much medical staff either. Only a few rooms in the town’s one small hospital were kept open, and there was only a maintenance worker and two public health nurses to oversee them. There was one ambulance and an ‘on call’ driver who had a reputation for drinking.

Of great interest to Alex was that many of the residents were Russian descendants, a group of pacifist Russian immigrants known as Doukhobors who settled in the area around 1909. Joe confirmed there were plenty of Russian restaurants and delis, which she couldn’t wait to try.

With Grand Forks just out of sight, Joe landed the floatplane on beautiful Christina Lake and tied it up to his brother’s wharf. Keith

had been out on the lake with his family for much of the summer, but now that the girls were back in school, he'd be lucky to visit more than a weekend or two each month.

Joe was not concerned about the prospect of being alone with Alex in a beautiful cabin on a romantic lake. But he was curious. They'd maintained their even-keeled friendship for quite a while now. She'd even told him once that he was her best friend in Canada, though she quickly added that she had many friends in the United States from her Harvard days and even more back in Russia. So, this would be nothing more than a change of scenery, no different than spending a few days in Bella Bella. No other, except for the fact that their friend Heather wouldn't be there sharing meals with them, and half the kids on the island wouldn't be running over to say hello and to play with Harley. Joe hadn't brought Harley for this first weekend in Grand Forks. She was better off being watched over by the girls at the ranch than alone all day at the lake.

Joe and Alex gathered their backpacks and two small nylon cooler bags. They headed down the dock toward the long rock stairway that led to the cabin up on the hill ahead. Keith's Sea-Doo was tied up at the end of the dock. Alex stopped in her tracks when she saw it. "Do we get to play with this?" she called over her shoulder.

Joe shrugged. Then he bent over to stick his fingers in the water to gauge the temperature. It was early October and chilly, but the lake water was still warm. "Sure. We've got a few hours before it gets dark, as long as there aren't any emergency calls," They weren't expected at the hospital until morning.

Alex grinned widely. "I like these little boats," she said. "And I like the color of this one."

Joe laughed. The body of the Sea-Doo had been painted a flashy fluorescent pink, a testimony to the tastes not of Keith but of Sarah and Chloe, and maybe Sandra too.

The main room in the cabin featured cedar paneling and large rough-cut beams, 30-some-feet long, holding up the ceiling. The ceiling angled from twelve feet high at the front of the great room to a

pitch of twenty-five feet at the rear. The centerpiece of the back wall was a massive fieldstone fireplace. To the right was a beautiful kitchen with stainless steel appliances and a dining area. To the left was a sitting room and the hallway that led into another section of the structure where the bedrooms were. There were floor-to-ceiling windows throughout, looking out over breathtaking views of the lake and the mountains surrounding it. The master bedroom, where Alex would sleep, had its own bathroom. Joe's bedroom, right across the hall, had a bathroom right beside it.

Alex returned from her bedroom wearing an oversized white T-shirt over what appeared to be a black one-piece bathing suit. Joe didn't mean to look her up and down, but he did before he could stop himself. He had never seen her in shorts before. She always wore pants, or occasionally, a skirt under her lab coat when she was in the hospital. Yeah, he said to himself. It was a shame so much of her would soon be concealed under a full-torso lifejacket.

Joe rolled up some newspaper and got the fireplace ready, so they could start a fire the minute they returned. Then they chose life jackets from the selection hanging on hooks near the front door and went down to the water to get on the Jet Ski. Joe started it up. He steered as Alex loosely held on to his sides.

The lake wasn't all that big, so it didn't take more than a half-hour for Joe to give Alex the grand tour, especially with them moving at about forty mph. Joe was just pulling back on his speed so that he could point out a mighty waterfall when a good-sized log appeared in front of them - he had to whip the craft to the right to avoid hitting it. If Alex had been holding on to him tighter, she would have been fine, but she wasn't, so she went flying off the Sea-Doo.

She saw the log mid-flight and didn't recognize it as a piece of wood. The memory of her reading about the Opopogo flashed through her mind as she was flying through the air; after all, the thing Joe had cut away from did look like a sea snake or something dangerous.

Her face contorted with terror as she hit the water. Once

surfaced, she immediately began flailing her way back to the Sea-Doo. When she saw Joe's expression—he was laughing hysterically—she took a second look at the thing she had believed was chasing her and realized it was only a log. He helped her climb back on board. At first, she was annoyed, as if Joe had planted the thing right there to scare the daylights out of her, but Joe kept chuckling, and pretty soon, she was laughing too.

They had a perfect time after that. Alex insisted it was her turn to drive. As soon as she reached full power, she had her chance to whip the Sea-Doo around with hard fast turns, and it was Joe who went flying. He was about to chide her for doing something like that purposely, but she was laughing so hard that he couldn't bring himself to ruin her fun. He'd seen her playful side before, but on this occasion, she was exuberant, like a child. They didn't return to the cabin until it was dark and the air temperature had fallen significantly.

While Joe was lighting the fire, Alex changed into dry clothes and began chopping the vegetables they'd brought along with them. She'd set her tablet up on the counter and was trying to find a Russian music station out of Grand Forks when she saw the message light flashing from her brother Yuri. He was in Canada for a couple of weeks on business. Alex had dinner with him a few evenings ago in Vancouver, and she'd told him she was going to be at Christina Lake this weekend. He knew the area because he was a skydiving fanatic, and he'd heard good things about the skydiving airport in Grand Forks. And, of course, he also knew that there was a good-sized Russian population living in the area.

Now his message said that he'd decided to come by and say hello because he'd spent the afternoon skydiving in Grand Forks, and he was nearby. As she read the message, she felt a surge of excitement about the prospect of getting to spend more time with Yuri. But along with it, she experienced a little stab of disappointment too. Joe's mom had packed the late-season vegetables for them from her garden. After their relaxing flight and their fun on the Sea-Doo, Alex realized she was looking forward to the two of them cooking together. It would have

been a first for them. She shook it off. This was her brother, who lived in Moscow. She was thrilled to be seeing him again.

Joe, who had also changed into dry clothes, appeared at her side. She indicated the message on her tablet with her elbow (her hands were engaged slicing zucchini). “My brother is coming to have dinner with us,” she said. “Isn’t that great? He should be here soon.”

Joe hesitated but recovered quickly, though not before Alex had seen the disappointment register on his face. “Great,” Joe exclaimed. “I’ll finally get to meet him,” Joe got busy rinsing the scallops they’d brought to eat with their vegetables. They had plenty enough food for a third person.

In no time, they saw Yuri pull up into the driveway in a red Corvette Coupe. Yuri could always be counted on to show up in a nice car. He bought cars for a living and did all his business in Canada because cars were cheap here. He was buying five or six American muscle cars at a time and shipping them back to Europe in sea cans. He sent other items too, but cars were his favorite and the most profitable.

Alex hurried to the door and opened it before Yuri could knock. “You smell like the lake,” he cried as he embraced her. Her hair was still wet from her swim. Yuri extended his arm around her to shake Joe’s hand. “I thought you folks came here to work!”

“We did,” Joe said. “We start at the hospital at eight tomorrow morning. We’ll put in at least twelve hours for the next two days before we have to be back in Vancouver.”

Alex was still looking out at the red Corvette Yuri had just purchased. “I love that car,” she said.

He winked at her. “I told you; anytime you want to partner with me... Then you can be driving around in a red Corvette too,” He closed the door behind him, and the three moved into the kitchen.

A sly look appeared on Yuri’s face. “So, you don’t have to be to work tomorrow until eight?” Yuri asked, well aware of the answer, “The skydiving facility opens at six. We can do a jump before you go to work!” His eyes were wide in anticipation of tomorrow’s jump.

Alex hadn’t realized Yuri was staying the night, but now she

was glad he was. She didn't want to slip up with Joe and do something that would only cause bad feelings in the long run. "Yes!" she shouted. "Yes, yes, yes, I'd love to go skydiving tomorrow!" she exclaimed without hesitation.

They both turned to look at Joe. "No, no, no," he cried, laughing. "I don't jump out of planes unless they're on fire," He saw delight register on Alex's face, and he knew she would tease him about this shortcoming in the future. "I like flying them," he added, "but I've never had a desire to jump from one, and I doubt I ever will. So, you two go tomorrow, and after, Yuri can drop you off at the hospital... I'll see you there."

Over dinner, Joe told Yuri that he'd learned two new things about Alex since they arrived at Christina Lake: she jet skied and skydived. Then, he casually asked what else she did that she hadn't bothered to mention.

"That's it," Alex said quickly. "Jet skiing and skydiving. Now you know all about me."

But Yuri, who talked rather loudly and liked to be the center of attention (as well as the Chardonnay Joe had opened) said. "If you've learned only two things about my sister - you've only touched the surface, my friend," From there he began enumerating other things his sister did: she'd had Special Forces training, which entailed high-level weapons handling, martial arts, parachuting and all kinds of other physical maneuvers.

Joe couldn't help thinking back to what his friend Patrick Dryden had told him about the guy in Russia who attacked her. They'd never discussed that; Alex had never brought it up, so he'd had no reason to let on that he knew. Now, Joe knew that the guy had gotten off easy by just being shot in the leg. If Alex had wanted to hurt him, she could have. Still, it was hard to reconcile. She was not a big woman. She was muscular and strong-looking, but she was also very feminine in how she carried herself and spoke. On a few occasions, he'd caught himself spying on her at the hospital when she was talking to recovering patients. She had damn good bedside manners. Far better

than anyone else he knew at Vancouver General. She cared.

“And she likes fast cars too,” Yuri added to the end of his litany. He winked at his sister again. “You know, Alex, even if you don’t want to tarnish your reputation with the physicians by being seen in a succession of really sweet cars, we can still be partners—”

“YURI!” she interrupted bluntly, “I don’t care who sees me doing what.”

“Okay, sis, don’t get upset. You can continue driving around in that nice blue Escape you’ve rented,” He turned to Joe. “Have you seen it? It doesn’t suit her at all.”

Joe smiled. He’d seen it. He didn’t know where this was going, but the way Alex was looking back and forth between them told him that she was getting nervous and hoped Yuri would stop talking.

But he didn’t. “You know, you can hang onto that nice Escape and be partners with me too, Alex. It’s not an either-or. You’re making the big bucks now, and my business could use some investment. Once the cars get from A to B, they will be an enormous margin of profit...for us to split.”

“Yuri, this is not the time—”

“Okay, okay. Just think about it.”

Alex snapped her head in Joe’s direction and then back towards her brother. She shook her head once then said, “Follow me.” She led him out onto the porch.

Joe, could hear Alex speaking sternly in Russian, with her brother listening quietly. Judging by her body language this was not a pleasant conversation. The only word he could make out was, “Putin.” Which was unmistakably said in anger.

They had set their alarms for 5:30 a.m., and by six, each had showered and was in the kitchen drinking coffee and devouring the muffins Joe had brought for the trip. Alex and Yuri left shortly after that in the red Corvette. Joe watched them from the window. Yuri was jolly enough and polite. And, of course, he was Alex’s beloved brother, her only sibling. But Joe hadn’t taken to him. He knew nothing about the exporting business, but he had the feeling that whatever Yuri was

doing might be somewhat less than legal. And the crack about the money... It was apparent to Joe that that was something she didn't want him to know about. Yuri must have realized, but he'd brought it up anyway. The night before, after the dishes were done, Joe sat with them for one more glass of wine before going to bed. He'd drifted off to sleep listening to them talking animatedly in Russian, arguing a little at first, but then laughing.

Kootenay Boundary Regional Hospital, otherwise known as KBRH, was only sixty miles away in the city of Trail. The drive would take about an hour and a half because of the mountain's curving roads. Patients with severe heart ailments traveled there for medical care when Joe wasn't available. Those with small problems or minor injuries contented themselves with the local general practitioners visiting Grand Forks. Local patients with heart problems who didn't want to drive to Trail waited for specialists like Joe and Alex to arrive, even if they were only available on occasional weekends. Heather had accompanied him several times to Grand Forks over the years, so he knew the patients would be surprised to see Alex.

As it happened, Joe had just parked his brother's blue Jeep Wrangler in the lot when the red Corvette pulled up, and Alex got out of the car. She looked exuberant after her jump. People were already lined up outside the door to the facility by then, and they all turned to look at her. As she walked to the door, she said good morning to the people in line in both English and Russian, and she got a lot of raised eyebrows and big smiles in response. She reached the door first and held it open until Joe caught up. "Good jump?" he asked.

"Excellent," she responded, but he could see she was not about to discuss the particulars with him now, which was good. There were a lot of people waiting, and it was time to get serious.

Just before lunch, Sally, one of the nurses who worked at the hospital, knocked on the door to the treatment room where Alex was working and asked what she wanted for lunch. Joe had just finished with a patient and stepped into the hall in time to see Sally standing there like a waitress, with a pad and pencil in her hand. "Who has the

best Russian food in town?” Alex asked.

Sally thought for a moment. “I think the best Russian food in the world is just down the street. It’s a small deli. If you like kasha, this is the best you’ll ever find.”

“Kasha?” Alex beamed back at her. “I would love kasha. She turned to Joe. “You’ve got to try it. It’s kind of like porridge.”

“I’ve had porridge,” Joe let out unenthusiastically.

“Trust me, you’ll like it,” Alex said, “the main ingredient will be some kind of grain, maybe buckwheat, with all sorts of other things added.”

“I happen to know Igor is making it with liver, mushrooms, and onions today,” Sally interrupted. She adjusted the glasses on her nose. Anyone could see she was happy to be doting on the Russian doctor.

Joe tried to think of a polite way to say he’d rather eat dirt than liver, but Alex was looking at him expectantly, and he didn’t have the heart to order a ham and cheese sub, which is what he wanted. “Okay,” he said, “Count me in,” and he turned to call the next patient into his treatment room. But just then, Beverly, the younger of the two nurses, came running up to him.

“There’s been an accident,” she cried, “over at the sawmill. A worker got his leg caught in a conveyor belt. Unfortunately, they didn’t get it turned off fast enough, and the guy’s leg is cut up, like halfway through his thigh! The first aid attendant asked for a vascular surgeon. What should I tell them?” She said, noticeably shaken up.

“Alex and I will take the Jeep,” Joe said to Beverly while moving to the door. With Alex right behind him, he called over his shoulder. “Have Gary drive the ambulance!”

The facility was massive, and Alex’s first thought as they approached was that it would take a while to find the accident site. But as soon as they pulled up and Joe identified himself, the guard hopped in the back of the Jeep and showed Joe exactly where to park before rushing them into the building.

A man in a white hardhat (the color indicated that he was a

foreman or supervisor) met Joe and Alex just inside the door and rushed them to the conveyor belt. Along the way, he explained that Peter Burke, the guy who had been hurt, had been inspecting pole logs moving rapidly along the belt toward a chipper at the far end. Somehow his right leg slipped between the belt and the mechanism turning it. Joe, who knew something about how this kind of equipment worked, asked. "Did anyone see what happened?" The white hardhat stated that some work had been done a few hours earlier on the belt; one of the metal guards (or covers) had been removed to service the mechanism beneath it, and possibly it hadn't been reassembled correctly. So, he was passing the buck. An improperly assembled metal guard could well be responsible for this kind of accident. But that still left the question of the whereabouts of the human guard, the spotter, who should have seen the accident and turned off the conveyor that very instant. But that wasn't Joe's affair. His job was to stabilize Peter and get him back to the hospital alive, where he could be adequately treated.

The conveyor belt was about five feet wide, and it rotated on a platform that was elevated about fifteen feet off the floor. A few workers in yellow hardhats (the color indicated they were operators) gathered at the top of the platform, near the injured man. Joe gave the order for the belt to be cut at once. The white hard hat began to object, but Joe walked right past him and told another white hardhat, who was quickly approaching, what had to be done. The second white hat pulled a box cutter out of his pocket. That would do the trick.

Alex, meanwhile, rushed up the ladder and yelled at the yellow hats to get off the platform at once so that the conveyor could be cut. Then, remembering that Peter would be in shock, she added. "And get blankets. QUICKLY!" Even though she didn't have experience with this kind of machinery, it was clear to her that there would be some kind of initial snap-back reaction before the belt, which had to weigh a thousand pounds, rolled off the end of the chute and fell down dead. As the yellow hats dispersed, two men in red hard hats, part of the company's first-aid team no doubt, became visible. They were

hovering right over the injured man. They had tied a tourniquet around Peter's leg and were applying pressure to try to stop the bleeding. There was blood all over the place.

Since no one was offering to cut the conveyor, probably because everyone was nervous about it whipping back, Joe took charge and did it himself. It took five passes to get it to split. He jumped out of the way after the last pass. So, the whip-back effect wasn't as bad as it could have been. The noise, however, was deafening. And it echoed crazily in the vast facility. He looked around. There were only a handful of people to be seen. He knew the rule of thumb in this kind of emergency was that everyone stayed in their department and kept out of the way unless they were part of the rescue effort.

Joe, Alex, and the two red hats had freed Peter. The ambulance driver, Gary, arrived with a gurney. Gary was a dark-haired overweight man in his 50's, but he could move fast in an emergency. Alex rode back in the ambulance with Peter while Joe followed close behind in the Wrangler. They spoke on their cell phones during the short ride back. "I wish we had the emergency room at Vancouver General," Alex lamented.

"I probably have more equipment on my plane than this hospital has," Joe responded.

Alex had both hands wrapped around Peter's thigh. Ever since dropping her cell phone while both her hands were inside Danny's stomach cavity, she'd been using a headset to communicate when she was with a patient in distress. Peter was out, breathing laboriously and unconscious. "I don't know if we can save the leg," she said.

The ambulance and the Wrangler pulled into the entrance at the back of the small hospital one after the other. Gary jumped out and released the gurney from the back of the ambulance. The three of them ran the patient into the operating room. The nurses, Sally and Beverly, were right there, ready with the necessary IVs. Both surgeons worked frantically, reconnecting arteries and re-attaching the muscles. Two hours later, they had blood flow to the leg, and the patient was stable.

By the time they'd finished repairing Peter's leg, the line of

patients waiting to see Joe and Alex had gone around the corner of the building. As Sally began letting people into the waiting room, Alex mumbled. "I'm starved."

"I knew you would be," Sally said after admitting a young woman into Joe's treatment room. "I took the liberty of going out and getting the kasha. I'll heat it in the microwave for you," Sally always knew how to help.

"Thank you very much, Sally. Did you order one for Joe?" Alex asked.

"Yes," she said politely. She then returned to her desk before she could be forced to admit that she'd ordered Joe a tiny container of kasha, just a sample, and with it a foot-long ham and cheese sub.

They saw patients all the rest of the day, and when they returned to Christina Lake, well after eight, they were both exhausted. They went directly to their rooms to clean up before trying to put together something to eat. Joe took a quick shower and remembered that his mother had asked him to call her when he arrived in Grand Forks. With everything going on, he had forgotten. So, he called her now, and they chatted for a few minutes. He didn't tell her about the accident at the sawmill. There was no point in worrying her. Besides, she had things she wanted to say to him, anecdotes about Harley, and some of the amusing things the girls were teaching her. The girls were over at their grandma's house all the time, or rather they were back and forth all day. They took turns sleeping over at Granny's because Granny spoiled them and let them stay up late watching TV shows their mom wouldn't allow.

After Joe hung up with his mom, he called the kids. Sarah answered. "Hey, Big Trouble," he said when he heard her voice. He called the girls Big Trouble and Little Trouble when he wanted to joke around. He didn't feel like joking just then, but he didn't want them to know that either. Sarah told him the same story that his mom had told him, something about Harley trying to herd the horses, who were having no part of it. Joe ended the conversation promising to bring the girls with him on his next trip to the lake.

Before they'd left the hospital, Sally had gone out again and bought them a few quarts of borscht, a small container of sour cream, and a half dozen garlic rolls. As Joe joined Alex in the kitchen, she held up one of the containers and asked, "Would you prefer to eat this hot or cold?" she asked.

Joe hadn't bothered to tell her that he'd skipped the liver kasha at lunch or that he'd tried borscht once, and he didn't care for it. They were both exhausted and subdued from the long day. "Hot, if you don't mind," Joe said. He opened a lower cabinet and removed one of Sandra's saucepans.

* * *

Alex was passionate about water. She felt that she was truly in her element in almost any body of water. In keeping with the rules, they'd established for their time at the hospital, she and Joe hardly spoke to each other the following week. Whenever they did run into each other, even if it was only in passing in one of the halls, he managed to whisper a word or two about the sea snake that had turned out to be a log. Just saying the word "Ogopogo" reminded Joe of how much fun they'd had on the Sea-Doo at the lake. It was their little joke. It was also quickly becoming a secret code attesting to their special friendship.

The following weekend they arrived at Christina Lake in the afternoon, but it was raining quite hard, and they didn't get out on the Sea-Doo. They had a pleasant evening regardless, cooking dinner together and afterward talking quietly in front of the fire. The next day the weather cleared, and they agreed on the way into Grand Forks that if the patient load wasn't too heavy, they would have an early dinner—at the Russian deli, of course—and get back to the cabin before dark to get some time on the lake. Alex didn't say so, but she'd been thinking that it didn't even matter if they got back after dark because the moon was going to be full, and there was no cloud cover in the forecast. As long as they watched out for the Ogopogo, they'd be fine buzzing

around the lake in the available light. More than fine. She could hardly wait.

Sally went out once again to get the doctors' lunch and did the same thing she'd done the week before. She brought back two pirozhki filled with cabbage, potato, beans, and one ham and cheese sub. Sally winked at Joe when she handed him his two packages. "Just try it," she whispered while gesturing to one of the bags, "If you don't like it, leave it in the back of the fridge, and I'll take it home with me tonight. No one will be the wiser," She winked.

It seemed to Joe that Sally was taking their little conspiracy too far, and he suspected she had some ideas about his relationship with Alex that were inaccurate. He would have talked to her about it, but there were people in the waiting room leaning forward in their seats, hoping they would be called in next. So, he simply thanked her and smiled before she turned and pranced back to her desk.

The next patient was a woman who, according to her chart, had done nothing about her high glucose numbers since he'd seen her last year. She was now beginning to experience some of the common side effects of type 2 diabetes, including blurry vision and an increased desire to urinate. She wanted some medication. She was young, maybe in her early thirties, and quite a few pounds overweight. It didn't look like she got much exercise either. Even before she got through the door, Joe knew he would discourage her from taking medication in favor of getting on a serious diet and exercise regime. Meds might end the side effects she was experiencing, but they would have their own set of consequences as well. The truth was that exercise and diet would give her a new lease on life as well as put an end to her blurry vision.

With all the help they were getting from Sally and Beverly, who were indeed very efficient, Joe and Alex managed to finish up with their last patients at about five-thirty. It was early enough to grab a bite to eat, then get back to the lake and get out on the water. As soon as they left the hospital, they started walking down the street toward the Russian deli where Sally had been getting their lunches. Joe, who hadn't eaten his pirozhki, had a look at the menu online and decided

he could easily manage the stuffed peppers. Alex was in a good mood. There had been six Russian-speaking patients that day, and Sally, who was the decider in many matters, had purposely sent them all into Alex. Alex had a great time chatting with them in her language and learning more about the Russian community in the area.

“This lovely man in his early seventies,” Alex said as she and Joe walked toward the deli, “brought in a photo album with pictures of his parents and some of the other Doukhobors when they first started homesteading.”

“How did he know he would be meeting with a Russian doctor?” Joe asked.

Alex laughed. “Everyone knows, Joe! I’m the talk of the town.”

They reached the deli, but just as Joe was about to open the door, Alex pulled him away, and they kept walking down the sidewalk. “I happen to know,” she said, “that someone didn’t eat his kasha last weekend or his pirozhki today.

“Who told you that?”

“I’m not telling. I’ve gone ahead and made a reservation for us – here,” They stopped in front of a small hotel.

“Here?” Joe asked.

“They have a dining room and several Russian dishes, but they also serve the kind of food you like,” Alex said proudly as her plan unfolded.

Joe opened the door and followed her in. “You know what kind of food I like?” He asked.

“Steaks, burgers...cowboy food,” she said casually with a smile.

Joe laughed. They walked to the front desk, and Alex told the concierge that they had a dinner reservation. A woman in her sixties, the concierge, quickly came around her desk and showed them into the dining room. She kindly told them to sit wherever they’d like. The room only had five tables, none of which were in use, and each of which was covered with a plastic tablecloth featuring a watermelon motif. The carpeting in the room was mustard-colored, worn, and badly stained. The paneling was faux wood, probably from the early

seventies.

The concierge's phone rang in the other room, and she excused herself before Alex and Joe could get past the décor and decide where to sit. As soon as she was gone, Alex whispered. "It doesn't look very appetizing, does it?"

"No, it doesn't," Joe whispered back. He was thinking about the stuffed peppers he'd planned to get at Igor's. "How can we get out of this?"

"Don't worry. I'll think of something," Alex said confidently.

Joe heard the concierge saying goodbye to the person on the phone. "Well, think fast," he said. "She's coming."

The concierge returned, this time with menus in hand. Alex had just opened her mouth to say whatever it was she'd come up with when Joe's phone rang. "Sally," he said to Alex before he answered. "Sally, what's going on?"

"Another emergency Joe."

"Where?" Joe was already moving toward the door. He could hear Alex, who was right behind him, explaining to the concierge that they were doctors and had an emergency.

"How long ago?" Joe said into the phone. He covered the mouthpiece and looked at Alex. "The ambulance guy, Gary, is on his way here," he said. "Sally told him to pick us up at Igor's."

Gary was just pulling up to the curb. Alex and Joe jumped into the front seat with him, and Joe filled them both in as they drove. According to what Sally had told him, a logging truck had been coming through a pass on one of the mountains, on its way into town. The driver had taken a hairpin turn too fast and jackknifed. People at the scene were saying that the cab slammed into a steel support at the edge of the cliff. It hit with such force that it caused the trailer to fishtail into the cab. The driver was still alive. Because he was crushed up against the steering wheel, no one had been able to get him out, and no one could be sure how badly he was hurt.

By the time Joe and Alex got to the scene on the edge of the mountain, there was already a wrecker there working to separate the

trailer from the cab so that they could release the pressure and hopefully get the guy out. A small fire truck was parked against the mountain, and while there didn't seem to be an imminent fire threat that Joe could detect, the three firemen were moving equipment and getting ready in the event one began. There was a lot of other activity, too; in fact, the mountainside was buzzing. Police were holding back traffic, which was backing up in both directions and causing a lot of problems. Because of the steep terrain and the road following the mountain's curve, a driver coming downhill couldn't see that traffic had stopped until the last second. Spectators, mostly young people coming back from a day of mountain biking, had pulled their cars to the edge of the road to watch. Some took it upon themselves to walk up beyond the police barricades toward the upper mountain, signaling drivers to slow down as they came around the bend.

"The sooner this is cleared up, the better," Alex said. She could see up ahead that some drivers were trying to make U-turns. "This is a second accident waiting to happen."

They got out of the ambulance as soon as Gary could zigzag his way through the other rescue vehicles and rushed up to the cab. Joe already had a sedative ready to administer by injection. The whole front of the cab looked like an accordion. It was severely mutilated. It was clear to Joe that once they got the trailer off the cab, they were going to find that the steering wheel had penetrated deep into the driver's gut along with a lot of metal. As it was now, the dashboard was so far forward that Joe couldn't see anything beneath it. There was blood everywhere, and it didn't look good.

Alex climbed up onto the wide aluminum step beside Joe. She touched the driver's cheek, and he opened his eyes and looked at her. "I don't want to die!" he cried. He was a young man, maybe in his early thirties, handsome, from what Alex could tell beyond his bruises, with a tattoo on his forearm. It looked like a heart with a woman's name across it. "I work hard, you know?" he went on. Again, there were tears in his eyes. "I'm not a bad person. I just do my job. I take care of my family."

“You’re not going to die,” Alex glanced over her shoulder. “There are lots of people out here working to help you. Can you hear them all? First, we’re going to move the trailer, and then we’re going to get you out of here.”

“I’ve got kids,” The tears were coming faster, and he choked on the last word. “Three of them.”

Joe had cut away part of the injured man’s shirt and managed to get an IV into his arm. “We are the pros,” he said. “we’re here to take care of you,” But when he looked up, he saw that the injured man was focused on Alex, looking at her beseechingly, like she was an angel come to decide his fate.

“Before you tell me their names, what is yours?” Alex asked gently.

It took some effort for him to reply, but after a deep breath, he said, “My name is Larry, Larry Johnson.”

Alex could see that he was fading, and there was nothing she could do about it. Finally, someone she didn’t know gave her a blanket, and she practically climbed in through the window to drape it around him. “Your kids, tell me their names and ages.”

The wrecker was failing in its attempt to separate the two parts of the vehicle that had jammed together. The tow truck driver was still trying, but it didn’t look good. They were on a steep incline. He couldn’t get the trailer to budge. He was yelling to the firemen who were helping him. If he pulled too hard and the cable broke, they would both go, the cab and the trailer together, in a heap of metal that would roll straight down the mountainside. With the doctors inside the cab and firefighters standing nearby, it was a chance he couldn’t take. He couldn’t rely on the guardrail to hold the truck back.

Now the rescue people were getting ready to cut into the side of the cab. “Doctors,” said one of them, “you’re going to have to get out and let us do our work.”

“I’m not in your way,” Alex snapped. “Go ahead and do what you have to do.”

“Alex,” Joe began, but her icy look shut him up too. He knew

then that it was clear, this guy had no chance.

“And you might be?” the rescue worker asked sarcastically.

Joe jumped from the truck and approached him, put his arm around the man’s shoulders, and walked him off a few feet where the driver couldn’t hear what was being said. “It’s not looking good for the driver.”

“Mark, Jack, and Carolyn,” the driver managed to say to Alex. “Nine, seven and one..., one and a half,” He was slurring now. He was hyperventilating too. Alex was barely able to understand him.

“Carolyn is the baby? She must be adorable!” Alex said, holding back tears. She then added, “Focus on your breathing. Try to breathe slowly.”

Larry, who had begun to bleed from his mouth, tried to smile. “Yeah,” he said. “My wife. Carolyn looks like my wife.”

Alex slowly slipped the silk scarf she’d been wearing off her neck and balled it up, and very gently began to pat at the blood near his mouth. She smiled at him, and he smiled back at her. “And what’s her name, your wife?”

All at once, his lids began to flutter. He didn’t answer. Alex gave him a soft slap against one cheek. “And what about you?” she asked more loudly. “Where do you call home?”

He rolled his head in her direction. “Grand Forks,” he said before drifting away.

All at once, the cab jolted, and Alex had to grab onto the door to keep her balance on the step. The driver of the wrecker had some tricks up his sleeve after all. Joe appeared out of nowhere and pulled Alex off the cab step. “You can’t be up there until we stabilize the truck,” he reprimanded when he saw her defiant expression.

Everyone in the vicinity stopped what they were doing and got away from the cab, waiting to see if it would move. But it didn’t; it held. Joe immediately climbed back up to the window. Alex was right behind him. The crush of the trailer into the cab had been keeping Larry alive. Now with some pressure off the cab, Joe could see he was pierced all over with shrapnel and that one large piece of metal had

gone right through his chest. Blood was spurting everywhere, most of it coming directly from his heart.

Alex looked up from the gushing blood in time to see the light go out of Larry's eyes. She stared at him. She knew he was gone, and there was nothing she could do.

Joe and Alex could hear the helicopter that had been called in from Trail. The police had cleared a small parking area for it to land about a half-mile below. The doctors looked at each other. Both their eyes were brimming with tears. As surgeons, they didn't often witness a person's passing. The people who died on the operating table were anesthetized; they weren't talking about their kids one minute and taking their last breath the next.

It took two hours for the rescue crew to extract the body. By then, the paramedics who had come in the helicopter had left, not wanting to tie up the chopper for another emergency. After the rescue, people finally got Larry onto the gurney and into the ambulance; Alex, Joe, and Gary took him down the mountain to town and delivered him to the hospital morgue. Gary left immediately after that. Joe and Alex stuck around to wait for the coroner to arrive with his assistant. In the meantime, they used the bathrooms to wash up as best they could. Reliable Sally went home for dinner earlier. She returned afterward and promised to lock up once the body had been stored and everyone had gone.

Joe and Alex returned to the cabin and took quick showers to remove what was left of the grit and gore they'd been covered in. Alex came out of her room in a flannel nightshirt, Joe in a pair of sweat pants and a white T-shirt. Since they were leaving the following day, there was nothing much to eat, but Joe found a can of stew in one of the cabinets and began heating it while Alex sliced up some bread leftover from the previous night's dinner. Next, Joe opened a couple of beers, and then the two sat side by side on stools at the kitchen island counter, staring out the window as they ate in silence. Despite the forecast, it had begun to rain hard, and Joe found himself focused entirely on the sound of the big drops hitting the slate patio outside.

Alex was a stickler for getting rid of dirty dishes, but on this occasion, she carried their bowls to the sink and mumbled something about getting to them in the morning. Joe turned off the kitchen light, and they walked down the hall to their separate bedrooms. Usually, when they traveled together, they smiled politely and said goodnight and went off in different directions to sleep. But on this occasion, their shared melancholy brought them together, and they hugged.

Just as Joe was releasing Alex, he heard her sob, and so he pulled her back and began to rock her gently. There had been times when he'd held women or children in his arms and rocked them like this after brothers or fathers or husbands had died. He'd even hugged a couple of men who had lost their wives or sisters or aunts or mothers. He hugged Alex for a long time, and she hugged him back. He began to hum, some discordant nonsense that came out of nowhere, and they started moving a little, back and forth, like dancers dancing to a slow, sad waltz.

Alex found herself thinking of her mother, who she could see clearly in her mind's eye. Her mother was a doctor too, an ENT specialist. She had been Alex's inspiration and greatest supporter when she'd started medical school. But in her vision, her mother was not wearing her white lab coat. Instead, she was wearing an apron over the baggy brown shirt that she always liked to wear around the house. This was the other side of her mother. She was standing at a stove, stirring something that smelled like cabbage in a big pot. She talked to Alex over her shoulder, telling her she hoped she was hungry because this meal was especially for her. Alex wished she would turn around so she could see her beautiful smile.

Joe felt Alex's head hit his clavicle bone and bounce off it. He realized she was nodding off, falling asleep standing up. He caught her just before she went limp and swooped her up carefully. Her bedroom door was already open. He carried her in and gently placed her on the center of the bed. He removed her flip-flops and put them on the rug. He didn't want to risk waking her by trying to get her under the covers, so he went into his room and pulled his comforter off his bed

and covered her with that.

He bent over and kissed her on the cheek, as gently as he might have kissed Chloe, the youngest of his nieces. But he found himself reluctant to leave. She was breathing so softly, so steadily, and he found himself drawn to the rhythm of her breath, just the way he had been drawn to the rhythm of the raindrops while they ate. First, he sat on the edge of the bed; then, he slowly lay down beside her. He gently stroked her hair. His breathing took on the same rhythm as hers.

He fell asleep, but only superficially. When he awakened, he listened to her breathe for another minute, all the while thinking to himself, I'm falling in love with this woman, and really, there's not much I can do about it. He fell asleep again, only this time he slept more heavily. When he awoke later, he found himself curled up against Alex as if they were lovers. He thought about all the chaos that had followed the last time he curled up against her in his sleep. It was the first time and the only time until now. As much as he wanted to stay, he made himself move. But before he crossed the hall and entered his room, he leaned over and kissed her very gently on the lips. To his surprise, she kissed him back. Her eyes were closed, but he was sure: she kissed him. He couldn't take his eyes off her as he straightened up, hoping she was awake. But it was not to be; she was sound asleep. Joe went to sleep thinking of the kiss.

They flew back to Vancouver early the following day, and neither of them brought up the subject of what happened the night before. Instead, during the flight, they talked about the accident, about Larry, the young man who had died, all sorts of things...but not about the embrace they'd shared or the fact that Alex awoke with Joe's comforter over her. But now, looking at her, Joe couldn't stop smiling, and she was smiling too.

Chapter Eight

Vivian Santos picked up her phone and buzzed Monika, her assistant. “Yes, Ms. Santos,” said Monika.

Their offices were across the hall from one another, and both their doors were open. Nevertheless, if they were both seated at their desks, as they usually were, neither could see the other. But Vivian happened to be standing off to the side of her desk, and she had observed Monika rolling her eyes when she answered.

On the first day on the job, Monika had called her Vivian, and she had straightened her out right away. Vivian was an administrator at Vancouver General. She had worked her way up from abject poverty to get where she was and was not about to have the woman who sent out her memos and scheduled her appointments to refer to her as an equal. Vivian thought she’d made herself clear on that point; she believed Monika respected her position. But apparently, that wasn’t the case. “Monika, call Dr. Doyle and tell him I need to see him in my office as soon as possible.”

“Yes, Ms. Santos.”

A minute later, Monika buzzed her back. “He has surgery in fifteen minutes,” she reported.

“By he, I assume you mean Dr. Doyle?” Vivian snapped back.

“Well, I figured you’d know that since you were the one who asked me to get a hold of him,” Monika said submissively.

“Monika, your social graces leave much to be desired.”

Monika sighed. “Sorry. Dr. Doyle has surgery in fifteen minutes. He wants to know if he can come after-”

“No. Tell Dr. Doyle I need to see him now,” Vivian’s tone was unmistakable.

“Yes, Ms. Santos,” Monika replied instantly.

Monika did it again. She rolled her eyes. But this time, Vivian had stepped forward, closer to her door. When Monika glanced up and saw that she was being watched, her face went bright red. Vivian smiled. Monika shifted slightly to the right as she rang Joe as if to hide. Vivian couldn’t think why she had ever even hired the girl. Monika was overweight, with large matronly breasts that would have been more appropriate for a grandmother in her sixties than a single woman in her early twenties. Her blondish hair was thin, and the fact that she wore it pulled back didn’t help. You could see her scalp at the sides of her head. Vivian made a mental note to start looking for a replacement. But she would take her time about it. She would teach Monika a few things before she let her go.

Vivian was standing at her office window, looking out over False Creek, when Joe arrived. Although he had a surgery scheduled within minutes, he took a moment to look her over before he knocked on the doorframe. Vivian was Filipino, and like many Filipino women, she was beautiful. But she had something more going on, too, besides the beautiful cheekbones, the gorgeous smooth olive-colored skin, the thick, shiny long black hair, and small but very well-proportioned figure, and a beguiling smile. When she smiled, she tilted her head down and looked up with her brows raised. Coy, Joe guessed the word was—and very sexy. She had dimples too. He would be untrue to himself if he didn’t admit that - over the years since his wife’s death,

he'd spent some time imagining what it would be like to slip into bed with her.

He knocked, and she turned. There it was, that smile. He wasn't pleased that he'd been called to see her right before operating, but he couldn't help but smile back at her either. Today she was wearing a sleeveless black dress, snug at the waist and cut just to mid-knee and wine-colored pumps. Her blazer, also wine-colored, was hanging over the back of her chair. Joe wasn't the type of man to notice what women were wearing, but Vivian was always so meticulously put together that he couldn't help himself. He even saw the pendant she had around her neck today. It was gold, and it featured what looked like a leaf design, half of it inlaid with tiny diamonds.

"Would you shut the door, Joe?" She asked calmly. He did. "I need to ask you something, Joe, and I would appreciate it if you'd be open with me," Her voice was shallow, almost a whisper, and she was still smiling at him.

Joe scratched his head. Wherever this was going, he didn't have time for it. "Shoot," he said.

"Let me be direct. Rumors are going around that you and Dr. Sharapova are, you know, together."

Joe laughed before responding. "Yeah, we're together. We work together. She's helping me over at Grand Forks on the weekends, just like Dr. Swift did in the past."

Vivian came around the desk and stood right in front of him. "Whatever happened with Dr. Swift?"

He shrugged. "Nothing. Dr. Swift spent half her free time over the summer volunteering at Bella Bella." Joe grinned in amusement over how their relationship ended. "The last time she flew with me, we flew into some bad weather. I think it scared her. So now Dr. Sharapova is working with me in Grand Forks."

"You're flying doesn't scare her?" Vivian asked, still smiling.

Thinking about Alex put a wider grin on Joe's face. "Nah, Dr. Sharapova is an adrenaline junky," He admitted.

“Adrenaline junky? Not such a bad characteristic for a vascular surgeon,” Vivian added.

“It doesn’t hurt,” Joe agreed. He took a step back; Vivian was standing so close he was afraid she might put her arms around his neck. He looked at his watch. “Vivian, I have to go. I’ve got surgery in five minutes.”

She placed a hand on his arm. “Oh, that’s right. Monika mentioned it,” She lifted her shoulders. “It’s just that these rumors are floating around about the two of you. I just want to know- if people are spreading false rumors about you, I will do whatever is necessary to stop it. But if they’re true... Let me be blunt. Are you sleeping with her?”

Joe was speechless. The question was blunt. He knew the answer was no, but he couldn’t help but think back to the night before and the pleasure he had experienced at that moment when he’d awoken beside Alex before going into his room. But that, of course, was not what Vivian was talking about.

“Your hesitation speaks volumes,” Vivian said flatly. She wasn’t smiling anymore.

“I’m not sleeping with her,” He answered quickly.

“So why do I hear about it?” She asked blatantly.

“It’s a long story,” Joe began speaking faster “Alex, Dr. Sharapova made a bad joke months ago. She was trying to look; it’s too long to explain right now. I’ve got to run. And frankly, I’m a little uncomfortable about the fact that you need an explanation,” Joe knew he had walked into a trap. Vivian had hoped to catch him off guard, and it worked.

She dropped her hand from his arm. “Oh, Joe, don’t you think I have a right to know what’s going on?” Then, before he could answer, she quickly added. “But it’s more than that. You know I feel very protective about you; can we get together soon? We need to catch up. You’ve been so busy. It’s been too long.”

“Sure, Vivian. Let’s do that,” he said, moving toward the door.

He had made it back to the door and had his hand on the doorknob. He would be late if he didn't get out of there right now. Carl Rockport, the anesthesiologist, had to be pacing by now. Alex, who would be assisting, would be getting impatient too.

"What about later today?" Vivian asked. "I looked at your schedule. You've got some time after your last surgery before you start making your evening rounds. How about we meet in your office? I'll bring something for us to eat. When's the last time we shared a meal?"

"It's been a while," Joe admitted. He was somewhat stunned to learn she'd checked his schedule. "I've got to run," He opened the door and rushed into the hallway.

"See you later," she called as he disappeared.

Joe arrived in the operating room with his hands held up in front of him so that Colleen could help him to get his gloves on. Alex and Carl were already there, suited up and ready to go. When he glanced at them, he found them both looking at him intently. Joe could tell they were wondering why he was late. "Administrator insisted on a meeting," he mumbled.

He didn't want to say anything more. His head was already reeling from his conversation with Vivian, and he had to get his focus back at once. There was a fifty-five-year-old woman on the table before him, the mother of two young men, both of them either in college or graduate school, and if he didn't do a proper job of unclogging her right carotid artery, she was a definite candidate for a stroke. So, Joe did what he did best. For the next two hours, he let everything else go and thought only about that artery.

Finally, the operation was over. The patient, whose name was Emily, was safely in recovery. Joe went out to see Emily's sons and husband in the waiting room to let them know everything had gone well. With that done, he collapsed in one of the many lounge chairs and let his thoughts about Vivian trickle back in.

He'd made a mistake with Vivian; he knew that. He'd thought its repercussions might disappear on their own, but now he could see that he was going to have to fix things himself.

It wouldn't be easy, that he knew. Vivian, who had grown up as poor as a church mouse in the Philippines, was a born fighter from childhood. She knew how to get what she wanted. She'd told Joe lots of stories about her early life. He'd encouraged it. After his wife's death, it was a comfort to be able to escape his miseries for periods of time, listening to her talk about how she'd recreated herself from nothing.

She'd told him, for instance, that when an aunt who lived in British Columbia offered to ease Vivian's parents' burden by taking one of their eight children, it was Vivian who insisted she should be the one to go. She found herself with no challenges. Her siblings were miserable, but they were also afraid of the unknown, and they didn't want to leave the family unit and venture to a foreign country. On the other hand, Vivian couldn't wait to get out of the shack they lived in, which flooded every monsoon season. She couldn't wait to stop breathing mold and eating pagpag, which in Tagalog means "chicken pulled from the trash." The school Vivian attended in Manila was 40 km from her home. She got a reduced fare from the bus driver who took her there, but it required that she climb to the top of the rickety windowless, exhaust-spewing vehicle and sit with other poor children amid baskets of squawking chickens between the luggage racks, rain or shine. Vivian had married her boyfriend when she was fifteen. When she'd gotten pregnant, her family and his, all staunch Catholics, insisted on the marriage. Fortunately for her, she miscarried only a month or so before her aunt's offer came. Danilo, her husband, who still lived with his own family at the time, begged her not to leave. But there was no way she would let a little thing like a forced teenage marriage keep her from the chance to live a better life. Still, she loved Danilo, so she promised to send him money from Canada, and he promised to continue his education to one day follow her to British Columbia.

Vivian's aunt wasn't exactly generous with her affections or her money. Once she'd brought Vivian over and showed her to her room, she was told what time to be home for meals and more or less left on

her own. She finished high school and then attended college, followed by a graduate school. After that, she worked at fast food joints, laundry mats, and wherever else she could find a job. She would send any extra money she made back home, not only to Danilo but to her parents as well. Even when she finally finished her education and began landing well-paying jobs, she stayed with her aunt. All the money she was sending home made it impossible for her to afford her own apartment. But when she got the job at Vancouver General six years ago at the age of twenty-eight, she was finally able to get the kind of apartment she had always dreamed of. She told Danilo she was ready for him.

Danilo had used the money she'd sent him wisely. It turned out that he had an entrepreneurial mind, and thanks to Vivian, he had been able to attend business school. He and Vivian had been in communication for almost twelve years by then—over the phone and through the mail and eventually via email—and while Vivian had never wanted to return to the Philippines and be reminded of how she'd been forced to live, she had paid for Danilo to visit her seven times. Always their time together included plans for their future, declarations of undying love, and plenty of sex. But when the time came for Danilo to move to British Columbia, he said he wasn't ready. He didn't want to give up his business. He opened a string of fish markets in Manila, and they were doing well. Thanks to clues found on the Internet and confirmation from a few of her old friends, Vivian learned that he'd spent the last three years of his life living with another woman. They even had a child. He never intended to come to British Columbia.

She was furious when she found out. He had this other woman at home when he'd come to visit her. He'd slept with her, told her he loved her, that he couldn't wait to be with her, and all the time, he knew he was going back to someone else. She was furious and miserable because she had been in love with the bastard. Then she met Joe, whose wife had been dead for a year by then. He was sad too. And so, they became friends.

Their friendship mainly consisted of sharing meals, not out at restaurants but in the hospital. Vivian, who usually worked nine to

five, left the hospital, picked up take-out or even went home to cook, and returned to share dinner with Joe in his office on nights when he had to work late, which was often. Initially, they were confidantes, but Vivian started talking about how well suited they were for each other over time. She also began hinting that she was interested in Joe from a physical perspective. In a moment of weakness, Joe had held her in his arms one evening and told her that when he felt that he was ready to be in a relationship again, she would be the one. She told him she would wait until he was ready. They had sealed their commitment with a kiss, a long kiss that began with them standing near Joe's desk and ended with them horizontal on the sofa, breathless and sweating. Joe brought the moment to a close and told her he wasn't ready. That was three months before he'd met Alex. Now he knew that it wasn't a matter of being prepared. It was a matter of Vivian not being the right woman. Moreover, he knew that when he explained all this to her, it would feel like *déjà vu*—and she would be furious all over again.

Alex came into the lounge and plopped down on the end of the ugly vinyl-covered green sofa closest to where Joe was sitting. "I just checked Emily Watson," she said. "She's awake."

"I'll go see her now," he said. "Is she in a room yet?"

"No. She's still in recovery. There won't be a bed ready in intensive care for at least an hour."

Joe stood up.

"Wait," Alex said. "I want to take you out for a bite later. My treat. You never got to have your cowboy meal last night."

"I'm staying late tonight," Joe said, looking aside.

"So, what else is new? We always stay late," Alex said enticingly.

He looked back at her and saw that playful spark in her eye. "What do you feel like having?" He asked.

"Sushi," Alex said, grinning. "Vancouver has the best sushi in the world," Joe knew she wasn't exaggerating.

He considered for a moment, but then he caved. "Sounds good to me. I'll see you later."

Joe stopped in his office to call Vivian before going to see Emily Watson. He didn't think she'd mind if he put off their meeting for another night. Her assistant, Monika, answered and said Vivian was in a meeting. And so, knowing that he wouldn't have a chance to call her again for several hours, he asked Monika to tell her that he wouldn't be able to meet with her today; he'd call her in the morning. However, he didn't want to wait until the last minute to let her know he'd made other plans.

Later, Vivian was furious when she returned from her meeting and read the message Monika had scrawled and placed on her desk. Her fury only intensified that evening when she saw from her window Doctors Doyle and Sharapova walking down the street together, smiling and laughing.

Chapter Nine

Joe came out of the shower to find a message on his cell phone, a text from Vivian to say she wouldn't be able to meet with him that week after all. Instead, she'd be busy every evening working with a committee on a silent auction project for one of the boards she sat on.

"That works for me," Joe said to Harley. He must have looked happy about it because Harley began to wag her tail.

Joe knew he should talk to Vivian as soon as possible and get it behind him, but he wasn't looking forward to it. He'd given it some thought now. He didn't plan to tell her that he was in love with Alex, because frankly, that wasn't her business. But he did plan on telling her that while he respected her and cherished their friendship, he no longer felt attracted to her romantically. That was the truth. That was the best he could do.

After their one meal together at the sushi joint, Alex and Joe had gone right back to their regular weekday routine. This meant long hours in the hospital, overseeing some surgeries together, and otherwise pretty much avoiding each other. But now the weekend was coming around again, and Joe had a surprise for Alex. Keith and Sandra were going away for the weekend to a wedding in Toronto, and the girls had talked Joe into saying he would take them to Grand Forks. In one way, it was the worst possible weekend to have the girls along because Joe had wanted to be alone with Alex. But, on the other hand, maybe Alex didn't feel the same way. Perhaps having the girls along would keep him from making a fool of himself. Unfortunately, he was so busy on Friday that he didn't even get a minute to tell Alex about the girls. Instead, he wound up sending her a text. And she wrote back, "Sounds good," which told him nothing about how she felt.

The girls had gotten up at dawn to have time to ride their horses before they left with Joe. They were just coming back to the stable when their uncle and Harley pulled into the driveway. Joe got out of the truck and stood with his hands on his hips to let them know he was not pleased to find they weren't ready. The girls were wearing

white cowboy hats. Joe was wearing his white cowboy hat too. When they saw Joe and Harley waiting for them, they took off their hats and waved them. He had to laugh.

“What is this?” he said as they dismounted. “You knew what time I was coming. Dr. Sharapova will be waiting for us at the airport, and you’re not even ready!”

“Let her wait,” Sarah said belligerently.

“Yeah, let her wait,” Chloe, the younger of the two, echoed, looking back and forth between her sister and uncle.

“Wow,” Joe said slowly. “Where did this come from?”

“Rumors,” Sarah said quickly. But Joe was looking at Chloe. She dropped her gaze. “Stories, Uncle,” she said.

Joe laughed. “Oh, that’s good,” he let out, “Stories, that’s all they are. Now, are you coming with us or are you staying with Grandma?”

“Give us five minutes Uncle Joe,” Sarah said.

The girls tied their horses to the hitching post and ran through the field that separated their house from Mary’s house to get their stuff. In the meantime, Charlie, the stable hand, a man in his fifties with a bad limp, emerged from the stable to get the horses. His job was to remove their saddles and rub them down because the girls always rode them hard.

Charlie loved horses but could no longer ride them himself because of his bum hip. Joe was endlessly reminding him of the array of surgical techniques that could quickly and safely fix his problem to get him back in the saddle. But Charlie professed not to like doctors. “What am I, chopped liver?” Joe always said when they had this discussion. Charlie always answered, “You come out here wearing your John B., you ride for hours. You’re a cowboy just like me, and if I ever see you in a lab coat, I’m running the other way!” to which Joe always retorted, “You won’t be running anywhere with that hip. I’ve got a brand-new titanium ball and socket just for you.”

Joe approached Charlie with his hand extended, and the two men shook. Before settling into the usual conversation, Joe noticed

that Sandra was coming his way at a fast clip, and she didn't look happy.

"Oh," Joe said.

Charlie whispered, "Good luck with that one," and led Griff, the baby, into the stable.

Sandra got to within two feet of Joe and stopped.

"Beautiful morning, isn't it?" Joe said.

She glanced at the sky. "Joe, you know I adore you. But I would be willing to bribe you, maybe with a pot roast dinner, if you would go tell my girls something came up, and you can't take them with you this weekend."

"Sandra, I can't do that. They'd never speak to me again! Besides, they said you said it was okay."

"Yes, in a moment of weakness, I acquiesced," She looked down at her feet, then back at Joe again. "But then last night, I tossed and turned all night. I hardly slept a wink thinking about how those girls walk all over you. You're not much of a disciplinarian, Joe. And my girls know how to play you. So, who knows what they'll get into? And who's this woman I hear about?"

"Alex? She's a vascular surgeon. Russian. She's coming along to work with me at the hospital." Joe thought this would put Sandra at ease. But, instead, it had the opposite effect.

"That's another problem. If you're at the hospital all day...." She said, her concerns now solidified.

Sandra had worked herself up almost to the point of crying. Joe stepped beside her and put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her stiff upper body to his side. "Come on, Sandra, you're overreacting. The girls aren't that poorly behaved, and I'm not as bad an uncle as you make me out to be. Besides, Alex and I have a very light load at the hospital this weekend. Unless there's an emergency, we'll only be gone a few hours each morning. Then, we'll be back before they even get up."

She turned her face to Joe so he could see how deadly serious she was. "I don't want them on the lake unless you're there."

“Sandra, it’s the end of October. The lake is freezing. They’re not stupid,” Joe said, trying to ease her mind.

“And I don’t want them hiking up the mountain,” She quickly added.

“Sandra, please trust me,” Joe said empathetically, “I already explained to them that they are going to be bored to tears because I’m imposing all kinds of rules. The only fun they’re going to have is when Alex and I get back from the hospital. Alex is going to teach them some Russian folk dances.”

A small laugh burst out of Sandra, “Ha! My girls’ Russian folk dancing? I don’t think so, Joe.”

By then, the girls were flying towards them, Sarah wearing her backpack and Chloe dragging hers on the ground behind her. “Let’s get this show on the road,” Sarah cried.

* * *

After his talk with Sandra, Joe felt compelled to lecture the girls once more before meeting up with Alex. “This is going to be a no-nonsense weekend,” he said sternly.

“Yeah, right,” said Chloe, as the two girls began to chuckle.

“No, I’m serious!” Joe added, “If anything happens to you two, your mother will never let me take you anywhere again.”

No one had anything to say to that. So that was the way to go, Joe decided. “And as for Dr. Sharapova,” he continued, “you should know that she has military training.”

Sarah, who was sitting up front beside him in the extended cab, rolled her eyes. He glanced in the rearview and saw that Chloe had the same reaction.

“So, what’s that mean?” Chloe asked. “If we like, leave our underwear on the floor, she’s going to shoot us?”

The girls laughed. Joe reached back and tickled Chloe’s knee. “Yeah, that’s right. Or worse...” Joe said ominously, “If you don’t behave, we’re going to lock you both in one room and let you duke it out all night.”

“How about if we lock you and her in the same room and see how you like that!” Chloe cried.

Sarah chimed in before Joe could decide how to answer. “Idiot, that wouldn’t be a punishment. That’s what he’s hoping for.”

“How do you know?” cried Chloe. “Maybe she’s stinky and has frizzy green hair and warts all over her face and black teeth and yellow snot hanging from her nose,” Her imagination was running wild.

Joe nodded and kept his eyes on the road. Chloe was having a good time imagining Alex as an ugly witch. He let her go at it. Sarah contributed to the sophomoric humor, saying that Alex probably had fungus growing between her toes. The girls rolled in their seats, as much as their seatbelts would allow, laughing hysterically while Harley looked from one to the other, trying to figure out what was going on.

In a short time, Joe pulled into his parking spot in front of the hanger and turned off the ignition. The noise level, which Joe estimated had been at about 85 dBA, dropped to zero instantly as the girls caught their first look at Alex.

She was standing outside the hangar wearing an oversized green hoody that was open. Beneath it, she wore a tight black knit shirt that stopped just short of her belly button and tight faded blue jeans that stopped just at her hips. A sliver of pink flesh was between the two garments, offering a peek at her firm and beautiful waistline. The girls had stacks of teen magazines at home filled with pictures of stunning young women, none that compared to the beauty in front of them. Joe couldn’t help it; after all the things the girls had said about her, their stone-silent reaction to her now seemed very comical to him, and he began to laugh.

“What’s so funny, Uncle?” he heard Chloe chirp from the back seat, but he couldn’t get ahold of himself to answer.

There was a backpack and a duffle bag at Alex’s feet. One was her regular backpack, in which she carried her clothes when they traveled on the weekends. The duffle held her parachute and skydiving gear. It was new; she hadn’t even tried it out yet. Her brother, who was

now back in Moscow, had bought it online and shipped it to her, a gift. Alex had spent the last hour inspecting and folding the parachute just the way she liked it. She was hoping to make at least one jump over the weekend.

Joe slipped out of the truck, smiled at Alex, and went to the back of the vehicle to open the tailgate. While he was pulling out a box of groceries, the girls and Harley exited from the passenger door and came around to meet them at the back of the truck. “All cowboys, I see,” Alex said smiling. She bent down to pat Harley’s head. Joe had forgotten that they were all wearing white cowboy hats.

“Cowgirls!” Sarah quickly corrected.

Alex extended her hand, “You must be Sarah,” she said. But, unfortunately, her warm smile was met with disdain as Sarah folded her arms across her chest.

“Oh, come on, Sarah,” Joe cried out, seeing what was unfolding.

Sarah didn’t even look at him. Instead, she was staring straight ahead at Alex. “You know Uncle Joe was married, RIGHT?”

“Sarah!” Joe exclaimed. He had been hoping this meeting would go smoothly.

“Joe, please, let me.” Alex said gently, “Yes, I do know that. What does that have to do with the work your uncle and I do together?” she asked calmly.

“Maybe nothing. Maybe not,” Sarah said, “You should know that he worked with Aunt Ginger too. She used to be his helper, and then they fell in love and got married, and then she died,” Sarah’s face became noticeable saddened. “You’re not planning on trying to marry him, are you?”

Alex laughed stiffly. “No,” she said. But then, her eyes turned to Joe, and she smiled a devious smile, “I hadn’t planned on it.”

“You could marry him!” Chloe exclaimed, stepping forward. “I think you’re pretty.”

Alex extended her hand, and Chloe shook it. "I think you're pretty too," Alex said smiling, "You're both beautiful girls, just like your uncle said."

They were beautiful, but Joe had never said that to Alex. She was working hard, way harder than she should have had to, to find a way to breakthrough."

It didn't work. As soon as they got in the plane, Sarah made a fuss about having to sit in the back with her sister and Harley. On previous trips to the lake, Joe had let her fly the plane from takeoff to landing. On many occasions when there was time, Joe would let Sarah do four or five takeoffs and landings on the lake without him touching the controls; she was that good. Both girls had been flying with Joe and their father since before they were born. Sarah only had a few hours to go before she would be a private pilot. Not being able to fly now wasn't going over well at all.

Except for the whine from the turbine, they flew on in silence, arriving just before noon with a smooth landing on the lake. While they were unloading their gear, Joe asked Sarah if she wanted to do a couple of touch and goes while the engine was still warm. The look on her face instantly changed; she wasn't about to let an opportunity slip. "Yes, Uncle! I'm ready when you are!" she said with a big smile. Joe looked over her head at Alex. Her quick nod indicated that he should take as much time as he wanted; she and Chloe would be fine.

Sarah flew the airplane flawlessly. Even though her logbook said 40 some hours, in reality, she had been accumulating hours since before she could see over the dash. Finally, an hour later, they taxied back to the dock. With the airplane secured, Joe turned to Sarah and said, "Sarah, please, Alex," He looked at her with his hands out, pleading.

She knew exactly what those few words meant. "Sorry, Uncle Joe. It's just that I miss Aunt Ginger. Sometimes it hurts so bad that I get angry. She was my best friend," Her eyes began filling with tears.

Joe stepped forward and hugged his niece. "I miss her too."

“I’ll try and be nice to her, but this isn’t going to work,” Sarah said as she pulled away.

“What do you mean?” Joe asked, “What isn’t going to work?” As the words escaped him, he knew what his niece was going to say.

“You’re going to fall in love with her, and then you’re going to marry her,” Sarah said, her voice cracking as a tear rolled down her cheek.

“Wow,” Joe said with a smile. “And how did you come to this conclusion?”

“It’s obvious. She’s just like Aunt Ginger. She’s your type,” Sarah said matter-of-factly.

Sarah’s words rang in his ears all the way up to the house.

No sooner had they entered than his phone rang. He saw on his caller ID that the call was from the hospital in Trail: Gail Long, the administrator. Joe had met her a time or two, and once, he’d even danced with her at an event to raise money for the Grand Forks Firefighter Relief Fund. “Hello, Gail,” Joe said. “What’s up?”

“Joe, your name came up as available on the computer, and we’ve got a problem here,” She spoke quickly, not giving Joe a chance to reply. “We’ve got a man in his late sixties with a large blood clot in his left leg. Dr. Craig has been treating him with heparin, but it’s not working. Now Dr. Craig is afraid he will wind up with gangrene and need an amputation, or worse yet, the clot lets go. He needs to be operated on immediately.”

Joe pulled out a chair and sat down hard. When he glanced up, he saw that Alex and Chloe had paused at the counter, where they were making sandwiches for lunch. Sarah had come to a standstill nearby, her pack still in her arms.

“What do you need me for?” Joe asked, puzzled. Gail sighed before answering.

“Dr. Craig wants you to operate. Unfortunately, he can’t do it, and we don’t have anyone else here.”

“He’s never done a venous thrombectomy before?” Joe was still at a loss. However, he knew that this procedure should be well within Dr. Craig’s abilities.

“That’s not the problem,” Gail explained, “Last night, he broke his wrist playing basketball.”

“Seriously?” Joe asked with a tone of disbelief.

“Does that mean you’ll come?” She said hopefully, “Right away,” The urgency of the situation vibrated through her words.

“I’ll have to clear it here in Grand Forks, as long as there’s nothing too serious going on. Let me make sure they’re good without me until tomorrow,” he said, making a mental checklist of his next moves.

“Joe, I took the liberty. I hope you don’t mind; I figured it would save you time,” Gail explained without hesitation. “Sally said they’re all good over there. So, she gave me the green light to solicit you.”

“Well, when you put it like that - I’ll fly over right away. Why don’t you schedule for...” he looked at his watch, “...say 1300 hours?”

“Thanks, Joe. We don’t have another vascular surgeon to help, but I’ll get on the phone and try to find somebody.”

“Don’t bother, Gail,” said Joe, looking directly at Alex. “I’ve got my assistant with me. We’ve done a few of these together at General. It’ll be a piece of cake.”

“Thank you, Joe. See you soon.”

Joe put his phone in his pocket and said to everyone, “Deep vein thrombosis, not responding to heparin. Trail’s vascular surgeon is out of commission. Sub needed. That’d be me.”

“And I take it I’m the assistant you mentioned?” Alex asked somewhat humorously.

“Yes. Today you’re my right-hand woman,” He smiled.

“I’d better get ready,” Alex said, and she quickly wrapped two of the many sandwiches she and Chloe had assembled and left the room.

Joe shifted his gaze to the girls. “Okay,” he began. “What this means is that Dr. Sharapova and I are going to have to fly over the mountain to Trail and spend about two hours cutting someone up and sewing him back together again and then maybe another hour waiting to be sure the guy’s okay before we fly back. So, instead of being gone two-plus hours for a short gig at Grand Forks, which is what we’d scheduled for today, we’ll be more like five hours. That’s twice as long as I planned to leave you alone.”

“Dad leaves us alone up here all the time,” Sarah interrupted.

“Yeah, maybe for an hour max to run to town for something,” Chloe blurted.

“Noooo,” Sarah corrected. “Sometimes he goes to drink beer and shoot the shit with Oscar,” she said, smiling at her younger sister.

Joe gave her a disapproving glance. He could hear the water running in the bathroom and was glad Alex didn’t have to listen to this. “Girls, this is important. I have to make a choice. You come with me and stay at the hospital until we’re done, or you stay here.”

The girls looked at Joe as if he was insane. “That’s a no-brainer, Uncle Joe,” Sarah said.

They both looked at Chloe, who was shaking her head hard and fast. “Uncle Joe, the hospital is not an option. You don’t have to worry about us. The water’s too cold to go swimming or jet skiing. We’ll just hang out here at the cabin or maybe go for a hike with Harley,” She saw her uncle getting ready to say something and quickly added, “Not up the mountain. Just a local hike, if we go at all,” The girls had spent the best part of every summer at the lake and knew the area well, or at least they thought they did.

“Promise me you won’t do anything dangerous,” Joe said, thinking that anything dangerous should pretty much cover every possible contingency.

Sarah responded confidently. “Go, we’ll be fine. What could go wrong in five or six hours?”

“Harley stays with you at all times. Are you listening, Sarah?” Joe said sternly, knowing that Harley would sacrifice herself as the last line of defense for the girls.

Sarah had twisted around to study Alex, who was walking back into the room. “Yes, Uncle.”

“Good. Sarah’s in charge because she’s the oldest,” he said to Chloe.

Joe shifted his focus once more, back to Sarah. “Sarah, you have a huge responsibility here. You’ve got a younger sister to set an example for. I don’t want any trouble. I’ll have my phone, but you won’t be able to get me while I’m in surgery. If you have a real emergency, you can call the administrator, Gail, the woman I was just talking to. I’ll leave you her number.”

“Uncle, you’re all bent out of shape for nothing,” said Chloe. “We’ll be good. I’ll do whatever Sarah says.”

Alex saw that Joe was looking around. She spotted what she knew he wanted, a notepad and pen, at the end of the counter. She handed it to him as he opened his phone to write down Gail’s private number. Then he wrote down his number, even though he knew the girls had it, and he added Alex’s number for good measure. Then he got up and went to the refrigerator where a magnet was holding down a whole page of emergency numbers.

He put the refrigerator list and his shortlist in the middle of the table, took a heavy bowl from the counter, and placed it on top. “Every number you could want is here. I don’t want any trouble. Do you both understand?”

“Yes, Uncle,” came the chorus.

“Good. And please, wrap the rest of the sandwiches and put all the groceries away,” He turned to Alex. “You ready? Let’s go.”

As they walked down the stairs to the dock and plane, Joe said, “I was a little hard on them. Probably because their mom laid into me before we left.”

Alex put her hand on his arm. “They’ll be fine, Joe. It’s only for a few hours.”

He looked at her hand. He wanted to clamp his over hers, but before he could decide whether that’d be an appropriate move, it was gone, and that was a good thing. It brought him back to the moment.

Joe hoped the flight would take about fifteen minutes. As they taxied the plane for takeoff, Joe used his cell phone to call Air Traffic Control and ask for an emergency flight plan to Trail through the United States. Usually, ATC needed an hour’s notice to process an international flight plan, but because Joe declared it was an emergency, he hoped to be cleared as requested once he was airborne. The alternative was to remain in Canada; climb the Cessna to 7,000 feet before crossing two mountain ranges then descending to land on the river that passed through town. That option would take forty minutes. However, their requested flight path would take them into the United States for less than a mile. Before 9/11, pilots would simply skirt the border without a flight plan, but these days, that isn’t a wise thing to do. Radar coverage along the Canada/US border was pretty much a hundred percent, and Joe wouldn’t take the chance. Climbing through one thousand feet, Joe spoke quickly into the headset. “Spokane Center, this is air ambulance Bravo November Kilo. We are looking for our flight plan clearance from Christina Lake to Trail.”

Spokane Center replied. “Bravo November Kilo squawk 3412, cleared as filed.”

Alex dialed in the transponder to code 3412, but before she could put her hand down, Spokane Center said, “Bravo November Kilo, you are radar identified crossing the border.”

They flew on in silence. Then, ten minutes later, Joe spoke into the mike. “Spokane Center, this is Bravo November Kilo; please close our flight plan. We are crossing back into Canada.”

“Bravo November Kilo, your flight plan is closed squawk VFR, Good day.”

Joe replied the same, “good day,” before he turned the radio off. He didn’t want any distractions. Landing on the fast-flowing

Columbia River was a little bit tricky, made even more interesting by the fact that there were two bridges, one that was almost right over top of where he needed to park the airplane. Approaching from the south, he flew the airplane down to about one hundred feet above the water, where he completed his pre-landing checklist: Landing gear up, flaps down, propeller pitch full fine. As they approached the first bridge, Alex asked. "You're not going under the bridge, are you?"

"Yes, we are!" Joe lowered the nose even more, and the airplane flew down to five feet above the river. He reduced the power, so the airplane was barely in the air as they passed under the bridge. Joe put the airplane down on the water and increased the power so they were high-speed taxiing under the second bridge and into the bay where they would park the airplane against the dock. Two people from the hospital were waiting, ready to help with docking and tying up the airplane. Within minutes of landing, Joe and Alex were scrubbing up.

Chapter Ten

Sarah, who had been watching from the window when her uncle and Alex left, had seen Alex place her hand on her uncle's arm, and she didn't like it one bit.

She'd been Eleven, Chloe's age when her Aunt Ginger died in a plane crash. Out of all the people she loved, Aunt Ginger was the first one who had ever died. Chloe was just a baby, but for Sarah, the loss was devastating. She felt like something had exploded inside her and left behind a big gaping hole. It was a wonder to her that no one seemed to see it.

Aunt Ginger had been her confidante. Whenever she was mad at her parents or her sister or one of her friends, it was Aunt Ginger who would come into her room and whisper to her, making the world sensible again. Sometimes Aunt Ginger would sit on the edge of her bed and brush her hair while talking to her. Her mother never even did that.

Sarah's parents were devastated, too, when Aunt Ginger died. They talked about it all the time, but not to Sarah. She couldn't get them to say a word about Ginger to her directly. Instead, they treated her like a baby, telling her to try not to think about her aunt.

Sarah had crept out of her bed one time to listen by the door when her parents discussed the accident in their room. She heard her mom say that Uncle Joe would never get over it. He had loved Aunt Ginger way too much. All he would have now was his work, and it was a good thing he had that. Sarah loved Uncle Joe more than ever at that moment because he exemplified her idea of true and everlasting love. He was like the prince in Cinderella or the one in Sleeping Beauty. And even though she was sixteen now and didn't care much about fairy tales anymore, there was no denying that Dr. Sharapova was every bit the Evil Queen from Snow White, right down to her ability to be beautiful on the outside, so she could cover up what was inside.

Her sister was standing there waiting for her to turn from the window, which she did once the plane had taken off. "Guess what?" she said. "We're going on a picnic."

"Yeah," Chloe squealed. "I'll pack sandwiches," She began emptying the grocery boxes onto the table to see what else was in there.

"Put pickles on everything," Sarah instructed. She looked for the keys to her father's Wrangler, which were hanging from a hook near the door. "We're going up into the mountains," she said and felt a thrill run through her body. She knew how to drive that thing. Her father let her fool with it all the time. She looked at her sister.

Chloe was looking back at her, considering how to respond. Then she shrugged and said, "Well, I can't get in trouble because Uncle said I had to do whatever you told me."

"That's right," Sarah said. "And I'm telling you to pack all the food in the cooler and get ready."

While Chloe was getting the food supplies together, Sarah got the important stuff, the bear spray. She was proud of herself for remembering. She also went outside and checked the gas in the Wrangler. She was happy to see it had over a quarter of a tank. Her father had a roof for the vehicle, but she had never put it on by herself. Since there wasn't a cloud in the sky, she couldn't see any reason to waste time trying to figure out how to attach it.

Sarah slowly and carefully backed out of the carport, onto the driveway, and then the road. Chloe sat up front with Harley bouncing around in the back seat. Sarah's whole face was locked in a smile; she couldn't help herself. This was monumental. This was a game-changer. She did not get to be the author of many events in her life because her parents were always down her neck, constantly worrying that she would somehow screw up if she did any of the things she wanted to do.

They drove for about five minutes on a flat paved road passing three other cars going in the other direction. Sarah had to congratulate herself. Her driving was perfect. Now it was time to start to ascend. There was a paved road going up too, but she decided to take the

private access road, the one the lumber trucks used when they were clear-cutting. Her father would take the service roads now and then in the summer when there was a lot of tourist traffic that he wanted to avoid.

As they began to climb the mountain, they turned onto another dirt road and passed a sign that said Logging Machinery on Road, Do Not Enter Without a Radio. Well, they had a radio, didn't they? If the roads were safe enough for the logging trucks, she was sure they would be fine for the Wrangler. Also, there was less chance that they'd run into a neighbor or someone who might mention seeing them to Uncle Joe or her father.

She drove carefully, giving the road her full attention. They climbed higher yet, and she was careful to slow down to a near crawl going around hairpin turns and navigating through the ruts. It was a bumpy ride, slow going, and scary because it felt like they were sideways on the mountain a couple of times. Finally, they came to a place where the road dropped, and she couldn't see it in front of her. She had to take a deep breath and trust that as she went over the escarpment, the road would reappear—and it did. When she heard her sister release her breath, she knew that Chloe was scared too. But she knew better than to say anything. Even Harley was quiet.

Eventually, they came to a place that looked perfect for a picnic, above the clear-cut area but below the snowline. They got out of the Jeep and began unloading their stuff. Sarah was subdued on the outside, giving orders in a soft even voice, but on the inside, she was still rejoicing, practically screaming, *'I'm FREE! I did it! I'm ready to make my mark on the world!'*

The girls knew the rules about making a campfire. First, they gathered rocks and built a pit. Next, they added tinder, kindling, and then a couple of larger pieces of wood. Sarah was so pleased with herself that she let Chloe light the fire.

They ate the cheese sandwiches with pickles and shared a bag of chips and several bottles of soda water. Then, after cleaning up and

putting out the fire, they hiked back into the woods. There they found a stream to take off their shoes and dangled their feet in its icy waters.

Sarah toyed with the idea of driving even further up the mountain, above the snow line. What she wanted to do was get up on a tippy-top peak and stretch out her arms, screaming with delight. But she had a practical side to her, and in the end, she decided that it would be better to head home. The Jeep was filthy from the dirt roads. She thought she might have to wash it before Uncle Joe got back, or at least wipe it down.

She turned on the radio to liven up the ride back, but the reception was not very good. Luckily the Wrangler had a CD player, and Chloe found an ancient Bruce Springsteen CD, not her favorite, but it would have to do. The girls knew all the songs because it was their dad's favorite CD. He played it all the time. They were both singing at the top of their lungs, "You can't start a fire, you can't start a fire without a spark," and bouncing along over the ruts in the road—feeling good, feeling alive—when they came around a bend and there right in front of them was a berm, a pile of soft dirt that went right across the road. It's common for logging companies to build a berm once they finish logging an area to keep the public out. As they got closer, they could see that a large bulldozer had dug a ditch at least three feet deep across the road in front of the berm.

They hit it too fast and at a funny angle. The Wrangler bucked, sending the Jeep airborne. It landed on its belly on the berm with the tires barely touching. The drive shaft dug in, creating a loud racket as it drilled its way into the dirt. The engine stalled.

Sarah's first thought was that they had to be lost because she would have remembered if she had seen anything like this on the way up. She turned the key in the ignition. The engine was running, and the wheels were turning, but it didn't move. It only made a nasty noise. They were high-centered.

She tried going forward, and she tried going in reverse, but nothing worked. She made Chloe and Harley get out of the vehicle and

stand on the edge of the mountain so she could try with less weight in the Jeep. That didn't work either.

"The wheels are barely touching the ground," Chloe shouted. And when Sarah got out to investigate, she saw that her sister was right. Only one tire was brushing the ground on one side of the berm. The other three were in the air.

"We have to dig," she said. "We have to get under the Jeep and dig until another tire is on the ground."

"I'm not going under there," Chloe said. "You got us into this. Now you get us out. You can go under that Jeep and shovel by yourself."

"Shut up!" Sarah screamed. She couldn't think of what to do; she was panicking. She looked in the back of the Jeep; there was stuff back there for changing a tire, but there was nothing to dig with. She looked out over the edge of the mountain and realized that the light had changed. It wasn't dark yet, but it would be soon. She didn't want to call her uncle. He'd be furious, and her parents would never let her go to the lake—or anywhere else—with him again.

Chloe was screaming in the background. "I told you this was a bad idea. I told you we'd get in trouble."

"Shut up!" Sarah screamed back. She wanted to cry, but she was the oldest. She was the one responsible. So, she got back in the Wrangler to think, and Chloe and Harley got back into the back seat.

The phone numbers that her uncle had left on the middle of the kitchen table were still there. Sarah hadn't thought to bring them. When she finally had control of herself, she called Joe's number, but she got his voicemail. She would leave a message, but Chloe was still screaming in the background, and she didn't want Uncle to know it was a dire emergency. He was probably still in surgery, or maybe with his patient in recovery by now. She called information for the hospital, but she got a recorded menu, and she couldn't remember the name of the woman her uncle had told her to call or even what department she worked in.

"I want to go home!" Chloe blared from the back seat. She leaned forward. "What if bears come?"

"We've got bear spray."

"Yeah, but how will we see them when it's dark?"

Sarah looked around. "Harley is our alarm; she'll tell us long before we see one."

"We should have put the top on. A bear could climb right in here," Chloe continued.

"Stupid, it could climb right in even if we had the top on. The top's only canvas," Sarah rubbed her arms. "Well, at least we'd be warmer until it ate us."

"I want to go home NOW!" Chloe cried.

"Shut up," Sarah said, but softly. Her heart wasn't in it anymore. It was getting cold, and it was getting dark, and the part of her that had been rejoicing not that long ago had vanished, maybe forever.

Sarah only had a twenty percent charge on her cell phone. Thinking she might not get another chance, she called again. This time when she got her uncle's voicemail, she did leave a message. She spoke in a low, controlled voice. "Uncle, we have a situation. We are up on the mountain, at the north end of the lake, facing west. I only have a little battery left, so I'm not going to explain how we got here right now. The thing is, we need to get rescued, and fast," Her voice cracked on the last two words. She took a breath to calm herself.

"It's not my fault," Chloe yelled in the background.

Sarah looked over her shoulder. "Enough," she said to Chloe. Then she went back to her forced calm. "It's kind of cold up here."

"You mean it's freezing," Chloe interrupted. "and a little scary."

Sarah hesitated because she thought she'd heard something in the distance. "Uncle Joe, I can hear wolves," she finished, and she hung up.

* * *

The first time Joe listened to the message, he and Alex were walking out of the hospital, heading for the waiting pickup that would take them down to the plane. He thought the girls must be joking, that maybe they spent the whole day planning how they would get even with him for lecturing them, for making them promise to stay home and be bored. But the second time he listened to the message, he heard the wolves howling in the background and said to Alex, "We've got a serious problem."

He let her listen to the message while they were bouncing along in the pickup. As soon as it stopped, they hopped out and began to jog down the path to the dock and then down the dock to the plane. Alex had the same reaction he'd had at first. "Maybe they're playing a joke on you," she said, "to get even with you for bringing me along. Maybe they found a video with wolves to play in the background."

He looked at her. "Do you think that's what happened?"

She hesitated before answering. "No. that's wishful thinking."

They settled into their seats quickly. Alex still had the phone, but once they were airborne, Joe took it back from her and called Sarah. She answered on the first ring. "I'm sorry," she whined. She was crying or shivering or both; he couldn't tell.

"Sarah, it's imperative that you listen to every word I say. How much charge do you have left?"

Sarah looked. "Twelve percent."

"Okay, that's good," Joe said, though he thought that was terrible. "Now listen carefully. I want you to turn on the Jeep lights, but not yet. In about ten..."

"That won't help," Alex said. "It's not dark enough; we won't see them. They need to make smoke."

Joe took a deep breath. This was not good, not good at all, but he didn't want the girls to pick up on his fear.

"Okay, you've got to start a fire. Then, when it's going well, put green branches on the fire, and that will make enough smoke for us to find you."

"Uncle, we're afraid to get out of the Jeep. We heard wolves," It was Chloe, leaning in close to the phone.

"What are you doing?" Joe asked.

"We're waiting for you," Sarah answered, but he hadn't been talking to her. Instead, he'd been talking to Alex, who had gotten out of her seat and was getting something in the back of the plane.

She lifted her duffel bag for Joe to see. "I forgot to take it in the house. Thank God."

"You can't do that! You can't jump onto the side of a mountain in the dark." Joe said, now fearing for Alex's life as well.

"Oh, yes, I can. Please, don't tell me what I can or can't do. There's no time for that. Do you have a better plan?" Alex said as she maneuvered the bag to find the opening.

"If there's a place to land, we won't need to," Joe could feel the futility in his words as they escaped him.

"But there isn't, and I'm almost ready," She had already unzipped her parachute backpack and was getting into her gear. Gear she'd never worn before, straps that still needed to be adjusted to her body size. There'd be no time for that.

"Sarah, you've got to get outside and make a fire now, or we'll never find you," Joe ordered.

"I'm afraid, Uncle. The wolves are howling," Sarah said in tears.

"You and Chloe go out together. Wolves don't attack humans, but they will attack the dog. Do you have bear spray?" Joe asked.

"Yes," Sarah answered.

"That's good. Take the bear spray with you. Gather twigs and small pieces of dried wood quickly. Keep Harley in the Jeep. If we disconnect before we find you, follow through and light the fire. Once it gets going, throw the branches on it to make smoke. Keep it at a distance from the Jeep but get it as big as you can. "

"Yes, Uncle," Her voice said quietly.

"Are you still in the Jeep?" He asked.

"Yes, Uncle?" She said once again.

"Move now before it gets too dark!" Joe yelled out.

Joe's words shocked them into action. The girls hustled out of the Jeep and started collecting any pieces of dry wood they could find. In no time, they had a decent-sized pile. Sarah tried to ignite the smaller pieces of wood with her lighter, but they were too big and wouldn't light. Then, she spotted the spare gas can strapped to the back of the Jeep. Within seconds she was pouring the contents onto the pile of dried wood. Chloe was surprised at the amount of gas that had come out of the jerry can so quickly. Throwing the can clear, Sarah lit a piece of rolled-up paper, and when it was burning well, she threw it onto the gas-soaked wood. Even in the cool evening air, the gas fumes had been accumulating all around them. Sarah instinctively backed away as the burning paper sailed onto the gas-soaked wood. When the paper left her hand, she turned to Chloe, who was closest to the woodpile, and yelled. "RUN!"

But her warning came too late for both of them. The gas fumes that were all around Chloe ignited with a loud '*kawhoof*.' She screamed as the fast-moving flame knocked her to the ground, her hair on fire. Sarah, who was further away, lost her eyebrows and the frizzy ends of her hair. She took her jacket off and quickly smothered what was left of the hair on Chloe's head.

Both Joe and Alex saw the light from the sudden fire. It looked like a giant flashbulb had just gone off but stayed glowing.

"Put me 300 meters above the Jeep," Alex commanded.

Her plan was obvious to Joe. She was going to parachute down to the girls, which he had to admit was a much better plan than crash-landing the plane in a nearby clear-cut. He pointed the plane towards the light.

A moment later, his phone rang, and he answered and heard Chloe's voice through his headset. "It wasn't my fault, Uncle," she said softly.

"I know, baby. Let's not talk about that now, though, okay? Is anyone hurt?"

He heard a shuffle, then a thud, then Chloe again. "I dropped the phone," she said.

"Okay, hold on to it tight and tell me what's going on?"

"The wolves are quiet, and Sarah started my hair on fire, but it's okay now because she got the fire out, and I'm not burned at all, just my hair," Chloe reported calmly.

"Your hair was on fire!" Joe said, trying not to panic.

"I'm okay now. Do you want to talk to Sarah?" Without waiting for an answer, Chloe handed the phone to her sister.

"Hello, Uncle Joe," she said, trying her best to sound calm. Other than her hair and eyebrows, the fast-moving flame had done no significant damage, but it did scare her.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes, Uncle Joe, I'm fine. Where are you?"

"We're about five minutes away. Alex is going to parachute down to your location, and she'll have a weapon. Does Harley have her harness on?"

"Yes, and we have her buckled in, so she won't chase after the wolves."

"Good, now both of you get in the Jeep, and if the wolves attack, you need to wait until you can see their tonsils before you spray them. You must do as I say, is that understood, Sarah?"

"Yes, Uncle."

Alex, who had suited up fully now in the back of the plane, was standing at the door putting an earpiece into her right ear, held in place by the thick elastic band of her goggles. Joe realized he could lose her. But he couldn't think about that now. He could lose the girls, too, if they didn't act.

Alex, on the other hand, was beaming with confidence. She was proud of herself that she had brought along everything she needed for this jump— she was seldom caught unprepared.

Joe looked to the back of the plane and was about to tell Alex where he had his rifle stowed when he saw the large semi-automatic pistol in its harness strapped to Alex's leg. She turned on the small radio that was strapped to the other leg and tuned it to the same frequency as the plane's radio. Then, she spoke into the voice-activated

mike that was fastened to her throat by a Velcro strip. "Do you read me?"

"Loud and clear. We are 300 meters above the ground. Are you sure about this?" Joe asked into the mike on his headset.

Alex nodded her head then blew a slow kiss before turning towards the door. She grabbed the lever firmly before turning back to Joe and nodded again. "I'm ready."

Joe pulled the power to idle, and by applying hard right rudder and opposite aileron, he put the airplane as far sideways to the wind as possible, creating suction on her side of the plane, pulling on her door. He took a deep breath. "Now!"

Alex turned back to look at him once more, and he thought her expression would say something intimate to him, but she only nodded again and then turned back and pulled up on the door lever. In an instant, the door was open, and she was gone.

The girls had their eyes glued to the plane and gasped in unison as Alex started to fall. Joe could see the arms waving in the air. Four of them. The girls were okay but the movement of three or four wolves rapidly closing in on the Jeep had his attention.

As soon as Alex had cleared the door, she pulled the ripcord to her high-performance parachute, and it opened almost immediately. She made a small s-turn to correct her flight path before landing on her feet close to the Jeep. With the parachute falling around her, both girls ran to hug her. She spoke into the mike. "Joe, I'm on the ground," She quickly undid the parachute harness, then turned towards the girls and commanded. "Lift the parachute and make yourselves look big! The wolves are almost here!"

Alex had spotted the wolves as she descended. The alpha male appeared first and made a beeline towards the Jeep and Harley. Alex drew her ten-millimeter *Glock* and fired two quick rounds, hitting the large wolf both times. One round went in the animal's shoulder, the second hitting his enormous chest. A second wolf appeared behind him and then a third and a fourth. In a lightning-fast display of accurate shooting, she fired off three rounds, hitting each wolf once.

The alpha male that had been shot twice was yelping as he tried to go for cover before falling lifelessly. The three other wolves broke off their attack after being hit. The younger unhurt wolves circled the downed Alpha before disappearing into the bush, crying as they went. Joe could see the flashes from the *Glock*, but other than that, it was impossible for him to know what was happening.

With his heart in his mouth, he forced himself to speak into the headset. "Alex, talk to me!" It seemed like an eternity before she responded.

"We're okay; I shot the wolves with hollow-point rounds. The largest one is dead; I don't think the others will be back," She looked at the Jeep before continuing. Harley was going crazy, yelping and trying to get out, thinking she could help. Alex commanded her to be quiet and then stared at her. Something about her stance and voice told Harley this was serious. She went silent immediately.

Alex turned to the girls still hiding behind the parachute and put her finger to her lips, whispering, "Shhhh," The girls didn't need to be told twice; they went silent. In the distance, they could hear the howls and the cries from the wolves as they got further away. Satisfied that the wolves were no longer a problem, she said to Joe, "I know it's getting dark, but I'm going to need you to give me directions to get out of here," Before she holstered her gun, she did a silent count of how many shells she'd fired, reminding herself that only four remained in her weapon. Before departing the Cessna, she remembered that she loaded her handgun with a full clip of the most powerful bullets the gun could handle. Except now, her only replacement clip had rubber bullets filled with pepper spray.

The girls gathered around her, both of them talking at once now. Then, finally, she spoke loudly, above them. "Girls QUIET!" She scolded, bringing silence to the pair. "Listen to me. We need to work together to get the Jeep off the berm before it gets pitch dark," The girls waited for more instructions. Alex took a quick look around. "Sarah, you drive."

Sarah gave her a look of astonishment. "The Jeep is high centered; it won't go anywhere."

"We'll push you off the berm. Get in and drive," Alex commanded.

Sarah got in behind the wheel. Alex found a long straight piece of birch, which had been left behind by the loggers who were only interested in the pine and fir. She broke off the smaller branches with a quick kick from each foot until only two large branches were left on the log. She drew her gun, turned to the girls, and said, "COVER YOUR EARS!" Then she blasted off the remaining branches. The girls looked like they were in shock. Alex dropped the empty clip, replacing it with the clip filled with rubber bullets, shrugged her shoulders, and said, "It was the quickest way," There were no branches left, only a straight piece of birch ten feet long. She positioned the tree under the side of the Jeep and used it as a lever to try and push the Jeep off the berm to the uphill side. At first, it only moved a little, but after repositioning and with the help of Chloe, it slid sideways off the berm enough for two of the wheels to fall firmly on the ground. Sarah, who had started the motor with the Jeep in first gear, let the clutch out, and the Wrangler began to move. Effortlessly it rolled off the berm and onto level ground, where Sarah brought it to a stop. The girls howled with excitement as Alex and Chloe piled into the Jeep. Chloe wrapped herself and Harley with the parachute to keep warm.

From Joe's vantage point, he could see the brightly colored parachute was moving but knew it still wasn't a done deal. He gave instructions to Alex, which she relayed to Sarah, and ten minutes later, they were on one of the more major logging roads. With the light fading, Joe gave his final instructions to Alex. "Stay on this road, make no turns, and it will lead you to the highway. I'll see you back at the cabin. Over and out."

"Roger," was all he got in return.

Once they were on the highway, Alex asked Sarah if there was a pizza place before they reached the cabin. Sarah handed over her

phone. "It's called John's Pizza. My battery still has 4 percent," Alex smiled as she rang the pizza place.

The girls were out of danger, but now Joe was faced with a real problem of his own. He was running low on fuel, very low, with less than twenty minutes left. He hadn't given much thought to himself until this moment. Grand Forks was too far away, and it would be dark by the time he arrived, so he decided to stick to his original plan and land on the lake.

A night landing on water is challenging to say the least. He pointed the airplane toward the south end of the lake and started a gentle descent. After completing his pre-landing checks, he set the airplane up for what's called a glassy water landing. This type of landing is used when it is difficult to judge the distance above the water. The airplane is flown with the nose a little bit high, the flaps in the landing position, and the airspeed just above the minimum. The idea is to fly the airplane onto the water without looking out the window, something Joe had practiced many times but had never had to do in real life. He set the airplane up perfectly and watched the altimeter spin down slowly as he approached the water. He kept his eyes on the instruments like he was supposed to, occasionally looking up at the light from the houses on the beach to make sure he was still in the middle of the lake. Finally, the Cessna touched down smoothly. Joe immediately pulled the power to idle, holding the airplane steady on the water. Once it had slowed, Joe turned on the landing lights. The high-powered lights lit up the lake.

He taxied the plane to the pier, and after securing it, he ran up the stairs to the cabin. Just as he arrived, the Jeep pulled into the driveway. Alex was the first to get out. She looked comical, standing there grinning at him in her jumping gear with two pizzas in her arms. Next, Chloe had to slide out from under the parachute. She ran to her uncle and threw her arms around him while Harley, who had followed her, jumped up and down at his feet. Sarah got out last. She stood near the Jeep with her head hanging so low that she didn't even see Joe was

approaching until she was in his arms. He hugged her very tightly. "I'm glad you're safe," he said.

Once inside, Alex flung the covers back from the top of the pizza boxes, and Joe opened a bottle of wine. They ate in silence, standing at the counter with only the hall light to illuminate the scene. His nieces, who were exhausted, went right to their rooms when they were done, one of them slamming the door. Joe couldn't see down the hall, but he didn't need to know it was Sarah.

A blinking light indicated that there was at least one message on the house phone. He was about to press the button when Alex appeared with two glasses of wine in hand from the remainder of the bottle. As she handed one to him, she brushed against him; he realized in that one glorious moment that she had done it purposely. Their magnetic field had intensified since the adventure on the mountain. She stood there, very close, as they each took a sip from their glasses. "Finish," she said, meaning he should finish listening to the phone messages.

He hit the message button. "Joe, it's Sandra," the voice began. "Everything is fine on this end. We just got home from the wedding, which was wonderful, by the way, we both had a bit too much to drink, and we're going to bed in a minute or two. So I assume everything is great there too since I didn't hear from you. But if you or one of the girls want to call me in the morning, that would be great... Or you can even just tell Sarah to send a text message..."

Sandra kept on talking. Joe was listening to her, but as Alex was still standing very close and staring into his eyes, he wasn't making much sense of her words. Finally, he leaned forward with the phone in his hand, and Alex took a step closer. Their lips melted together in a long warm kiss. When they finally parted, Joe said, "I'll finish listening tomorrow," but then Alex bent towards him for another kiss. While they were locked together, Joe heard Sandra say, "Oh, and by the way, your mom said some woman stopped by asking for you. A little Asian-looking woman. She said..."

Joe didn't want to hear the rest of it, not now. He found the disconnect button with his free hand and hit it, and went on kissing Alex. Their magic moment was cut short anyway by the sound of Chloe screaming so loudly that the cabin shook.

Everyone ran to her room. Sarah was the first one there, opened the door without knocking, and ran to her sisters' side. Chloe had stopped screaming and was frozen, looking at herself in the mirror.

Sarah, Alex, and Joe were soon standing behind Chloe, looking at her reflection too. The fire had done a number on her thick brown hair, which only yesterday had been shoulder-length and perfectly straight. Now the ends were badly singed, the left side more so than the right. But, lucky for her, the hood on her hoodie had protected the back of her head.

To Joe, it didn't look so bad. It would only require a shorter cut, and no one would be the wiser. He thought he could put a bowl on her head and do it himself in a matter of minutes. He held back a laugh. Alex saw this and gave him a dirty look that said, "This is not funny!"

He looked at Sarah. Her hair was singed too, though it wasn't nearly as noticeable as Chloe's. Sarah had had her long hair styled a few months back. She'd intended to wear it in ringlets hanging down her back, like a movie star, but it was more trouble than she had anticipated, and more often than not, she wore it tied back in a ponytail.

Joe had seen women group up in situations like this, and he knew that if he stayed, he could easily say or do something wrong and become a target. So, he snuck out to take a shower and go to bed.

But sleep did not come easy. Alex's kisses were weighing heavy on his mind. He felt guilty; this was the first time he had felt love in a kiss since he kissed his wife goodbye for the last time almost six years ago. After asking himself the same questions over and over again, he finally drifted off to sleep, still without answers.

Chapter Eleven

Joe woke to the slamming of a door. He checked the table alarm clock and was surprised to see 7:30 on the dial. It was almost 8 o'clock when he emerged from the bedroom, ready for the day. He found Sarah sitting at the kitchen table reading messages on her iPhone, with Harley resting on the braided rug at her feet. She didn't look up when he entered the room.

"Good morning," Joe said, trying to sound cheery. When he looked at her hair, he knew there was big trouble. Last night someone had cut her hair, probably to get rid of the singe. It was a lot shorter. Instead of ringlets hanging down her back, she now had ringlets flaring out to the sides, but the singed ends were gone. Joe decided not to mention her hair at all.

Without lifting her eyes from the phone, Sarah said, "Harley had her breakfast already. Dr. Sharapova took Chloe in the Wrangler to Grand Forks, and Chloe's hair is ruined," Joe felt his eyes widen. He didn't want to make the mistake of commenting on Sarah's new appearance. "Dr. Shara- Alex is going to try finding someone to cut it, even though it's Sunday. If she can't, then Chloe will have to help out at the hospital all day. She said to tell you she'll see you over there when you're ready."

Joe's phone rang. It was the hospital dispatcher confirming that Joe was on station. "Standing by," Joe said, and he hung up. Sarah still hadn't lifted her eyes to look at him. She was still fooling with her phone. If he told her she had to come into work with him, she'd feel like she was being punished—not that she didn't deserve it. But, on the other hand, if he didn't tell her, she'd be alone all day, brooding, or maybe getting into more trouble. He admired Alex for having found an excellent excuse to get Chloe out of the house. He suspected she'd tried to get Sarah to ride into Grand Forks too but hadn't succeeded. He slammed his palm on the table to get her attention. Sarah jumped in her seat, startled as if just woken up abruptly. "I have to refuel the plane and then leave for the hospital. If you'd like to come with me, I

think we might have enough time for a couple of touch and goes, and if we get a call while we're up there, you can do the flying."

Sarah looked up from her phone and patted her curls with her free hand. "Thanks, Uncle Joe," she mumbled.

Joe turned to Harley, who was already looking up at him sadly as if she knew what was coming. "You're on your own today, buddy. Don't wander too far," Since Keith didn't have any animals; Joe had paid to install a high-tech pet door in the back door of the cabin a few years earlier. Its motorized Plexiglas flap corresponded to a battery in Harley's collar, letting her in and out but shutting out any other animals that might want to attempt entry. The fancy door was essential to keep the cabin from being overrun by raccoons.

Joe's priority was fuel. Knowing he kept several jerry cans full of Jet A in the shed, he began the process of carrying them to the plane and emptying them into the nearly dry tanks. Within an hour, Sarah was taxiing the Caravan, going through the preflight checklist from memory. When she finished, she turned to Joe and asked. "Are you ready, Uncle?"

Joe sat back in his seat with his arms crossed. He nodded his head. "It's all yours."

Between flying with her father and her uncle, Sarah had almost 50 takeoffs and landings as pilot in command on this airplane. She pulled back hard on the yoke as she applied full power. The smile on her face gave away the excitement of racing across the water and leaping into the air the way only a lightly loaded floatplane can do. She flew like a seasoned pilot, always ahead of the plane. She had the airplane leveled off at 1000 feet in no time and turned back for another touch and go.

After the fourth touch and go, the satellite phone rang with that familiar tone. They were being summoned. Joe answered, "Dr. Doyle speaking. Go ahead."

"This is Ron McIntyre. I'm the park ranger at Renata on the Arrow Lakes," As soon as Sarah heard the word Renata, she punched it in as their destination on the 1000 series Garman GPS. Immediately

and without asking Joe, she turned in the direction of Renata. This wasn't the first time she had been with her uncle when he received such a call. Sarah knew the drill and thrived on the opportunity to help, especially now, when she'd made such a mess of things the day before.

"I'm on a beach near Renata," Ron said, "with two hunters that were in a tin boat when they came upon a large bull moose swimming across the lake. The idiots lassoed the animal. The trouble started when the moose got traction in the shallow water. When the moose accelerated, they were thrown out of the boat violently. Once on dry land, the pissed-off moose turned and charged them," Joe knew from his experiences growing up in B.C. that an angry moose could be deadly.

"They lost their guns when the boat was yanked out from underneath them. So, they were defenseless," He stopped to take a breath. "The first man was caught right in the chest by its head. It crushed his rib cage. The second hunter was lucky enough to scramble underneath a fallen log," Ron took another breath. Anyone could tell he was as angry with the hunters as he was concerned for them.

"I saw what was happening, and I fired a couple of rounds that splashed in front of the moose, scared him off. The animal took off with the boat in tow. The guy under the log had industrial first-aid training and is presently giving the other one mouth to mouth. I can see his heart; he's ripped up that bad. How fast can you get here?"

Joe looked at the GPS, which told him he was ten minutes from Renata. "Tell me exactly where you are?" He instructed.

"We are approximately 100 meters north of where the creek meets the lake. Do you know the area?" Ron's asked, his voice noticeably desperate.

Joe's one trip to Renata, to fish with his dad, was unforgettable. He was thirteen, and it was the first time his dad had let him drive their 1957 Chevy pickup, pulling a fourteen-foot wooden boat that supported a 35 horsepower Johnson outboard. At the time, Joe thought it was the most powerful boat in the world. His father

taught him to back the boat into the water and run it as they trolled for fish.

While sleeping in the back of the pickup, they were awakened by a thunder and lightning storm. His dad asked him to check on the boat and make sure it was tied well enough to handle the storm. Because there were bears in the area, his dad gave him a 30-06 rifle to take with him just in case. Joe was not a stranger to this gun, having shot it many times at the range. As he hurried toward the boat, which did need its ropes adjusted, he saw many monsters that the lightning from the sky illuminated. He loaded the gun, preparing to shoot any of them if they got any closer. They didn't; he never discharged the weapon. By the time Joe arrived back at the truck, he had conquered many demons that were never to appear again. If his father were alive today, Joe would ask his dad, "Was that a test, sending me out in a storm like that with a gun?" Unfortunately, his dad died before he could ever find out. The fact that he didn't remember the place that well didn't matter. By moving the cursor approximately 100 meters north of the creek, the computer almost instantly calculated the heading and time to touchdown. Following her uncle's every instruction, Sarah knew exactly what to do. She followed the flight director, and she did it perfectly.

Low clouds in the valley between Christina Lake and the Arrow Lakes forced her to follow an abandoned railroad route that snaked through the mountains. By staying low with the power at max, they crossed the 20 miles quickly. It was only eight minutes after the phone call that Sarah pulled the power to idle, which was like applying heavy braking in a car. The airplane decelerated smoothly until it was inches above the water and stopped flying. After a flawless landing, she pulled the throttle into the reverse indent, stopping the plane almost immediately. Then, skillfully, she brought the floatplane up the beach alongside the game warden and the two hunters.

Joe was out of the plane with his emergency medical kit before it stopped. After shutting down the engine, Sarah was right behind him. Joe took a quick look and said to no one, "What a mess!" Luckily

the shattered ribs hadn't punctured any major arteries, but that didn't mean there wasn't a lot of bleeding. He quickly pulled a breathing bag from his case and inserted the attached endotracheal tube into the hunter's windpipe. Then he instructed the second hunter, who had been applying mouth-to-mouth all this time, how to use it. With his diaphragm ripped up, the injured man couldn't breathe on his own.

Using scissors, Joe cut his shirt back to expose more of his chest, immediately revealing pieces of broken ribs pointed in every direction and covered in dry blood. Trying to do anything to this man here could kill him. Joe's only chance was to get him to an operating room as fast as possible. With an IV running full open, he gave him a shot of morphine that would put the semiconscious man to sleep. The last thing they needed was for the injured man to be conscious and in so much pain that he would be flopping around like a dying fish.

The noise from the tin boat being pulled through the forest was becoming louder. The game warden took his gun and moved to a high point along the beach to get a better look. A large pissed-off bull moose is something he knew better than to mess with. With everyone looking, less than 50 yards away, the moose appeared at the edge of the tree line with the small boat still in tow. He was making all kinds of ugly sounds. He tried to get closer to the humans who had done this to him, but what was left of the tin boat had jammed under a large root and stopped him. Slowly the large animal backed up, lowered its head, and charged. As the rope grew tight, the mighty force from the animal ripped the anchor point clean off the boat. Now that the moose was free of the boat, he headed back into the woods with the rope trailing. Joe and the others emitted a sigh of relief.

Joe turned to the hunter. "What are your names?"

The hunter said his name was John, and the man with the crushed chest was Norm. To justify their stupid stunt, he told a story about two men trying to feed their families. Joe cut him off and instructed, "Keep using the hand pump, John, while Ron and I get Norm into the plane."

Sarah was already retrieving the stretcher from the airplane. Everyone worked together to load the man carefully onto it, then slowly into the plane. John stayed alongside all the while to keep the breathing bag going. When Norm was secure, and John was in the dropdown seat still working the pump, Joe started a second IV. Once that was done, Joe told him, "I'll take over from here; you should exit the plane right away," John looked hurt at first. But after looking at his hands which were full of blood, he climbed out without a word.

Sarah jumped into the pilot seat, shut the door, and fastened her seat belt. Methodically she went through the preflight checklist and in no time had her finger on the start button. She turned to her uncle and stated, "I'm ready, just say when,"

Joe looked toward the game warden, who was still holding the door open at the back of the airplane. "We're ready. Shut the door and give us a push-off."

The warden stuck his head deeper into the interior. "Is she the pilot? Does she even have a license?"

"Almost, student pilot permit," Joe said, realizing how it sounded. "Look, she's excellent, and unless YOU can fly this plane, she's it! Trust me, warden. She's the least of our problems; now, can you give us a push-off? Now!?" Joe commanded.

"Well, that's just great, a student pilot," With a questioning look, the warden asked Sarah, "And how do you feel about flying the plane by yourself?"

"Are you serious? I fly this plane like I own it," she said without hesitation.

Shaking his head, the game warden backed out of the airplane. He shut the doors and then jumped down from the float to the beach and pushed the airplane away. Without waiting for instructions, Sarah hit the start button as soon as they were clear. As the engine came alive, she asked Joe, "Where to now, Uncle?"

Joe thought for a second. Putting this man back together again, even with Alex's help, was over his head. Norm needed an experienced orthopedic surgeon to put his chest together. Dr. Don Urban, who

also worked out of Vancouver General, was one of the best orthopedic surgeons Joe knew. And like many of the doctors who worked in Vancouver, Don had a cabin at Christina Lake. Don also owed Joe a favor. “Christina Lake,” he answered.

Sarah confidently taxied the plane into the wind before gently applying full power. Once airborne, she steered the large Cessna up the same valley they had flown down 20 minutes earlier. Joe used the satellite phone in the meantime to call Dr. Urban.

It took four tries before Don picked up, and Joe could tell he wasn’t happy to have been forced to do so. “What?”

“It’s Dr. Bryan Doyle calling. I need your help,” Joe knew to keep it simple and to the point when talking to this guy.

Dr. Urban was face down in the sand with his nurse/medical assistant and long-time girlfriend Megan sitting on top of him, rubbing moisturizing sunscreen onto his shoulders. “Joe?” He said loudly, “I would love to help you but I’m at the north end of Christina Lake enjoying what might be the last warm day of the year. Sorry,” The line went dead.

Joe looked at Sarah, who smiled as she moved the GPS cursor to the north end of the lake. She started her turn before Joe could speak. “He should never have told me where he was. If Dr. Urban doesn’t want to come to us, we’ll go to him,” Joe said.

Three minutes later, Joe gave Sarah her final instructions. “Put her down gently, no reverse.”

“Wilco,” she said (an acronym for ‘will comply’) without taking her eyes off the gauges as she lowered the nose of the plane toward the lake. Her uncle was back on the phone, talking to Dr. Sharapova. Sarah didn’t listen to the conversation. Her job was to execute a flawless landing.

When the floats were about a foot above the water, she slowly powered back the power to idle. With less than a quarter mile of water between her and the beach, she gently put the floats on the water and let the large Cessna slow down without using reverse thrust, which would have put more stress on the injured man. Sarah had practiced these

maneuvers many times with an instructor sitting beside her, but this was the real thing. When the plane slowed, she lowered the water rudders that were mounted on the back of each float and then shut the engine off. She steered the plane until it came to a stop alongside the only boat on the beach, a red and white *Pachanga*. Her flying was perfect, and she knew it.

Standing on dry sand in front of the plane was Dr. Urban wearing a silk robe, and he didn't look happy. He jumped onto the float, opened the back door, and stuck his head inside. "What the hell is so important that you need to ruin my last day of boating?"

Joe turned to Don and said, "Come have a look. Tell me what I need to do," Joe could just barely see Megan, Don's girlfriend, standing behind him on the shore in a yellow bikini. She was moving her head from side to side, trying to see what was happening in the back of the plane.

Shaking his head with annoyance, Dr. Urban made his way to the injured man. Joe pulled back the blood-soaked towel that had been covering the man's broken chest. Don took a good look at the broken and bloody bones beneath. "How?" he asked as Joe gently replaced the towel.

"Moose hunting, only this time the moose won," Joe said with a hint of sarcasm, knowing it was the absolute truth.

Don laughed lightly, but it wasn't because the situation was funny. "And just when I thought I'd seen everything," he mumbled. His gaze swung from the dying man to Joe. "I know you're good, Joe, but you've got to be kidding me. Do you want me to tell you how to put this guy back together? Impossible!"

"But YOU do this sort of thing all the time, right?" Joe said impatiently.

"You're out of your mind! I've never seen a person this broken up and still alive," he said, shaking his head again. "Not even close."

"Look, I'm traveling with Dr. Sharapova," Joe began illustrating his plan, "You know her, or at least you've seen her around. She's the new vascular surgeon at Vancouver General. You once said

you heard she was better than me. She's at Grand Forks now, prepping the OR. If you put his chest back together, she'll reconstruct the arteries and veins. It'll give him a chance."

Joe could see Don was considering. He lifted the towel again. "Now that's a good-looking heart," he exclaimed with the casualness of someone complimenting a person for having a nice pair of hiking boots. "And I've seen a lot of hearts," Both doctors stared at Norm's heart, which was pumping at a steady rhythm, thanks to the breathing bag apparatus.

"We need you to put his chest back together so he can breathe on his own," Joe went on. "I don't need to tell you the urgency of doing this. He's a dead man without you."

Don was still staring at the man's heart. "Well, this is something I don't get to see every day," he conceded, the boater in him finally succumbing to the physician. He sighed audibly. "Okay, then. Call Grand Forks and make sure they have everything ready. We'll meet you there. Arrange for Megan to handle the anesthesia."

Without another word, he turned and quickly left the plane, jumping off the float into the shallow water. Then, after rocking the floats free from the sandy beach, he pushed hard on the left float to turn the plane away from the beach, towards open water.

Not wanting to call attention to herself after the park ranger's interrogation, Sarah had been quiet. Then, finally, she turned to her uncle. "Grand Forks, Uncle Joe?"

Joe nodded. "As smoothly as possible."

Sarah started the engine, and after going through the checklist, gently applied full power. Just as the plane began to move, Don and Megan raced past them in Don's high-powered boat roaring at full power. But it was a race they couldn't win; twenty seconds later, Sarah passed him, going at least twice his speed. She kept the plane low, aiming for speed over altitude. Meanwhile, Joe used his cell phone to alert the hospital to have an ambulance and crew ready when they landed.

Five minutes later, Sarah had lowered the landing gear for the touchdown at Grand Forks. A lot was going on in Joe's mind, but he couldn't help saying to himself, 'Under pressure is where this sixteen-year-old excels.' He smiled as she touched the wheels to the pavement without the tiniest hint of contact.

Dr. Urban tied his boat to his wharf, and he and Megan quickly dashed into the cabin and threw on some street clothes. As they were leaving, he tossed her a helmet and said, "We'll take the Harley. It's faster," They quickly mounted the 110-cubic-inch monster and roared off towards the hospital. Don took it easy for the first few minutes to let the engine come up to temperature, but after that, it was pedal to the metal. They passed everything in their way, setting a speed record from Christina Lake to Grand Forks. Don pulled the big Harley into the parking lot just as the ambulance crew rushed the patient into the hospital.

Dr. Sharapova was waiting in the hallway, directing traffic. As soon as the two paramedics escorting the patient entered the hall, she barked orders like an army drill sergeant. "Hard right into the OR. Gently please, gently," They positioned the gurney next to the operating room table, and once everyone was in the room, Alex supervised the transfer. "On three, we are going to lift just enough to slide him, no higher. One, two, three," Everyone there was experienced. The transfer was seamless; Norm was on the cool operating room table.

That shock was the last straw for Norm's heart. It stopped, setting the heart monitor screaming. Everyone there knew what that meant. With the hunter on the OR table, the paramedics smoothly hustled out, letting the surgeons take over. Alex, as usual, was prepared with a syringe of adrenaline and injected the stimulating drug directly into his heart. Afterward, she used the small paddles from an automated external defibrillator (AED) to administer a constant flow of electrical current to the heart the way a pacemaker would. Because Norm's chest was so torn up, her challenge was finding an area of skin above and below the heart muscle to situate

the paddles, but she managed it. The low dose pulsing shock started the heart muscle working again. Megan stepped in to help administer blood transfusions and various medications. Within twenty minutes, Norm was stable enough for the surgeons to begin putting his body back together.

Besides having seen one another coming and going at Vancouver General and introducing themselves briefly once Norm started to breathe again, Don and Megan were strangers to Alex. But Don, who was at work in Norm's chest now, couldn't leave it that way. "Are you and Dr. Doyle hooking up?" he asked bluntly.

"Oh God," Megan mumbled.

Alex glanced up in time to see her roll her eyes in exasperation. The gesture told her a lot about Megan, including that her relationship with Dr. Urban was more than just professional. It also told her a lot about Dr. Urban. "Dr. Doyle? Oh, you mean Joey," she said with smiling eyes.

Don didn't understand why she called him Joey and didn't want to ask.

"What do you mean, hooking up?" Alex continued innocently.

"You know, man, woman, sex?" Don said bluntly.

"Now, why would you ask such a thing?" She couldn't believe how rude this man was, but she wouldn't let herself react, which she could see was what he wanted. Her concern was for Norm, the man with the broken chest.

"Just curious. You know how it is in a hospital. You're the new doctor, and people talk," Don's genuine answer was no surprise to Alex.

"Oh really? And what's the latest gossip?" She kept her tone buoyant.

"The word in the lunchroom is that you and Joe are sleeping together," Don answered plainly.

"Listen, we only slept together once, and it was a disaster," Alex said. "Maybe next time will be better," She knew this would set the rumor mill running, but at that moment, she didn't care.

Don looked surprised. “That’s more information than I was expecting,” He turned his attention to the man on the operating table after that, and Alex was satisfied that her performance had the correct result.

Joe, meanwhile, was still on standby. He called the air ambulance dispatcher to say he remained available. Still, instead of returning to the plane, which was only five minutes away, he stayed at the hospital and saw the patients that had been waiting for Dr. Sharapova. He and Sarah had asked about Chloe when they’d first arrived and had learned from Sally, the nurse, that Chloe was down the street, getting her hair cut. Unfortunately, because it was a Sunday, the salon was closed. Dr. Sharapova had called the owner at home and explained that this was an emergency, so he agreed to drive into town after he’d had an early meal with his family to cut it himself.

Within a half-hour, Chloe was back with a new hairdo. Her hair, which had been cut straight across previously, was now much shorter and curling at the ends just a little bit. It was puffier than Joe could remember. Chloe came in smiling and patting what Joe thought looked a bit like a helmet. Sarah jumped up from where’d she’d been sitting with the nurses at the registration desk and hugged her sister, telling her she looked adorable. Another disaster averted; Joe hoped.

Sarah and Chloe kept themselves busy helping the nurses. They carried out the trash, answered phones, helped sort mail, brought charts into the waiting room, and escorted people into the examination rooms—whatever was needed. Chloe was good, but Sarah was a pro; hanging around their uncle meant hanging around hospitals, especially this one.

Sally had gone into the small hospital kitchen to make fresh coffee while Beverly and Chloe were getting things ready for Norm in the recovery room. Then, the front door opened, and Norm’s wife walked in with her two little girls. All three were dressed in flowery summer sundresses made from the same cotton fabric. The woman walked up to Sarah authoritatively and asked, “Do you have a patient by the name of Norman White?”

“He’s in surgery right now. How can I help you?” Sarah asked politely.

“My name is Joanna White. I’m his wife. Can you tell me what’s happening with my husband, please?” Joanna had started calmly, but now her jaw was quivering as she was on the verge of tears. Sarah came around her desk at once and took her by the hand, leading her to a row of old-fashioned connected seats in the waiting area. Sarah and Joanna sat down, and the two little girls squeezed into the seat on the other side of their mother. Sarah couldn’t help but notice that Joanna White was carrying a Bible.

“A moose attacked your husband; his ribs are broken badly. The good news is that we have excellent surgeons working on him,” Sarah explained, trying to break the news gently.

Joanna took a deep breath before she announced, “My husband is a firm believer in the Bible, and I wanted to let you know that he would not accept a blood transfusion or the use of any blood products,” She was in tears as she finished speaking.

Sarah’s first reaction was one of amazement. She had heard many stories of religious sects that prohibited blood transfusions and allowed people to die rather than get one. Her uncle had told her more than once that he’d given up trying to convince people that the Bible was talking about eating blood and not about blood transfusions. From a historical perspective, he’d studied Jesus some, and what he learned was that Jesus was a healer and probably somewhat unorthodox. There was reason to believe that at times, Jesus would not have told his patients how he was healing them for fear they might reject his cures out of superstition. As much as Sarah wanted to set this woman straight about the realities of life, she took a deep breath and spoke as calmly as possible about modern interventions she had heard her uncle talk about. “Are you familiar with the *autologous* blood system?”

Joanna shook her head. “Sorry, I don’t know what that means.”

Sarah began explaining, "It's a machine that uses suction to pick up the blood and fluids from inside your husband's body. Then, it refines them and puts them back into his body as clean oxygen-filled blood cells," She smiled, proud to have remembered how this system worked.

Joanne was relieved by what she'd heard. She thanked Sarah for her time, and as Sarah got up, she pulled her little girls close to her, and all three bowed their heads and began to pray.

Alex and Don worked nonstop for almost three hours. The man's chest was back in one piece by then and covered with staples and stitches. They agreed that Don had done as much as he could. Then, without alluding to their earlier conversation, Don said goodbye and left the operating room. When the door had shut behind him, Megan stepped to Alex's side and whispered, "I'm sorry for his behavior. He's upset with Joe for calling him away from the beach today."

Alex nodded. It would be some time until she was finished with her part of the job on Norm's chest, and she didn't want any further distractions.

"Well," said Megan, "I just wanted to say that."

"Thank you," Alex said without looking up.

Megan began to move to the door, but then she stopped and turned before saying more. "The administrator at Vancouver... Vivian..."

Alex glanced up. Megan didn't know quite what to say now that she had Alex's attention. "It's just, well, watch out for her. It's no secret that she wants Dr. Doyle and her to be more than friends... And well, frankly, I don't trust her. There's something...I don't know...sort of sinister about her," Alex smiled and nodded and went back to work on Norm.

Don had washed up and texted Megan to meet him outside in front so that they could grab a bite before they returned to the cabin. He was heading down the hall that led to the waiting room when Sarah

intercepted him. He recognized her from the plane and assumed she was a relative of Joe's.

"Dr. Urban," she began, "You might want to go out the back door. There's a crazy guy in the waiting room demanding to talk to the doctor in charge of Norman White's surgery. He says he's a preacher representing the family and that Norman White can't have transfusions for religious reasons, and..." Sarah continued, but Don had heard this objection all too many times before.

Don sighed. He didn't need this on the last nice day of the year. He could hear the voice of the man in question, arguing with the nurses.

In his early years, he worked as an ER doctor in a small town where it was common for him to be working alone in the evenings. Late one night, an ambulance showed up with a girl who had been broken up very badly in a major car accident. One look at her, and Don knew she had lost a lot of blood. Without a second thought, he'd ordered the OR nurse to use blood from the soaked blanket she'd been wrapped in to find out what blood type the young girl was. She was type O, which is the most common of the four types, and was readily available. Don ordered the assisting nurse to prepare three units of blood. Before it arrived, the hospital administrator called from his office and announced that before they could transfuse any blood, he would need the parents to sign, which they were not likely to do. They were on their way to the hospital, but they'd called ahead to tell the administrator that their daughter was not to have blood. As it happened, the administrator was a member of the same religion, and he respected their decision.

Don stayed at the girl's side until the parents arrived. Then he stomped right out and began to argue with them and the administrator, who'd come down from his office. This girl was dying in front of him, and he felt he had to act. So, while the parents were in the room saying goodbye to their daughter, he called the local police to see what the procedure was as far as getting a court order. For almost two hours, Don waited for the police to get back to him. During that

time, the girl's heart stopped beating four times, and each time he was able to get it going again. But the fifth time was the final time. Her heart would not restart. She was dead; she had bled to death needlessly.

Watching that beautiful young girl die for no reason in front of him had haunted him for years. He blamed himself for following the rules. It was a hard lesson to swallow. So now, the only rule he followed was that he wouldn't abide by stupid religious beliefs in his operating room.

Sarah was still standing in front of him, enumerating the many nasty things this preacher had said to her and the nurses. Don had not been paying attention to her; he'd been lost in thought. Now he moved past Sarah and headed to the reception area.

An intelligent person would have taken note of his body language and the look on his face. A wise man would have been frightened and backed down. But this preacher guy was an idiot. Guessing correctly that Don had been the surgeon in charge, he got in his face and immediately began quoting from the Bible. He even dared to poke Don in the chest, as if he were a thug as well as a Bible thumper. That was a major mistake. Don lifted the man by his throat and threw him against a wall. It was almost comical how the man bounced off of it, landing on his side.

Don bent over him and whispered into his ear, "You have five seconds to get out of this hospital, or YOU will become my next patient. Understand?"

The preacher quickly scrambled to his feet. He was cursing Don and mumbling about calling the police even as he rushed out the door.

Don turned around and saw Megan standing there. The pleasant look on her face told him that she had missed all the action. He approached her, saying, "Let's go outback. We'll eat when we're back at the cabin." Megan turned at once and headed for the back door.

Joanna and her two daughters had witnessed everything, and now Joanna was bent over and crying into a handkerchief.

Sarah rushed to her side and put an arm around her shoulders. “Please, don’t cry. That’s serious negative energy, and your husband is going to need your positive energy to get through this,” It took a few minutes before Joanna calmed down enough to listen. Finally, Sarah took her hand and said. “Come with me.”

They walked together to the poorly lit viewing room where they could watch Dr. Sharapova working alongside a surgical nurse putting Norm back together. Sarah said softly, “What you see in front of you is an angel sent by God to save your husband’s life. There is no other explanation why she would be here at this time and place,” Joanna had begun sobbing again as soon as she saw her husband on the table. Sarah continued, “This amazing lady has dedicated her life to healing people, and in the Bible, it says that Jesus was a healer.”

Joanna felt as if a great weight had been lifted off her shoulders. For her having an angel work on her husband was a gift from God. She lifted her daughters, one at a time, so they could see the angel saving the father too. They watched in silence for over an hour as Alex worked on his tiny arteries, restoring blood to the broken parts of his chest.

When Dr. Sharapova was satisfied that the man would live, she walked to the viewing room to speak with Joanna. “Your husband has a very strong heart,” Alex said. “I believe he’ll be fine. It will take some time for him to recover, and that’s best done here, not at home,” Alex was unaware of what had gone on with the preacher but seeing the Bible in Mrs. White’s hand, she added, “What your husband needs from you, other than taking care of your beautiful children, is positive reinforcement. Keep your prayers positive; trust me, it will make a difference.”

Alex asked Sarah to take the girls to the reception area. Once they were gone, she brought Joanna, who was trying to control the tears that were running down her cheeks, into the operating room, where she held her husband’s hand as they moved him from the OR to Intensive Care. It would be hours before the man regained consciousness.

Joe, Sarah, and Chloe left not much later. On the way back to the lake, once again, Sarah did all the flying. It seemed incredible that she could have the best day of her life, right after the worst one.

Dr. Sharapova didn't leave the hospital until well after midnight when she was sure that Norm was stable. She drove back to the cabin to find everyone sound asleep. Silently she slipped into bed and was out like a light.

Chapter Twelve

Weeks later, Joe was flying alone to Bella Bella when his satellite phone flashed and buzzed an irritating sound.

“What’s up?” he answered.

“How close are you?” Heather asked, sounding mildly panicked, which wasn’t normal for her.

Joe responded, “Ten minutes out. What’s going on?” He took a quick look at his fuel and engine gauges. The Cessna had hours of endurance and was running in top shape as usual.

“You know the logging camp on Kwatna Bay?” she asked bashfully.

Joe let out a laugh, “I’m flying over it as we speak,” he looked out the window to see the small settlement almost directly below.

“Good! You need to land there. Someone’s been attacked by a grizzly,” she said. The words made Joe’s stomach sink as they echoed in his head. He had heard of grizzly bear attacks throughout his years growing up and working in B.C. Unfortunately, it never ended well for the human or the bear.

Joe took a deep breath before he spoke. “How bad?”

Heather’s response shared his tone, “I don’t know. The guy who called me was pretty upset. There are three or four men, all colleagues of the injured man. They were all yelling their prognoses into the phone at the same time. I hung up as quickly as I could, thought it made more sense to reach you before you landed than getting every last detail,” She was speaking so quickly that Joe was straining to make out her words.

“Understood. I’m turning now; where am I landing?” Joe announced as he pulled back the throttle, slowing the Cessna in preparation for his descent.

“You know the rock that juts out into the bay?” Heather began explaining, “Where that little boy—”

“I remember,” Joe responded, cutting her off. He didn’t want to think about it. Two years ago, he’d gotten a call about a kid who’d

broken his neck diving from the rock. He was dead before Joe even got there.

“There’s a path about 30 meters north of the rock,” she told him, “The guy is right along that path somewhere, hopefully not too far inland.”

“What are they doing here?” Joe asked, mentally drawing a map of the area as he began extending flaps to slow the plane and steepen his decent path.

“Engineers from the city.” Heather answered, “They’re flagging trees for a logging company.”

“Figures,” Joe said as he selected his final flap setting, lining up with the stretch of water he would set the plane down on. “Call them back and tell someone to meet me at the head of the path,” he instructed.

Joe had a tightness in his stomach as he rested the floatplane gently down on the water. Then, he taxied the plane to the small sandy beach beside the large rock outcropping, using almost full power to pull the floats out of the water.

Every situation out on the islands called for a unique apparatus. Joe couldn’t prepare for every single possibility because the possibilities were endless. Still, he kept a couple of different backpacks ready to go for scenarios that seemed to come up over and over again. Loggers getting mauled or injured in the backcountry was one of them. So, after shutting down the engine on Kwatna Bay, he selected a pack from one of the built-in cabinets in the back of the plane. His choice included a place for his rifle and a can of bear spray, along with bandages, sedatives, and the rest of it.

Joe quickly located the path and set off at a quick pace. Within seconds he encountered men running in his direction. “Come on!” one of them shouted. They immediately turned and started back toward the injured man they’d left. Joe was amazed that someone hadn’t stayed behind with the guy.

Joe arrived at what was one of the goriest scenes he’d ever attended. The man looked like he’d been butchered with a dull knife.

Joe went right to the injured man's side and knelt beside him in the pool of blood that the deep gouges had generated.

"You got here really fast," One of the other men said. "We never thought help would come this quick."

Joe didn't bother to explain how he happened to be in the air right above them when he got the call. "Tell me what happened!" he commanded loudly.

Surprisingly it was the man who had been mauled who tried to answer. "Bear...attacked; big male grizzly," he said. His words were slurred, but Joe understood perfectly. One of the other men started to tell his version of what happened, but Joe, who had heard enough, for now, interrupted him.

"Who knows how to use a rifle?" He asked as he took off his pack and reached inside, grabbing as much gauze as he could.

The men looked at each other as if they were lost. Great, Joe thought. No one. But then the oldest of the men, maybe in his early sixties, stepped forward. "I can handle that rifle," he said hesitantly.

Joe was applying pressure to the man's mauled arm, which was torn up pretty bad. Then, he reached to his pack with his free hand and drew the rifle from its holster. Lifting it by the nylon stock, he handed it to the older man.

"The safety is on," Joe announced. "You probably won't need it, but be ready in case that bear comes back," The old man took the gun from Joe's hand, released the safety, then loaded a shell into the barrel confidently. Joe could see he knew what he was doing. "Take an extra second to see where your friends are before you fire. We don't have time for another catastrophe and don't shoot unless he's charging. Got it?" Joe was giving an abbreviated version of the lesson his father gave him years earlier.

The old man gave Joe a look then said, "Don't worry. I know what to do."

The injured man was also bleeding badly from his torso. The skin was pulled back off his lower right abdomen, and ribs were visible where the grizzly sliced through with his sharp claws. Lucky for him, it

didn't look like any organs had been damaged. Joe would have to stop the bleeding to be sure. He looked over his shoulder at the men. Of the three that were empty-handed, two looked squeamish, hyperventilating at the sight of their bloody pal. One of them, who looked about Joe's age (early forties), was the one who had expressed surprise that Joe had arrived so quickly. At least he looked capable. Joe reached into his bag once more and handed him the can of bear spray.

"If the bear is still close by and sees us as dinner, it'll be back. If it charges us, your friend will have to shoot it, and if that doesn't work, and it gets close, you need to spray it; empty the can," Joe was using both hands to try and stop the bleeding as he barked orders. He was sure these two men were panicked and focused on their injured friend rather than the actual gravity of the situation. Except for the man with the rifle, they were sitting ducks.

"If you spray him, give yourself space," Joe continued his orders, "He's going to start thrashing around like crazy. It'll cough like hell. And for God's sake, don't inhale the stuff yourself. Keep your back to the wind."

Joe recalled a time when Sarah had gotten pepper spray in her eyes as a young girl. It wasn't even from being sprayed; it was from touching a container that had been discharged previously and was leaking ever so slightly. He knew that this stuff to an angry bear was a good deterrent, but a human being would be incapacitated. "You two, keep your eyes open!" he said, motioning his head toward the other two men. "Watch for any movement in the trees. If you see anything, YELL OUT AND POINT ITS DIRECTION!" Joe announced the last words in a demonstration of what he was expecting. He knew well that the best chance for survival against a grizzly is avoidance. If you can scare it off before it attacks, you win.

All four men turned from Joe at once and started scanning the surrounding wilderness. Guns had about a 70 percent success rate when it came to attacking grizzlies. The bear spray was pretty much 100 percent. The spray would blast out like powder from a dry chemical fire extinguisher. It would blind the grizzly and take away its

sense of smell. What didn't make sense was that these guys didn't have their own cans of bear spray. From the look on their faces when he'd handed his over, they'd never even heard of it. As the human population expanded, the grizzly bears' habitat was being taken away. Their population, like every other animal, was shrinking. Estimates were that less than 14,000 grizzlies were left in British Columbia; a territory once known for its abundance of bears. Still, there were a lot of grizzlies.

Grizzlies were all over the islands, but sometimes bears were found inside the city limits too. Joe had friends who complained that the bears came out from the wooded areas and upset their trash cans and dumpsters. He gave them all the same advice; spray them, and they won't bother you anymore.

He was working quickly on the mauled man. He'd already applied a tourniquet to his arm and stitched up where the skin had been pulled back on his torso. Now he was wrapping the arm with bandages. He'd be ready to move in a matter of minutes.

At the onset, Joe had given the man a sedative, and he hadn't made a peep throughout the stitching. But now he scared Joe by yelling, "Bad breath!"

Joe didn't know what he was talking about at first, but the guy went on lucidly. "I never smelled bad breath like that in my life. I was thinking while he was biting me how bad his breath was. Stinking fish breath," He started to chuckle, but it hurt so much that he wound up wincing in pain.

"What's your name?" Joe asked in his calmest voice between breaths.

"Nick. Nick Parker," The man said.

"Well, Nick, you were very lucky he didn't eat you. What scared him away? Your pals here?"

"Hell no," He stopped to take a breath. "They weren't even close. I kicked it. I don't know how... he tackled me, and I somehow managed to kick it in the..." He turned his head to the side and spat up a wad of mucus, "...in the head," he finished.

Joe glanced at the man's boots: *Corks*, they called them, heavy-duty work boots with spiked soles. Loggers and linemen wore them all the time. But you couldn't rely on stopping a bear attack with logger boots. "Why didn't you have bear spray?" Joe asked.

Nick ignored him in favor of going on with his story. "He made this huffing sound... It was incredible. Really deep grunts."

"Yeah, I know," Joe said. He knew the sound all too well. "Don't try to show me. You'll blow your stitches out."

Nick tried to laugh again, but again he wound up wincing in pain. Joe had a folding orange nylon stretcher strapped to the bottom of his bag. He unlatched it from the pack and opened it out. With the help of one of the men, he quickly got Nick onto it. The man who had helped him was the biggest, so Joe commanded him to take the foot end of the stretcher and start moving Nick to the floatplane. They lifted him and moved along quickly, with the other two men staying close behind. He was thinking, if he had Harley with him, he wouldn't need the guy with the gun. Harley would alert them if the bear came back. She would probably chase it. Even if it was the other way around and the bear chased her, it was unlikely the bear would have been able to catch her.

To Joe's amazement, Nick had managed to get his satellite phone out of his pocket with his good hand. While they hurried along, he was telling the story to his wife, or maybe his girlfriend. Then, all at once, he emitted a loud sob. Then, when he could talk again, he said, "All I could think was, I'm never going to see you again," Joe felt a twinge in his heart. He knew what that was like, knowing you were never going to see someone again.

After they got Nick onto the gurney and strapped in, Joe jumped off the float and put his hand out for the gun. The older man who had been holding it handed it over carefully, handle first. Then the guy who had the bear spray went to hand that over, but Joe did not reach to accept it. "You keep it," he said.

There was a loggers' cabin not too far away where the men would stay the night and finish flagging trees in the morning. They

said they had a helicopter coming for them tomorrow, in the late afternoon, to take them back to Bella Bella. That was Joe's only can of spray, but it was clear, in the near future, they were going to need it more than he would. "Keep it, and get some more as soon as you can. Never, EVER, come out here again without it."

With a loud growl, the grizzly charged, smashing its way through the brush it had been hiding behind. With the charging bear ten feet away, Joe opened fire. At this distance, he just pointed and fired. The first two bullets had little effect. Then, with the bear almost on top of him, he shot it in its open mouth, killing it instantly. The dead bear's forward motion knocked Joe to the ground before coming to rest on top of him, knocking the wind out of him. The heavy weight of the bear prevented him from breathing.

The loggers, who had scattered when the bear attacked, slowly returned. After they were sure the bear was dead, they pulled the dead animal off of Joe.

With the bear rolled off, Joe took a few fast-deep breaths then asked. "What took you so long?" The embarrassed men looked at each other. Joe was scratched up, but he wasn't hurt badly other than being flattened by a grizzly. With the dead bear looking up at them, Joe returned his attention to Nick and started him on oxygen. His breathing was strained and getting worse. Returning to the end of the float, Joe pointed to the collar around the dead bear's head. "Take the collar off and give it to the conservation officer at Bella Bella. He'll want to know what happened."

Vancouver or Bella Bella, Joe decided Vancouver was best for Nick, but it was at least an hour further. "Do any of you know how to fly?"

The older man in the group asked. "Why do you ask?"

"Your friend is having a hard time breathing, and I believe he has a collapsed lung, which requires immediate attention. I can work on him here or in the air on the way to Vancouver. To do that, I need someone to fly the plane. Are you a pilot?"

“Was, the license is long gone, but I can fly your plane,” said the old man confidently.

“What’s your name?” Joe asked.

“Richard.”

Joe stepped off the float to let Richard by; he cringed with chest pain as he found a footing on the slippery rocks. His ribs hurt. “Ok, Richard, take a seat and buckle in,” as he climbed back onto the float, he instructed the men. “Push me off,” He closed the doors before taking a fold-down seat beside Nick. When the plane was in the water and turned around, Richard hit the start button. The engine quickly spooled to life. He turned to Joe and asked, “You ready?”

Without waiting for an answer, the older man advanced the throttle to the max, pulling the Cessna into the air in less than 30 seconds. Richard kept the plane low because there was a large rainstorm ahead. As they flew under it, visibility became severely limited. He engaged the autopilot on a direct course to Vancouver. Joe had no idea who this older man was, but he was convinced Richard knew what he was doing.

Joe started an IV. After making sure he wasn’t allergic, he loaded the IV with Penicillin to combat the rapidly growing infection from the bear bite. Next, he used scissors to cut away the remainder of Nick’s clothes covering his chest. He cringed when he saw the damage. There was little doubt in his mind that his lung was partially collapsed. He was preparing to insert a catheter in Nick’s chest when the heart monitor sounded its alarm. The extreme pressure from the fluids that had built up in his chest not only caused his lung to collapse but his heart to stop.

Joe slowly inserted the catheter into the man’s chest, instantly the clear plastic tube, connected to a vacuum pump, filled with a red, watery solution. He counted the seconds, knowing that he could not defibrillate the man until the pressure was relieved. Sixty seconds had gone by before Joe activated the defibrillator on the man’s chest. Nick was healthy, and immediately his heart started to beat.

With Nick safe for the moment, Joe relaxed in his seat; the pain in his chest was getting worse, almost intolerable, desperate for relief, he gave himself a shot of Demerol. Within minutes he was asleep.

When Richard looked back into the cabin, he was surprised to see Joe's head hanging low with his headset on the ground not moving. With less than 50 miles to Vancouver, he radioed Vancouver Center and declared an emergency. He instructed the air traffic control that he would need an ambulance at the Burrard Civic Marina. Fifteen minutes later, he landed the airplane smoothly on English bay, then lowered the wheels and taxied the plane up the boat ramp onto the parking lot, blocking the parking area. The waiting paramedics rushed to the plane, not waiting for the motor to stop.

Richard shut down the engine and secured the airplane as the paramedics loaded Joe, who was still a little groggy, and Nick into the ambulance. He stepped out of the airplane to watch the ambulance speed away with lights and siren blazing. The noise caused by the high-power setting that was necessary to pull the amphibian up the boat ramp drew a lot of attention that he didn't need. Richard casually walked away from the plane. One of the bystanders, who assumed he was the pilot, asked him what he was going to do with the airplane. He replied. "It's not my plane," turned and walked away. This wasn't the first time Richard had abandoned an airplane on a beach.

Fourteen minutes later, when the ambulance arrived at Vancouver general emergency entrance, Joe, who had been breathing 100% oxygen during the ride, was still in pain but alert. He took charge of the situation, and within minutes they were rolling Nick into the emergency operating room. Dr. Don Urban soon joined him, and together they repaired the massive damage the bear had caused.

It was hours later that Joe finally was able to take a shower, choosing to use the doctor's private showers rather than go home. The hot water felt great, and the steam made it easy to breathe. Through the tinted glass, Joe saw her enter the private room. Unfortunately, Joe wasn't the only one who saw Alex join him in the shower.

Vivian had her security people install a hidden camera, claiming it was necessary after what happened with Tony and the two nurses. However, when she saw the live footage, she went insane, smashing the computer on her desk.

Chapter Thirteen

In the late fall, emergency surgery was performed by Drs. Doyle and Sharapova that saved a very wealthy man who was having a major heart attack. To thank them, he had his son stop by the administrator's office and drop off the keys to his condo at the Whistler ski resort for Joe and Alex's use throughout the winter. Given that the doctors had insisted he take it easy for the next several months, he would be wintering in Cabo San Lucas.

Both of Joe's nieces were excellent skiers, and when he announced that they had a condo for the winter, the girls were thrilled—as much about the chance to ski, more importantly, they were being included. It was no secret that their uncle and Dr. Sharapova were becoming romantically involved, and Sarah worried they would be abandoned for her.

The week after Christmas, the four of them said goodbye to Harley, who would be staying with Joe's mom, and hopped into Joe's truck on a Friday afternoon and headed for Whistler for the first time this year. They arrived just after 6:00 p.m. The condo was amazing, with five bedrooms and six bathrooms. Everyone would have their own room. They worked quickly, and by 6:30, the truck was unloaded, and Alex and Joe were already in the kitchen unloading the groceries.

Alex loved to cook, and Joe loved whatever she prepared, even if he didn't always like how it tasted. There was love in the air in that kitchen, and they took every chance to bump against each other, touching as often as possible.

Watching the two lovebirds was more than Sarah and Chloe could take. Reports Sarah had read on her phone confirmed that there was fresh snow on the mountain and that the chairlifts ran until 9:00 p.m., and she couldn't wait to get out there. The girls had enrolled in a junior racing program when they were very young and had stayed with it until only the year before. The program was taught by some of

Canada's best skiers and ski instructors, and the competition was furious. They both excelled, and both had won their share of races. When Sarah was fifteen, she participated in a downhill race on an interior mountain. Because of her ranking, she started late in the afternoon, after more than thirty racers had already run the course. Worse yet, the sun had come out just long enough to wet the outer layer of snow, which turned to ice immediately once the sun retreated. By the time Sarah had reached the halfway point, she was going faster than she ever had. Hitting a small lift built into the raceway at that speed sent her airborne, tumbling out of control into the trees. The sound of breaking branches and breaking skis still permeated her dreams.

When she finally stopped tumbling, she realized she had missed at least five large trees that could have killed her. How she didn't get spiked by one of the many frozen branches still amazed her to this day. That was the last time she participated in any ski race. And after seeing what happened to her sister, Chloe ended her racing career as well. But the near catastrophe didn't keep them from the slopes. They had been to Whistler many times, and their parents had always allowed them to explore the mountain freely. They knew every run, every shortcut, and hotel lobby where they could get free hot chocolate.

With only two hours left before the chair lifts closed, Sarah informed Joe and Alex that they were going night skiing. Joe smiled at the girls and waved them on, but Alex suddenly became very concerned. "Where will you be? Are you going to let us know what part of the mountain you'll be on? What if there's an emergency and we don't know where you are?"

Chloe chimed in, "Alex, I appreciate your concern, but we've been skiing on this mountain since we were little kids, and anyway, I have an emergency backpack. I could stay out in the wilderness for five days with what I have," Her pack was sitting on the floor in the hallway next to her skis. She ran out of the kitchen and ran back in with it and proudly began to pull forth its contents. "Warm-up pouches," she announced, holding up two of them for Alex to see.

“Emergency blanket. Chocolate-covered high-energy bars...”

She would have gone on until the pack was empty, but Joe turned to Alex and said calmly, “Don’t worry, Alex; they’ll be fine. They ski alone all the time.”

“That’s because you old people can’t keep up with us,” Chloe said, smiling.

Alex shrugged. “Enjoy,” she said, and she resumed her work at the stove, but Joe could see she was not happy.

He waited until he heard the door shut behind the girls to speak. “Alex, they really are excellent skiers.”

“I believe that. They’re excellent at everything. But very young, and young people who love adventure so much sometimes make bad decisions.”

Joe smiled. “You’re referring to the picnic.”

“Hmmm,” Alex acknowledged. She was reading the directions on the back of a package of noodles. She was not interested in pursuing this conversation just now.

But Joe was. He sat back in his chair and stretched his legs and crossed his ankles. “I’m thinking this, Alex. Sarah’s got this strong mix of daredevil and empathy going on. The way she was in Grand Forks...” He drifted off to consider it. The weekend after the Norm White event, Alex and Joe had gone to Grand Forks alone, and Beverly and Sally had raved all weekend about how compassionate Sarah had been in her handling of Joanna White. How she stayed at the viewing window for nearly an hour with Mrs. White, whispering comforting words to her and her children. They were sure she was going to be a great surgeon one day, like her uncle. They swore they’d never seen anything like it in a girl that age and both had teenage girls of their own.

“What’s your point, Joe?”

He waited until she turned to answer. “My theory is that you worry so much about them because you see yourself in them, especially Sarah.”

She laughed. “So now you’re a psychiatrist too?” she said,

turning back to the stove with a smile.

“Just thinking out loud,” He was smiling because he was seeing Alex again the way she’d looked that evening after she’d jumped out of his plane to rescue the girls from the side of the mountain. Standing beside the Wrangler in her sky diving gear, two pizzas in her arms, her face flushed with excitement and..., and what? Bliss?

* * *

The condo was a ski-in and ski-out unit, and in no time, the girls had their equipment on and were sliding down to the chairlift.

They had received brand-new ski suits for Christmas, white overall with blue striping, and matching helmets. The girls had modified the outside of their new ski helmets by gluing small LED lights in a circle around the edge. In the front, they had glued two large, powerful LEDs that would light up the dark night. Years ago, while night skiing, Sarah had been hit by a skier who claimed he couldn’t see her. Now the flashing lights would make it impossible to miss either one of them. On the inside of their helmets, they had installed tiny speakers connected to their phones to listen to their favorite music.

After producing their season tickets to the lift operator, they got on the chairlift and rode upwards, singing along to different songs from inside their helmets. They slid off the chairs smoothly when they reached the top and joined the other people who had gathered there. It was crowded. Night skiing after a big dump of snow just after Christmas had great crowd appeal.

Only part of the mountain was lit for night skiing, and the rest was out of bounds. A large sign posted at the side of the hill stated that the penalty for season ticket holders skiing out of bounds was losing their season ticket. But that didn’t stop Chloe and Sarah, who had come to the mountain with a plan.

Sarah led with Chloe close behind, and after a short distance, she stopped at the edge of the well-lit run beside a path that led into the trees. With their LED lights off, they slowly slid out of sight before

they stopped again. They waited in silence, listening, and looking for the ski patrol, to see if anyone had seen them disappearing into the trees. But they didn't hear or see anything, and after a couple of minutes, they began to move again. There was enough light for them to follow the path that led to the next run, which was groomed for the next day's skiing.

With the LED lights turned on, the wide ski hill lit up below them like daylight. Almost in perfect unison, they skied side-by-side at a rapid pace making flawless wide turns. As far as they were concerned, they owned the hill. It was so exhilarating to have it to themselves, and not just because they were breaking the rules. Of course, they knew the risks of being off on their own, but they'd discussed the potential consequences earlier, and they didn't see how things could go wrong, given that they were such experts on the slopes.

After almost five minutes of hard skiing, they stopped near the bottom of the hill. This was where they would need to cut through the trees, back to the lit part of the mountain and the chairlift, a route they knew well.

After blowing snow into the air with their hard stop, both girls removed their helmets. They were sweaty from the intense workout. They looked at each other with huge grins and high-fived. "Wow, I told you that would be incredible," Sarah said.

Both girls were breathing quickly, grabbing oxygen from the cool air to feed their lungs. Vapor was rising from the sweat that had accumulated under their helmets like white ribbons, streaming upwards.

Chloe caught her breath and said. "Let's do that again."

Sarah was about to answer when a whimpering sound broke the silence surrounding them. Both girls froze. This was not a good noise they were hearing; it was the sound only a human could make. Someone was crying. The girls looked at each other, and Chloe asked, "Where's it coming from?"

"It's coming from..." Sarah began as she turned away from her sister. Her helmet was still in her hand; she pointed the LED lights to

the right. "...over there,"

Holding their helmets like flashlights, the girls slowly skied in the direction of the noise. It led them into an area of trees half-buried in deep snow. The girls put their helmets on so they could use their poles to push themselves through the snow. Sarah led, breaking trail. They moved a short distance, then took off their helmets and listened again. The noise was getting louder and the direction more certain.

With her helmet back on, Sarah pushed forward and skied around large trees on the steep hill, not an easy thing to do. Nevertheless, the LED lights were putting on quite a show, twinkling from the powder she blew into the air on her sharp turns, and Chloe close behind doing the same thing. Finally, they came to a stop only feet away from a young boy lying on his stomach facing downhill, his skis still attached and trapped in a tree well by the branches hidden under the snow.

There was an eerie silence as the two girls and the little boy looked at one another. The night lit up from ice crystals that were still falling all around, with the beams from the LED lights changing direction as the girls moved their heads. The little boy, who was trembling, mumbled something about angels. He was shaking so bad the girls could hardly make out what he said, but that didn't matter; they knew what they had to do.

Sarah skied beside the boy and quickly packed the soft snow all around so she could take off her skis without going waste deep in the soft snow. Chloe packed the snow on the other side of the boy for the same reason. In no time, both girls had kicked off their skis and had removed the boy's skis too. He was trembling uncontrollably; his teeth were chattering, and his lips were blue.

Over the last few years, Sarah had been with her uncle in the first-aid rooms of various resorts when he worked on people who had frozen hands and feet. That experience had prepared her for the present situation. She instructed Chloe to open the heat packs, all of them.

Chloe was ahead of her and already had four opened. She

began handing them to Sarah before she finished speaking. Sarah stuffed them inside the little boys' ski suit as fast as Chloe could open the packs. She removed his gloves and watched his fingers curl into a fist. He was wearing good equipment, and although his fingers were very cold, he could still move them; they were not frozen.

She placed a heat pack inside each of her warm gloves and exchanged them for his cold ones. She then moved to his feet and removed his ski boots. Carefully, she checked his toes for pulse and mobility. If his toes were frozen and she pushed too hard on them, they would break. His feet were cold, but like his hands, they weren't frozen. She used her scarf to wrap his feet together with four heat packs.

Chloe pulled the thermal blanket from her backpack and threw it down on the snow. Sarah took her ski jacket off and placed it on top of the thermal blanket. The little boy was so cold that he had assumed a fetal position and was still shaking violently. Together they lifted him onto the jacket and wrapped him inside it and the thermal blanket. They worked quickly, and within minutes they had the little boy completely wrapped up with a dozen heat packs in all the right spots. Chloe removed his helmet and snow-filled goggles. Then she removed her jacket and wrapped it around the little boys' head and shoulders before doing up the zipper. The only thing visible were the boy's eyes, nose, and mouth at the end of the tunnel she'd created with her jacket. With this done, she asked the little boy, "How did you get here?"

His teeth were chattering so violently he couldn't speak.

The girls looked at each other. "Now, what?" Chloe asked.

"He's cold, but he doesn't have frostbite. Nothing's broken. We warm him up and get him out of here."

"That sounds simple, but we're on the side of a steep hill in three feet of powder snow. It's going to be hard enough getting ourselves out, but with him? Why don't I phone and get help from search and rescue? They can be here in minutes."

Not wanting to give away any information in front of the little

boy, Sarah whispered, “Do you remember the sign at the top of the hill and what it said?”

Chloe thought for a second and then answered, “Oh, *that* sign.”

“Yeah, *that* sign. We need to make a path from here to the groomed run we were just on. It’s twenty meters at the most. You break trail, and I’ll pack the snow behind you. It’ll only take a few minutes. I’m getting cold standing here. Packing the trail will keep us warm.”

“Yeah, right, keep us warm,” Chloe knew exactly what had to be done and how much work was involved. So, she put her skis on and started pounding through the deep snow. The girls worked well as a team, but it was hard work packing the endless snow into a level path leading to the main trail—which, it turned out, was a lot further away than they had thought. Both girls were breathing hard, with ribbons of vapor rising from their sweaters when they returned to the little boy.

He was crying, but his teeth had stopped chattering, and he was able to talk now. “My fingers are burning. They feel like they’re on fire,” he said. “It hurts so bad. Can I put them in the snow?”

The girls shook their heads in unison. They both knew what he was going through. The effects of warm blood going through his extremely cold fingertips made the nerves feel like they were on fire. They had experienced this themselves.

Sarah was sympathetic, telling him it would pass. Then, trying to distract him from the pain, she asked, “What’s your name?”

“Ben,” he said through his tears.

Chloe wasn’t quite as kindhearted. “Well, Ben, you need to stop whining. The burning is a good sign. When you get like that, it means you’ll be okay. So, who’s your favorite superhero?”

Surprised by the question, Ben stopped whining long enough to say. “Superman.”

“Would Superman be whining if his fingers were on fire? Of course not. Toughen up. You’re going to be fine,” She reached into her backpack and pulled out her thermos, which she filled earlier with hot

chocolate milk. She poured some into the thermos cup and held it in front of the little boy. "If you stop shaking, I'll give you the hot chocolate, but you have to stop shaking first; otherwise, you will spill it all over the place."

He took a deep breath; his eyes fixed on her. He began to inhale and exhale rhythmically, a technique his parents had taught him for when he needed to control his anxiety. By the time he'd finished six rounds, he was no longer shaking. He wiggled a hand free and reached for the hot chocolate.

As he sipped, Chloe and Sarah took turns asking questions. "How long have you been here?" Sarah asked first.

"A long time. I almost got out, but then my skis got caught. And then I lost my phone in the snow. And then you angels came and saved me."

Chloe couldn't resist. "We haven't saved you yet," she said.

Sarah gave her a dirty look, then turned back to the young boy. "What makes you think where angels?"

"You floated out of the sky with halos, just like on TV, only just for me," That's when he realized that they might not be there to rescue him. With a frightened look, he asked. "You're not here to take me up to heaven, are you?"

"No, we're not taking you to heaven today," Chloe said. She twisted so he could see her back. "No wings, can't fly," she pointed to her sister. "She doesn't have any either," She couldn't resist going on. "But she's going to get her wings soon."

Sarah smiled. Chloe was referring to her pilots' license. "But today," she said, "we're rescuing you, and you're going home. And if anyone asks, you can tell them our names are Big Angel and Little Angel," She looked out towards the trail. "Anyway, that's the plan. So, Ben, what's your full name?"

"Benjamin Gregory."

"And how long have you been skiing, Ben?" Sarah asked

"This is my first day."

"Who are you up here with?" Her tone had changed; her voice

was tight now.

“My mom and dad.”

That’s what Sarah was afraid he would say. She turned to Chloe and whispered in her ear. “Big problem. People are going to be looking for this kid; we need to get him out of here, now.”

The girls quickly put his warmed-up ski boots back on him and pulled him to his feet, and had him do some deep-knee bends to limber him up. They traded gloves, so the boy was now wearing his own, and took back their jackets. The next twenty feet would be impossible for the little boy to ski through on his own. So, Sarah bent down on her knees and instructed him to climb on her back, and when she was sure he was holding tight, she put her skis on and used her poles to push her way along the path she and Chloe had created minutes earlier. Once they reached the groomed trail, Sarah stopped and lowered Ben to his feet. The area was light enough for them to turn off their LED lights.

Chloe, who had been carrying Ben’s skis and poles, threw them down. Then, kicking her skis off, she helped the little boy into his. Sarah got behind him, lifted him in front of her, held him between her skis, and then skied down the path. Eventually, she lowered him until his skis had touched down on the snow, but she continued to hold onto his shoulders and steer him so that she could control their speed. Ben was getting a ski lesson he would never forget. Chloe, who was still carrying Ben’s poles and Sarah’s and her own, stayed close.

The trail opened up onto a well-lit berm, which Sarah was able to see over. One hundred feet or so ahead was the lodge, and the area in front of it was crowded with search and rescue personnel, all wearing high visibility gear and lights. She shouted instructions to Ben, and as he began his attempt to stop himself, she swooped in front of him and helped him. Chloe caught up and gave him his poles.

“Do you think you can ski from here down to where those people are?” Sarah asked, pointing to the crowd. Ben had to stretch his neck to be able to see over the crest of the hill. He nodded. The last thing Sarah said to him as she fit his now dry prescription goggles onto

his helmet was. “See all the people wearing the same color jackets, kind of orange? Get yourself over there and tell any one of them what your name is. They’re looking for you. They’re going to be very happy.”

“Okay,” Ben said, and off he went, and he didn’t look back. He was wobbly, moving slowly.

The girls skied off quickly in the opposite direction, stopping at the edge of the groomed run to watch Benjamin as he skied into the crowd of rescuers. He couldn’t stop, and he plowed into them.

The girls laughed as they skied to the chairlift and blended in with the other night skiers. On the way up the lift, Sarah received a text from Uncle Joe. It read, “a seven-year-old boy has been lost on the hill since late afternoon. A search party is forming at the search and rescue shack. They can use all the help they can get, and you girls know the hill well. Can you help?”

Joe was surprised when the return text asked, “What is the boy’s name?”

Although her reply seemed like a strange answer to his request, he checked over the text he had just received from the resort and texted back, “Benjamin Gregory.”

“Now what?” Chloe asked, but Sarah was already busy texting back to her uncle. “People at the bottom of the chairlift we’re on just told us that boy has been found. He’s fine. They don’t need to continue with the search; he’s fine.”

Joe was not about to suggest anyone call off a search until he had confirmation. But before he could text Sarah again, the phone rang, and the caller, I.D., announced that it was Search and Rescue. “Dr. Doyle speaking.”

“Dr. Doyle, I’m the search and rescue coordinator. We’ve found the young boy we notified you about, Benjamin Gregory. He’s in the first aid office. We need you as soon as possible.”

“We’re on our way, five minutes maximum.”

The man on the other end of the line replied by hanging up, which Joe took to be a very bad sign. As they hustled down stairways and through the lobby to the first aid station, Joe showed Alex the

puzzling text he'd received from Sarah. It meant nothing to her.

The alert from Search and Rescue had brought a quick end to Joe's intention to have a conversation with Alex about Vivian. Alex had never asked him about his relationship with Vivian, but Joe felt the need to fill her in on its various twists and turns. He'd seen Vivian twice in the last month. On the first occasion, she'd driven out to his loft without any warning to speak to him without any distractions. They'd argued, and she'd left threatening to let Alex know the truth about him, whatever that meant. The second time she'd called him into her office and apologized, and Joe had accepted her apology and apologized for not being honest about his feelings sooner. It was all water under the bridge now, but Joe still felt the need to discuss it with Alex before word got out and she heard it from someone else.

The Search and Rescue room was blocked by the ski patrol and voluntary search and rescue personal. After introducing himself with his Vancouver General Hospital identification in hand, he and Alex were quickly escorted into the small emergency room inside the first aid office. Inside, a woman and a young boy were wrapped in each other's arms, both of them crying. The ski patroller that had escorted them into the room tilted his head towards the boy and said, "That's him; we checked him out. Surprisingly, he seems to be fine."

Joe walked up to the boy and his mother and said, in an authoritative voice, meant to get them to separate. "I'm Dr. Doyle, I'm here to help," As soon his mother moved away, Joe reached out and took the child's hand—and was surprised to find it warm. Alex, meanwhile, pulled off a boot and then a sock, and after feeling the child's foot, announced, "For a boy who's been lost for hours, in the freezing cold, your feet are surprisingly warm."

Joe pulled a stethoscope out of his medical bag and put it around his neck. Next, he opened the boy's ski jacket to check his lungs and heart. As he and Alex wiggled Ben out of his ski gear, heat packs began to fall to the floor one after the other. First, she took the boy's temperature with an ear thermometer. "He's a little warm," she said, surprised. Next, Alex took his blood pressure, which was normal.

Finally, she bent down, so they were at eye level. “How do you feel?”

The boy, who was still wiping tears from his eyes, said, “I think I’m okay, but my mother thinks I’m frozen. What if she’s right?”

Both doctors had seen this scenario before, a panicking parent overreacting and scaring the child. Joe asked the boy’s mother if he could talk to her alone. Without hesitation, she followed him out of the room. Once they were clear, Joe told her that he believed, from what he had seen, the child would be fine, but they needed to check him out without her being present because she was scaring him. Although she objected, she sat down in one of the chairs that Joe pointed out for her. While he was gone, Alex had asked the boy to tell her exactly what happened, and Joe arrived just in time to hear the story.

“I don’t know how to turn right, so I kept turning left. Then I was going really fast on this path, and then I went in the air over the edge and landed in the deep snow. I tried to get out, but the more I tried, the more my skis got caught in the branches under the snow,” His face lit up. “That’s when I saw the two angels coming down from the sky. They came to rescue me.”

“Two angels?” Alex asked sweetly, with a big smile. “How do you know they were angels?”

“They were all white except for some blue stripes, and they had halos, bright halos around their heads, and they were beautiful. There was a big angel and a smaller angel. The big angel was nice, but the other one was just a little bit mean.”

Alex looked at Joe as she spoke. “Two angels, one big and one smaller, white outfits with blue stripes and halos around their heads! Does that remind you of anyone?” She turned back to Ben. “Did the angels happen to tell you their names?”

“The big one told me to call them Big Angel and Little Angel.”

Joe mumbled under his breath, “Are you sure they didn’t say Big Trouble and Little Trouble?”

Confused, Ben looked at him, but Alex got him back on track. “Did the angels give you the heat packs?”

“Yeah, the little angel had a lot of them, and she gave them to the big angel, who put them all around me. Then the big angel put her jacket over top of me and wrapped me in a silver blanket. Then, when I stopped shaking, the little angel gave me some hot chocolate, and I liked her after that,” Benjamin smiled.

Alex got out her cell phone and scrolled up to a photo of the two girls she had taken back in Grand Forks. She showed it to Benjamin.

“Is this what the angels look like?”

“Sort of; my prescription goggles were filled with snow so that I couldn’t see well. How did you get that picture? Do you know these angels? How come they don’t have their halos on? That’s not them.”

“Well, that explains why we got the text about calling off the search!” Joe said with a smile.

Both doctors looked at the little boy then at each other. “Ben, you’re fine,” Alex said. “You can go home with your mom and dad now. And as for the angels, they’re just two girls in white outfits.”

“Lady, you don’t know what you’re talking about,” Ben said with an attitude as he walked towards the door. Before leaving, he turned to the doctors and said firmly, “They were angels! They even said they were.”

Joe turned to Alex with a smile on his face. “Well, he sure told you! It isn’t every day you get told off by a seven-year-old.”

Both doctors broke out laughing simultaneously, but they were quickly interrupted by a light knock on the door. A tall, uniformed man poked his head in and introduced himself as the head of security and asked Joe and Alex to follow him into the resort’s computer room, just down the hall.

Once inside, he showed a time-lapse photograph of the two girls skiing with the little boy. It had been taken by their security camera near the bottom of the hill, just before the girls had reached the berm. “Any idea who these young people are?” the security officer asked.

Joe nodded his head. He couldn’t help smiling as he replied.

“Oh yeah, we know them.”

“We’d like to talk to them,” the man said. His expression suggested that he only wanted to thank them for rescuing the boy.

“We’d like to talk to them first,” Alex said. She didn’t know why but something told her the girls must have had a good reason to avoid the fame that could be theirs for rescuing the little boy.

On the way back to the condo, Joe explained to Alex that the girls didn’t want to be acknowledged because they were skiing out of bounds when they found the little boy. They’re worried about losing their season pass. When the girls were young, they would go night skiing, and Joe would take them down unlit trails out of bounds. At that time, skiing with the girls was all about excitement; he knew now what a bad example he had been. He also knew that Sarah had to be the ringleader; she always was. The doctors agreed that if the girls didn’t bring it up, they would keep what they knew to themselves. But just before they entered the condo, Joe couldn’t resist saying. “A daredevil that cares. Just like someone else I know.”

Chapter Fourteen

Vivian Santos, who has been waiting patiently all these years for Joe to get over his wife's death and turn to her, becomes desperate when she realizes that Joe has fallen in love with Alex. After seeing them together in the shower, her range of emotions carries her from self-loathing (during which time she is, briefly, suicidal) to extreme anger. When she reaches the latter sentiment, Vivian realizes that she has the power to sabotage Joe and Alex's relationship. Vivian immigrated to Vancouver from near poverty in the Philippines when she was in her twenties. To have gotten where she is today, she had to tell some lies and falsify some documents. She was no stranger to the art of deception.

Harold dela Cruz was from a village close to where Vivian was raised, and they had known each other since childhood. Harold had come to Canada to study computer science and had specialized in hi-tech security systems. When Harold graduated from BCIT, Vivian offered him a job in the IT department at Vancouver General.

"Monika, call Harold," Vivian said with a grin. "And ask him to come to my office as soon as possible."

Monika immediately called the IT department. Harold was well known to her because of his many visits to her office. He answered the phone on the first ring. "Harold speaking."

"Hello Harold, I'm calling for Miss Santos. She would like to see you as soon as possible."

"I'll be there in ten minutes," Harold said, then hung up. Precisely ten minutes later, Harold walked into the administrators' office, past Monika's desk, and into Vivian's private room, without

knocking.

Monika knew something was going on between them and was determined to find out. Because of how rudely Vivian had been treating her, she had planted a transmitter in Vivian's office over a month ago to secretly record her conversations as a way of protecting her job.

Vivian spoke to Harold in Tagalog, their native language, which was very unusual, peaking Monika's interest. They chatted for almost an hour. After Harold left, she pulled the memory stick out of the recorder. On her lunch break, she took the memory stick to her friend Angel Ramos, a Filipino who worked as a bookkeeper for the catering company that ran the kitchen. Vivian and Angel were not friends. Since they first met, Vivian was constantly speaking down to her, like an unwanted maid. So, when Monika told her the story about why she was recording Vivian's conversations, Angel was eager to translate Tagalog to English.

"I'll listen to it tonight. Then, drop by tomorrow, same time," Angel said with a smile. She was very eager to hear what was said.

Monika gave her a contented look, waving goodbye as she left.

Harold was busy working in photoshop, downloading videos from the many hours of recordings secretly taken of Joe, Alex, Tony, and Vivian. He worked tirelessly changing faces and locations then adding dialog to match the videos.

The following day, he marched into Vivian's office with a proud grin on his face. He spoke Tagalog to her while he handed her the memory stick. They didn't talk for long; within minutes, Harold stomped out of Vivian's office, smiling.

As soon as Vivian left the office for her usual hour-plus lunch break, Monika was on her way to meet Angel. Once inside the catering office, Monika closed the door behind her then asked. "Anything good?"

"Who are Joe, Alex, and Tony?" Angel asked.

"They're surgeons, and the word is Joe and Alex are lovers. Why do you ask?"

Angel shook her head. “Not for long. Vivian is planning to destroy their relationship.”

“How,” Monika asked.

“The man on the recording is going to manufacture a video that will show Joe cheating on Alex, gets better,” Angel said. “And a video of Alex having sex with Tony, then post them on porn hub.”

Monika shook her head in disbelief. “Wow, I knew Vivian was wicked, but if she does this, the ramifications could be disastrous,” She handed Angel the memory stick from this morning. “This is from their meeting this morning; it’s only a couple of minutes long.”

Angel took the stick and plugged it into her computer. Using headphones, she listened to the short meeting. “He gave Vivian two memory sticks with the altered videos. He told her that putting them on Porn Hub required too much verification that could lead back to them. Instead, the man suggested she email them to hospital staff from a cheap throwaway computer, which he had many of, that couldn’t be traced back to her. She agreed and handed him a list of email addresses and the corresponding names. She told him to pick ten names and start sending them, which means by now, they’re already sent.”

Monika felt sick to her stomach. “I need to think.”

Angel handed her the two memory sticks. “These might help.”

Based on the false videos that Vivian circulates, the rumor mill went wild. After Alex viewed the footage of Joe and Vivian having sex and mocking her as they went, she felt like a dagger had been stuck in her heart. She decides her relationship with Joe has been an enormous mistake and accepts an offer to work at the Royal Columbian Hospital in New Westminster.

Joe tries to get her to see that the video is manufactured, but Vivian has done her homework and found ways to “backup” the evidence. Heartbroken but also angry at himself for getting involved with Alex in the first place, Joe throws himself into his work, looking for opportunities to save lives even when he is not at the hospital during the week or flying to remote areas on the weekends. He becomes an ambulance chaser, rushing to accident scenes to do what

he can even before paramedics arrive. He is at one such location, administering to a badly hurt cyclist with Harley by his side, when a driver, in a large truck, busy texting doesn't see the accident and slams into a small car that had stopped short of the accident, propelling it into Joe, and Harley but luckily missed the injured cyclist. The last thing Joe sees before he loses consciousness is Harley, severely injured from the car, dragging herself into a wooded area beyond the highway.

Police arrived first and blocked off the area, making room for the ambulance that arrived minutes later. The paramedics worked quickly, one working on Joe and the other on the injured man that Joe had stopped to help. After a quick check of Joe's vitals, he found that his heart was beating slowly, but worse, he wasn't breathing.

The paramedic knew exactly what he needed and pulled a handheld air pump from his bag and handed it to the policewomen assisting him. She knew what to do and placed the mask over Joe's face, and started pumping. The second paramedic tapped her on the shoulder and whispered. "I'll do that," as he lightly pushed her aside.

"BP 100 over 45. This one has a severe head injury; how's the other guy doing?" asked the first paramedic.

"His leg is badly broken. He's conscious and said this man put a splint on it and wrapped it before we got here. He said the man told him his name was Joe."

The paramedic took a good look at Joe's face that was covered in blood. "I know this man. I've seen him at Vancouver General in the ER; he's a doctor. We need to transport him, now."

They worked together to immobilize him and soon had Joe and the injured cyclist in the ambulance and on their way to the hospital. The man driving radioed ahead to Vancouver General ER to say he was 10 minutes out with a doctor named Joe, with a severe head injury from a car accident.

The ER nurse, who knew Joe well, froze for a second, stunned by what she had just heard. Then, snapping to, she remembered seeing Dr. Chang flirting with a nurse only a few minutes ago. Using the hospitals' intercom, she announced. "Dr. Chang, please report to the

emergency room, code RED.”

Tony went to the nearest nursing station and called the ER. “Dr. Chang speaking, What’s the emergency?”

“I just received a message from an ambulance driver that Joe was in a bad car accident, and they’re bringing him here with a severe head injury.

Tony’s heart fell. “I’m headed your way now,” was all he could say. He walked quickly through the winding hallways arriving at the ER at the same time as the ambulance.

The ER nurses and Tony worked quickly and soon had him breathing pure oxygen with the help of a ventilator. Then, with Joe hooked up to the primary monitor, Tony pulled out his phone and stopped at ‘Mark Neil’ and pressed call.

Mark answered on the second ring. “Mark speaking,” he didn’t like to be called Dr. but preferred to be called ‘the mechanic.’ Mark had graduated from UBC with a bachelor’s in mechanical engineering before entering medicine. He had invented or improved on many surgical implements over his career, specializing in brain surgery.

Tony went straight to the point. “Mark, it’s Tony Chang; Joe has been in a car crash and has a severe head wound. We need your help, room 8 in the ER.”

Mark was in the morgue experimenting with the newest heart valve that UBC developed. It allowed for smoother blood flow and could last much longer than the valves in use today, which only lasted 15 years at the most.

“I’ll be right there,” Mark said before storming out of the morgue.

He and Tony prepared an intraventricular catheter that monitored his intracranial pressure and safely inserted it inside an artery and into his brain. Tony could feel anxiety in his chest as he looked at the results on the screen. Intracranial pressure can be from 0 to 10 mmHg under normal conditions. Joe’s pressure was just under 40. He would need emergency surgery to relieve the pressure before there was permanent brain damage or death. Tony injected Joe with mannitol as they prepared for surgery.

Tony and Mark Neil, who was the head of neurosurgery, prepped to operate. Tony made a long incision in Joe's scalp where Mark drilled three holes through Joe's skull, each one squirting out a milky fluid. It was an hour before Joe's intracranial pressure had dropped below 20, and that was still not low enough. So, Tony called for pentobarbital; this drug would put Joe into a medically induced coma, requiring the mechanical ventilator that he was on to continue to breathe for him. Finally, after a week in intensive care, Joe's intracranial pressure had dropped to eight. Dr. Neil was anxious to get Joe off of the pentobarbital because of the known side effects.

Joe falls into a persistent vegetative state and becomes a patient in the same hospital where he has saved so many lives. He has visitors, and the most frequent are his two nieces Chloe and Sarah, and his family. With everyone trying to say just the right thing to bring him out of the coma. Another frequent visitor was Vivian Santos, who speaks to him from her heart, even admitting that she would rather see him as he is than with another woman. It had been ten days since the pentobarbital had been discontinued and Dr. Neil was worried; Joe was not responding.

When Alex hears about the accident, she visits Joe only once, but it is apparent to those looking that she's still stinging from his "betrayal."

Doctor Joan Swift, a close friend of Joe's for years and now a friend of Alex's, also has been puzzled since she first heard the rumors about Joe; she never believed them and regretted that she was not able to change Alex's mind about leaving. She was going over patient files at a nurse's station when Monika approached her.

"You don't know me. My name is Monika, Vivian Santo's secretary. Could I have a minute with you in private?"

Expecting a problem involving paperwork, she led Monika into a deserted room that housed housekeeping supplies. Then, closing the door behind her, she asked casually. "What's up."

"I understand you're a friend of Dr. Doyle, and I assume you have heard about the videos?"

“Where are you going with this?” Joan asked.

“I have proof that Vivian Santos and a man, Harold dela Cruz from IT, manufactured the videos to destroy Joe and Alex’s relationship. Her exact words were ‘if I can’t have him, she won’t either.’”

Joan could see the fear in Monika’s eyes. She was risking her job with these allocations. “Show me the proof.”

Monika reached into her pocket and pulled out the two memory sticks. “They were speaking in Tagalog, so you will need to get it translated for yourself. I’m not in a position to do anything, but you are. I hope I’m not making a mistake by trusting you,” Monika said with a shaky voice.

Joan was stunned. This was unexpected. “I will have these translated, and if what you say is true, I will do something about it!”

“Thank you,” Monika said. “I need to get back to the office before Miss Santos does. Please don’t say where you got this information from. I can tell that she wants to fire me, and if she finds out I illegally recorded this, I could go to jail and be fired.”

“Go, and don’t worry. Your secret is safe with me.”

Joan shook her head in amazement. If what she had just heard was true, she was holding the smoking gun. A quick search on the internet showed many translation services. She picked the closest one that specialized in translating Tagalog to English, and it was only a block away from the hospital. With nothing urgent happening, she slipped out of the hospital and walked down to the small office that specialized in official translations. The girl at the front desk told her they would have a paper copy ready for her by noon tomorrow and cost \$200.

The next day at exactly noon, Joan paid the \$200 and picked up the five pages of the translation. Upon returning to the hospital, she sat down in the Doctors’ lounge and read every page. Shaking her head as she read. Now, she had the smoking gun. Joan called Alex and gave her the short version of what she had in her hand. After a lengthy discussion, the ladies agreed to meet at a coffee shop near the hospital

at six this evening.

Alex looked sad as she entered the little coffee shop, spotting Joan at a small table. When Alex arrived at the table, Joan rose, and the two women hugged as women do at a funeral. The transcript and the two memory sticks were waiting for her on the table.

Alex read every line slowly, memorizing every word. By the time she finished, tears were flowing down her beautiful face. "I was a fool, and I didn't believe Joe. The video was so real. This is all my fault," her emotions took over. Putting her hands over her face, she started crying.

Joan rushed to her side. "It's not your fault; this is all on Vivian."

Through the tears, Alex asked. "If it's not my fault, then why does it hurt so much?"

Hugging Alex, Joan said. "That's because you love him, and love is fragile, and it hurts sometimes."

It was minutes before Alex could calm down, still sniveling she asked. "What should I do now?"

Joan thought for a minute. "Joe needs you; go to him."

Alex didn't need to be told twice. "Thanks, Joan, you're a true friend," she picked up the memory sticks and the pages with the translation then strutted out of the coffee shop with a very determined look. On her way to the hospital, many thoughts bounced around her head, none good. She had been played, and now she was mad.

Through the window to Joe's room, Alex saw Sarah and Chloe. They were hugging each other and crying. Between tears, Sarah said. "Uncle Joe, you need to come back to us," that brought more tears. "I know we have been bad, and we promise to be better. You see, it was us that found that little boy in the tree well. We should have told you, but we were afraid you wouldn't take us with you anymore, especially after the time with my dad's jeep and the wolves."

Hearing the two girls brought tears to Alex's eyes, she stepped into the room and announced. "He knew it was you," the girls turned to Alex and stopped crying, holding their breath. "We knew it was you,

and your uncle was so proud of both of you for rescuing that little boy. After that, he called you his private angels.”

Alex rushed to the girls hugging them both; now, all three were crying.

Through the tears, Chloe asked. “Is he going to die?”

“No, he’s not going to die. He’s got two angels praying for him.” Alex said, hoping to calm the girls.

Without looking to see if anyone was in Joe’s room, Vivian stomped in. When she saw the girls and Alex, she said. “Sorry, I’ll come back later.”

“No, you won’t,” Alex said with fury in her eyes as she rushed to intercept the fleeing Vivian. Stopping in front of her, she called her out. “This is all your fault, and I have the proof,” she pulled out the five-page translation with the headline in large letters that read. ‘Translation of Tagalog to English, a conversation between Vivian Santos and Harold dela Cruz’ and pushed it in front of her.

After reading the first two paragraphs, Vivian knew it was authentic. “You bugged my office; that’s illegal. I’ll have your job for this,” Vivian screamed at her. Unfortunately, that’s when she made a big mistake. In her rage, she slapped Alex across the face.

On her second attempt, Alex grabbed her arm and quickly spun her around, pinning Vivian against the wall causing severe pain.

“Break her arm, and then shoot her,” Chloe yelled.

With nurses gathered around wondering what to do, Chloe’s outburst brought Alex back to her senses. She pushed Vivian in the direction of the elevator, and in a raised voice, she cried out. “You’re finished. Guaranteed when the board of directors reads this, you’re done.”

Vivian, hurting and scared, hustled into the elevator and was gone.

For the next two hours, Alex listened to the girls telling Joe, in great detail, the story of how they found Harley, and that she was pregnant.

Chapter Fifteen

Danielle Blum, the ICU nurse in charge of Joe, was singing along to the song ‘You were meant for me’ when she noticed the monitor showed an increase in Joe’s heart rate and blood pressure. The increase was not enough to set off the monitor’s alarm, but experience told her that Joe was coming out of the coma; he was waking up. It had only been one day since the mechanical ventilator had been removed, and the improvements in his condition were remarkable. Danielle immediately contacted Dr. Neal and informed him of Joe’s condition. Mark rushed to his room. It was almost an hour before Joe could form coherent words. Finally, when he could talk, the first intelligible sentence was, “Where’s my wife?”

Danielle, who worked with Dr. Sharapova and believed that she was in a relationship with Joe, turned to Mark and asked in a whisper. “I didn’t know they were married.”

“They’re not,” Mark whispered back before leaving the room and going to the nurses’ station, where he made a phone call to Alex, who was working at the Royal Columbian hospital performing a valve transplant; they talked over the speakerphone. “Dr. Sharapova, this is Dr. Neil. Joe is conscious and talking. He’s confused, which is normal considering the number of drugs he’s had in the last two weeks and the

severe concussion. It's going to take a while before he gets his short-term memory back."

Everyone in the operating room working with Alex had positive comments about Joe's recovery as they continued with the operation.

"Thank you, Dr. Neil. please tell Joe I will be there as soon as I'm finished."

"I will, but remember, he's still quite confused."

Dr. Neil returned to Joe's room and continued to check him out.

"Do you know where you are?"

"Looks like the ICU; what happened?" Joe questioned Mark, speaking slowly.

"What do you remember?" Mark asked as he looked into Joe's eyes with a monocular eyepiece.

Joe was at a loss for words as he tried to remember.

"Do you know my name?" Mark asked.

Joe spoke slowly. "Yeah, the mechanic, ahhhh Mark, Mark Neil."

"Very good," Mark said with a smile. "And your nurse, what's her name?"

Joe looked at Danielle, who had her hand over her name tag; before the accident, he knew her well. They had worked together often and had enjoyed chatting many times. His face took on a questioning look as he shook his head negatively, without saying a word.

"That's okay Joe, after what happened to you, it may take some time for your short-term memory to return," Mark handed Joe the half-inch thick medical file that documented his medical history since he entered the hospital as a patient.

Joe was still reading about the surgery performed on him when Alex arrived an hour later. With a huge smile on her face, she walked up to Joe and gently put her arms around his bandaged head, and kissed him on the lips. Joe pushed her away with a confused look. "Who are you?" he turned to Mark. "Where's my wife?" Everyone

went silent.

Alex was the first to speak. “Joe, I’m Dr. Alexandra Sharapova. You know me! When we first met, you told me you would always tell me the truth and expected no less from me in return. Do you think you’re ready for the truth?”

Joe nodded, “Tell me!”

To be continued

**MORE EXCITING NOVELS FROM MCTR
PRODUCTIONS**

RED ZONE
ALAN MCTEER

The plan is to fly a small plane to Colombia, collect the delivery fee, and return to Miami on an airliner. But ace pilot Alan Richards begrudgingly agrees to deliver passengers as well – a last minute concession that will turn his near-perfect life into a mortal nightmare.

A crash landing in a burning plane, torture at the hands of someone who has mistaken him for someone else, and a forced tour of some of South America's most horrifying prisons are only the beginning of the long journey that will ultimately deliver him (and his copilot pretty-boy Mario Rodriguez) into the hands of drug smugglers hiding out in the region of Colombia known as the Red Zone.

Red Zone, a novel based on events that actually happened to the author, pits two well-intended but humanly fallible characters against some very bad men in an adventure that brims with danger, excitement, humor, insight and veracity.

ESCAPING CUBA

ALAN MCTEER

Ace pilot Alan Richards has taken a job ferrying Greenpeace scientists in a seaplane to identify freighters and cruise ships that are pumping waste overboard. But when an engine glitch forces him to land in an area of Mexico known for drug smuggling (and for which he has not filed a flight plan), he opts to abandon the plane and take his chances living on the beach rather than run the risk of being mistaken for a smuggler.

This gives the CIA the chance to make their move. They know that Richards is always running away from his past, and they need a rogue pilot like him to fly into Cuba, land, pick up two baseball players, and get back out before the Cuban government knows what hit them. But when Richards and his co-pilot (Cuban American Mario Rodriguez with secrets of his own), eventually begin their descent, they see on the

field below not only the two ball players they were expecting, but also more than fifty men, women and children waiting for transport to America. And that's only the beginning of their problems...

ESCAPING CUBA is a thriller teeming with aggressive CIA agents, Navy Seals, merciless Cuban Army soldiers, beautiful women and ordinary Cubans trying to get by without making waves... It's an absolute must read for anyone who likes their adrenalin rush mixed with authenticity, historical detail and great company.

ESCAPE de CUBA

GABRIELA IBARRA

El piloto Alan Richards ha obtenido un empleo transportando a científicos de Greenpeace en un hidroavión, para identificar barcos de carga y cruceros que estuvieran lanzando desechos por la borda. Cuando una falla en el motor lo obliga a aterrizar en un área de México conocida por el tráfico de drogas (y para la cual no ha presentado un plan de vuelo) opta por abandonar el avión, viviendo en una playa a pesar de correr el riesgo de ser confundido con un

narcotraficante.

Esto le dio a la CIA la oportunidad de entrar en el juego. Ellos saben que Richards siempre está escapando de su pasado, y necesitan un piloto adicto al peligro exactamente como él para volar al interior de Cuba, aterrizar, subir a dos jugadores de beisbol y salir antes de que el gobierno cubano tenga información al respecto. Pero cuando Alan y su copiloto (un cubano americano Mario Rodríguez – con su propio pasado-) finalmente inician su descenso, no encontrando únicamente a los dos beisbolistas que estaban esperando, si no a más de 50 personas, hombres, mujeres y niños con la esperanza de ser llevados a Norte América. Y eso fue solo el principio de sus problemas....

ESCAPE de Cuba es un libro de suspenso, en donde se ven involucrados decididos agentes de la CIA, miembros de la marina de los Estados Unidos –Seals- despiadados soldados de la fuerza armada cubana, hermosas mujeres y ciudadanos cubanos intentando escapar sin producir oleaje. Es absolutamente una lectura obligada para cualquier persona que le gusta sentir una descarga de adrenalina mezclada con datos históricos reales.